

"Nine Nights" in Indo-European Myth

SIGNE COHEN

University of Missouri, USA

Abstract: A time span of "nine nights" is frequently mentioned in ancient Indo-European literature. The Norse god Óðinn hangs on the world tree Yggdrasill for "nine long nights"; his magical gold ring multiplies itself every nine nights; the Norse fertility god Freyr must wait nine nights to be united with his beloved, and Óðinn's son must ride for nine nights to the underworld to attempt to get his dead brother Baldr back. The Greek goddess Demeter must search for her lost daughter Persephone for nine days and nights before finding her in the underworld, and Hesiod claims that it will take an anvil nine days nights to fall from earth down to Tartarus. Hindus celebrate the nine-night festival of *Navrātri*, associated with ghosts and the dead, and Zoroastrians perform the nine-night ritual of *Barashnûm* to purify those who have come into contact with the dead. In this paper, I argue that there is abundant evidence of a "nine night week" attested in the myths and stories of most ancient Indo-European cultures. But why nine nights in particular? I propose that the nine night cycle is connected with the sidereal lunar month and with symbolic representations of death, danger, and the underworld.

Keywords: nine nights, Indo-European mythology, sidereal lunar month, underworld.

Nine Nights in Norse Mythology

A famous passage in the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*¹ describes Óðinn's ritual self-sacrifice as he hangs on the world tree Yggdrasill:

I know that I hung
on that wind-swept tree
for nine full nights,
wounded with a spear
and given unto Óðinn,
myself to myself,
on that tree
of which no man knows
from where its roots run.

They did not comfort me with bread

¹ *Hávamál* is only preserved in a single manuscript, the Codex Regius, dated to around 1270. The poem itself can be assumed to be at least a few centuries older, as parts of it are quoted in a 10th century text.

nor with the drinking horn.
 I looked down,
 and I took up the runes.
 Screaming I grasped them,
 and I fell back from there.

I learned nine great sounds
 from the famous son
 of Bölþor, Bestla's father,
 and I got a drink
 of costly mead,
 and I was sprinkled with Oðrerir.²

Oðinn's self-sacrifice in *Hávamál* can be compared with the 11th century descriptions by Adam of Bremen of the real-life sacrificial rituals he observed in Uppsala, Sweden.³ These solemn rituals took place every ninth year. During the nine-day ritual, which recalls Oðinn's nine nights of suffering, nine victims of different species were sacrificed by hanging, perhaps as a ritual reenactment of Oðinn's primordial self-sacrifice.

Other textual references to "nine nights" in Norse mythology suggest that a time period of nine nights is associated with both death and transformation. Oðinn possesses a magical ring, Draupnir, that creates eight new copies of itself every ninth night. Draupnir is associated with death in the *Gylfaginning*; Oðinn himself puts the ring on his son Baldr's funeral pyre to accompany him to the underworld. When Oðinn's other son, Hermóðr, rides to the underworld "for nine nights through valleys dark and deep" in a failed attempt to retrieve his brother, he ends up bringing the ring Draupnir back. The ring Draupnir has been interpreted as a symbol of transition from death to life and back to life,⁴ or alternatively as a symbol for the moon. But why the association with *nine nights* in particular?

The phrase "nine nights" also occurs in the Norse myth of the fertility god Freyr's courtship of the giant maiden Gerðr, where it is associated with separation and an anguished waiting period. When Gerðr finally agrees to marry Freyr, she promises to meet him on a tree-covered island "nine nights from now":

Barri is the grove called, which we both know,
 A grove peaceful and still.
 Nine nights from now to the son of Njörðr
 Gerðr will grant delight.⁵

Echoes of the nine nights' waiting may also be found in the myth of Frey's father Njörðr's somewhat complicated relationship with another female giant, Skaði.

² *Hávamál* 138-140. It is unclear what "Óðrerir" is; common interpretations include either the vessel that contains the mead of poetry or the mead itself. All translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ Adam of Bremen: *Gesta hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* (1075/1076 CE).

⁴ Steinsland 2002: 93.

⁵ *Skirnismál* 39.

Skaði prefers living in the mountains where she can hunt, while the sea god Njörðr wants to live by the ocean. As a compromise, the two agree to spend nine nights in the mountains and three days by the sea. Njörðr finds the nine nights in the mountains to be difficult to bear, however:

Hateful to me are the mountains.
I was not there long,
Only nine nights.
The howling if the wolves seems evil to me
Compared to the song of the swan.⁶

Here, the nine nights represent a period of suffering for a desired outcome. A similar notion of suffering for nine days or nights can be seen in the *Völsungasaga*, which describes men turning into werewolves for nine days through dark magic but turning human again on the tenth day.⁷ Overall, in Norse mythology, "nine nights" seem to represent a time of suffering, followed by a dramatic transformation, sometimes – but not always – associated with death.

Nine Nights in Germanic Literature

If we turn to other Northern European texts, we find several other instances of nine days (or nine nights) as a recognized time period. In old Germanic law, nine days constituted a well-recognized legal period. In case of divorce, a wife had to leave her husband's house after nine days. If he died, she also had precisely nine days to vacate the house. Nine-day periods are so frequently mentioned in Germanic literature that Weinhold concluded that there must have existed an original Germanic nine day week prior to the introduction of a seven-day week after contact with the Romans in the third century.⁸

Nine Nights in Ancient Celtic Literature

A time period of nine days is also frequently attested in Irish and Welsh literature. Many scholars have observed that the ancient Celtic calendar operates with a nine-day week, rather than a seven-day week.⁹ There is even a separate word in Old Irish for the period of nine days and nine nights, *nómad*.¹⁰

Old Welsh law books such as *The Laws of Hywel Dda* make frequent references to nine days (*nawfed dydd*¹¹). In Welsh, it is still common to refer to *naw diwenod* "nine days", rather than a week, as a common way of counting time.

