

SALJA HELJAR

A Journey into the Realm of Hel

An excerpt from *Dragon's Blood #8: Via Nocturna*

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"Downwards he rode to Niflheim
A dog he met coming out of a cave.
Bloody was its breast in front
His masters spells he howled at long
He rode further along the way booming
To the high house of Hel he came."
- *Balder's Dreams*

In Nordic mythology beside the nine worlds there existed numerous other realms of the dead (*Walhalla, Helheim, Niflheim, Folkvang, Ran's Realm, Gimle, Vingolf, Andlangr, Brimir, Okolnir, Vidblain, Sindri, Nidaberge* etc.), of which the nine realms are ruled by the dark goddess Hel. Hel is the daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda; her siblings are the Fenrir wolf and the Midgard snake; together they are forming a triad fighting against the gods.

The nine worlds of the gods, the humans and the giants are not only the home of many mythic creatures but they also represent aspects of existence and human consciousness. Each world is connected through the world tree *Yggdrasil*. It is possible to divide the nine worlds into three triads, with the first three worlds forming the shamanic "upper world" and the human super ego (see the chart). The following three worlds represent the "middle world" and consciousness, whereas the lower three worlds form the "underworld," the unconscious and the unknown. Thomas Karlsson in his book *Uthark - Nightside of the Runes* compares the Nordic world tree *Yggdrasil* with the cabbalistic tree of life, and correspondingly to cabbalistic notions, there exists not only a Nordic tree of life but also a Nordic tree of death, which the author identifies as *Heldrasil*. Since the Nordic tree of life/world tree *Ygdrasil* comprises nine worlds, he counters it with the nine worlds of the dead, presumably with reference to a part of the Edda, in which Odin banishes Hel to Niflheim and grants her power over the nine worlds (*Gylfaginning* 34).

Heldrasil means "horse of Hel" (*Hel* = Hel; *drasil* = horse), while *Yggdrasil* can be translated as "horse of the dreadful" and can be considered a sobriquet of Odin. Accordingly, since it took Odin nine days while hanging on the world tree to receive the runes, the way to Hel also takes nine days - so it is passed on by *Odin's Rune Song (Havamal)*, according to which *Odin's* son *Hermod* needed nine days for the journey to Hel in order to bring back his brother *Baldur (Gylfaginning)*.

Hel - the dark goddess

Hel (whose other names are *Heljar, Hella, Helan, Hellia*, and presumably also the names *Frau Holle* and *Holda* can be traced back to her) had not originally been a goddess but later she evolved to becoming the goddess of death. In Snorri Sturlusons' *Prose Edda* she is mentioned as the daughter of Loki and the giantess *Angrboda* and is assigned to the lineage of the giants. Furthermore, the *Prose*

Edda reports how Hel, like all other offspring of Loki, became banished from Asgard. Hel went to Niflheim, where she gained power over the nine worlds in order to offer housing for the deceased that are sent to her (*Gylfaginning*):

“Hel he (Allfather/Odin) cast into Niflheim, and gave to her power over nine worlds, to apportion all abodes among those that were sent to her: that is, men dead of sickness or of old age.”

Physically, the goddess Hel is depicted with a face that is half-human and the other half is blue-black, which indicates that she is half dead and half alive. This is confirmed by the description of Hel as a dark goddess who unites life and death. This means that Hel has more aspects than just being a goddess of death. Furthermore, Hel is a goddess of magic and healing. Among others, the German magician and occultist Jan Fries mentions in his book *Helrunar* a kind of Old-Nordic shamans called *Haljarunarn*, those who are whispering with Hel. Therefore, contacts and journeys into the underworld did not begin with the birth of modern magic or the left-handed path but already existed earlier in the Northern shamanism and also worldwide.

Helheim – World of the Dead

Hel, as a world within the tree of life/world tree *Yggdrasil*, belongs to the underworld and is considered as the underground world of the dead, situated below the roots of the world tree. It could be reached by crossing Gjöll, the river of death. As with Hades of the Greek mythology, the return is nearly impossible. When we take a look at Germanic notions of death and afterlife, we can see that in the beginning Hel held the position of the “standard underworld” to which all the dead had to travel. Later it was believed that this only applied to people having died of an illness or old age. In the beginning Hel was not considered a place of punishment and of suffering. Only later and presumably by a Christian influence the notion arose that it was a place of punishment for evil people, especially liars and murderers, as we can find in the *Edda* (*Gylfaginning*). The English word “hell” and the German word “Hölle” are both presumably derivatives of Hel (in some German fairy tales she is embodied by the figure of Frau Holle).

There are sources describing Helheim (amongst others the *Gylfaginning*). Helheim is surrounded by fences and gates of *Helgrind*. Helheim is guarded by the giantess Modgudr, who is waiting at the bridge to Hel. From this bridge called *Gjallarbrú* a northern-bound path leads to the castle of Hel which has high walls and wild rivers are flowing around it. The entrance to the castle is guarded by the hell hound *Garm* and the barn cock *Fialar*, completely different if compared to the cock of the gods that is wearing a golden crest. Allowance to enter is granted by these two. Inside Hel’s castle there are, beside large halls, also her throne, which is called *Eljudnir* (misery), her table called *Hungr* (hunger), her knife *Sultr* (withering). Her servant is called *Ganglati* (“slow walker), her maid is called *Ganglot* (slow stepper); her threshold is called *Fallandaforad* (Falling peril), her bed *Kor* (coffin) and her bed cover *Bliikjandabol* (blinking doom). No sun beam has ever entered the castle’s interior, even the entrance gate is facing north. The walls are formed by the bodies of snakes and through the smoke tube poisonous rain is running down.

Further realms of the dead

Beside Helheim or Hel there are a number of further realms to which humans and other entities may go. Some of them I want to mention in this text, the name of others you can read in the chart. A commentary to all of them would lead too far away from the actual topic.

1. *Ran*, the wife of *Ägir*, the giant of the ocean, houses all drowned persons in her place under the waves.
2. *Valhall*/Walhall, the “hall of the dead soldiers” is a place to which those dead soldiers come that Odin is recruiting for the last battle of Ragnarök. Originally Walhalla was probably only a name for the battlefield on which the dead ones lay.

3. The goddess Freya maintains also a place for the dead, especially dead soldiers, that is called *Folkvang* (see *Gylaginning*). Freya chooses one half of dead warriors to go with her, while Odin gets the other half. On the other hand, it is also said that maidens that died young will come to Freya, while Frigga will take those women that died e. g. while giving birth. It is also possible to imagine, that each god is taking those humans that have worshipped this particular deity during their lifetime. In *Hárbarzljód* we can read that the servants will go to Thor while those of a noble breeding will go to Odin.
4. There is a dark place reserved for murderers and other law breakers called *Naströnd* "shoreline of corpses." About this place it is written (*Völuspá*): "In *Naströnd* there is a huge but terrible hall, whose doors are facing north. It is covered with snake bodies and all the snakes' heads are facing inside the house. They vomit poison that is running in streams through the hall, through which perjurers and assassins are wading."
5. As a further place for the dead *Niflhel* is considered, which is often identified with Niflheim, the ice world of the North (*Vafbrúðnismál*, *Baldur's draumar* and *Gylfaginning*.)
6. Another place mentioned by the name in Niflheim is Hvergelmir: "But the worst it is in Hvergelmir; it is there that Nidhöggir de-souls bodies."

When you start looking for concrete names or descriptions of the nine worlds of Hel, you will find no information at all. Only Helheim and the different places of which the Germanic people believed that their deaths will come to live after their passing away are handed down and described. For us this means that we are able to explore new worlds of Nordic mythology. For this project, already established and known techniques of Nordic magic, combined under the term of *Seidr*, will work well.

Procedure Instruction for the Ritual

Advice: Create a ritual space or an altar to your own taste. Use incense and several items that represent attributes of the goddess Hel (*Halagalz*-rune, bones etc.). As a sacrifice during the invocation, you may choose freely (wine, blood, and others).

a. Protection by the runes of the 24 Uthark

For those of you who want some kind of protection before the ritual, I recommend a circle of protection consisting of the 24 Uthark that can be drawn with a knife around you and your working space. This means you take your knife facing north and start to draw the *Uruz*-rune into the air. At the same time you chant the rune's name for one time. You carry on with the other runes (up to *Fehu*) while turning around clockwise.

b. Invocation of Hel / Entrance into Hel's realm

Facing north you start the following invocation:

Lepaca Hel

Hel, goddess of death and life

I, Daimon ... (nn) have the will to explore your realm and your nine worlds.

As a sacrifice I offer you ...

That you may grant me entrance into your realm and its worlds.

(Make the sacrifice)

Hel, open Helgrind, the gates and the fences to your realm,

Let me safely pass by the hungry Garm and the carking Fialar.

Let me safely pass by your threshold Fallandaforad and your throne Eljudnir.

Let me open the veil Blikjandabol of your halls

That I may receive insight into your nine worlds.

Hear my galdr, Hel:
Salja Heljar,
Salja Heldrasil.

c. Galdr

Start now singing the *galdr* “*Salja Heljar, Salja Heldrasil.*” Carry on until you have reached a sufficient trance state. For support you may do some drumming in accordance with the *galdr*. It does not have to be a drum but can also be two wooden sticks or something similar that seems suitable. Rattles are also a favoured aid.

d. Trance and Hugr

During trance, when you recognize that you have reached the entrance to Hel or that you have established a contact to the realm of Hel, start to send out your will (*hugr*). Visualize your *hugr* as a raven sitting on a tree and allow it to start flying. Change to seeing through this perspective and explore the first world of Heldrasil (the second and third world will be the destination of the next two workings). During the whole time you can continuously chant the *galdr*, while will (*hugr*), word (*galdr*), and action (the singing itself) should be in harmony with each other. As soon as you realize that the trance state becomes weaker, let your raven (*hugr*) fly back to the tree.

e. The grounding of surplus energy

In order to get rid of the surplus energy, to reach again a serene normal state of consciousness and to gather the main insights of this work, perform some grounding work. By this I mean that you should bend forward and allow your arms and legs to touch the ground. Focus all the surplus energy you have built up during singing the *galdr*. Visualize that your arms and legs are channels for this energy, let it flow through your arms and your legs into the ground. Feel yourself getting again fresh and serene, feel the memories of your trance getting structured and cleared.

f. End of the Ritual

As a closure of the ritual, open the circle of protection made up by the 24 Uthark. Start with *Uruz*, end with the *Fehu*-rune but this time walk counter-clockwise. Afterwards, write down your impressions.

Levels	Worlds on the Tree of Life	Realms of the dead
Heaven/upper world/superego	ᚖ Muspelheim ᚷ Asgard ᚱ Wanaheim	Vingolf/Gimle Vidblain Valhall, Nidaberge
Earth/middle world/consciousness	ᚱ Ijusalheim ᚷ Midgard ᚷ Svartalheim	Sindri and Brimir Himinbiörg, Gladsheim, Valhall, Ran, Folkwang Nifelhel, Naströnd
Underworld/subconsciousness	ᚱ Jötunheim (Utgard) ᚱ Helheim Nifelheim	Himinbiörg Hel + Nine Dark Worlds Nifelhel

The Nine Worlds in the world tree and the various realms of the dead.