⁶ *Gylfaginning* 23.

⁷ *Völsungasaga* chapter 8. The number nine is significant in Norse mythology in general. There are nine realms, nine daughters of the sea god Ægir (*Skaldskaparmál* 25.61), nine maidens serving the goddess Menglōð (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 37.38), nine master smiths among the dwarves (*Fjölsvinnsmál* 34.), and nine mothers of Heimdalr (*Hyndluljóð* 35-38).

⁸ Weinhold 1897, 40ff.

⁹ Ellis 2003.

¹⁰ Roscher 1903:15, Loth 1904: 134.

¹¹ http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/laws_hywel_dda.html

Nine day/night periods also occur in Celtic mythology and Celtic-inspired Arthurian legends, often associated with danger, death, and the Otherworld. King Arthur¹² and his warriors battled with the magical boar of the Otherworld, Twrch Trwyth, for nine nights and nine days before killing it¹³. The enchanted island of Avalon, Arthur's final resting place, is said to be located "nine days' sail from Cyprus".¹⁴ The Arthurian hero Cai has the ability to breathe for "nine nights and nine days" under water, and he could go "nine days and nine nights" without sleep.¹⁵ But Cai himself is a deadly warrior; a wound from his sword can never heal.¹⁶

In general, then, it seems that a time period of nine days or nights is associated with danger, death, and the otherworld in Celtic mythology as well as in Celtic-inspired Arthurian legends.

Nine Nights in Ancient Indian Literature

The association between danger, death, and nine days or nights can perhaps also be seen in the *R̥gveda*, the oldest text of Hinduism. *R̥gveda* 1.116.24 praises the Áśvins, the twin gods who rescued the drowning and wounded Rebha:

Within the waters through ten nights and nine days,
bound and pierced by the malicious one,
Rebha, who bobbed and twisted in the water –
Him you brought up, like soma with a ladle.¹⁷

According to a parallel passage in *R̥gveda* 10.39.9, Rebha was dead when the Áśvins raised him from the waters and brought him back to life. Although Rebha's period of agony here involves an extra night, the nine-day period aligns his suffering with other Indo-European heroes in pain for nine days, and with experiences associated with death and new life.

In classical Hinduism, the nine-night festival to the goddess Durgā, simply called Navrātra or Navrātri ("The Nine Nights"), is widely celebrated. Although the autumn Navrātri (in the lunar month of Āśvin) and the spring Navrātri (in the lunar month of Caitra) are the most well-known, some sources mention the year (of three hundred and sixty days) being divided into forty periods of nine nights, each called a Navrātri, or nine-night period.¹⁸ During the popular autumn Navrātri, the goddess Durgā's slaying of the buffalo demon Mahiṣa is celebrated. The nine nights of the festival are immediately preceded by *Pitṛpakṣa*, the

¹² King Arthur is associated with the number nine in several ways; he was said to have nine times his father's strength (Schimmel 1993: 173), nine kings paid homage to him, and nine butlers worked for him (Schimmel 1993: 173), and he encountered nine sisters on the magical island of Avalon, his final resting place.

¹³ Ellis 1999: 392.

¹⁴ Green 2009: 243.

¹⁵ Koch 2006: 325.

¹⁶ Macbain 1885: 56.

¹⁷ *R̥gveda* 1.116.24. Translation from Jamison and Brereton 2014: 271.

¹⁸ Rodrigues 2003: 15.

fortnight devoted to the spirits of the dead ancestors,¹⁹ and is often seen as a continuation of the worship of the dead. During the nine nights of Navrātri, the spirits of the dead are especially powerful, and many ghost exorcisms take place at this time. Many women observe a fast during the nine days of Navrātri, either fasting completely or avoiding meat and wine, a custom intriguingly reminiscent of the nine days' fasting for women during the Eleusinian mysteries in Greece.²⁰

Nine Nights in Ancient Iranian Literature

Nine nights also appear to have been significant in Iranian literature. Among the Zoroastrians, the nine-night purification ritual of *Bareshnûm* is considered the highest form of purification. It consists of three ceremonial baths and the recitation of multiple prayers. In modern times, it is usually performed by priests who need to be pure in order to perform religious ceremonies, but it can also be performed whenever someone is polluted through contact with the dead.²¹ The *Sad Dar*, a ritual text in Persian²², elaborates on the importance of performing this ritual:

"As it is declared in revelation that, if a man who has chanted comes upon a corpse, whether a dog, or a fox, or a wolf, or a male, or a female, or any creature on whose corpse it is possible that he may come, that good man becomes so that a man may become defiled by him, and it is necessary to wash to polluted one, so that it may not make him a sinner. In order that they may act so to the polluted one it is necessary to wash him, it is necessary to perform that *Bareshnum* ceremony of the nine nights."²³

If a person does not perform the nine-night ceremony, the demons will transform him into a rotting corpse after death, and the angels will complain so bitterly about the stench of his soul that they will not be able to make up its final account of reckoning. The soul will therefore get stuck on the Cinvat bridge which separates the living and the dead and not be able to pass into the afterlife.²⁴

Long before any mention of the *Bareshnûm* ritual in Iranian texts, however, the association between death and nine nights is made in the *Avesta*, where it is stated that one must wait for a period of precisely nine nights before bringing the sacred fire back into the house of a man who has died.²⁵

¹⁹ Roy 2005: 304.

²⁰ Harlan 1992: 88.

²¹ Nigosian 1993: 105.

²² The date of this text is uncertain. It is referred to as an old text in the 16th century (West 1901) and could possibly date back to the 10th century.

²³ *Sad Dar*, Chapter 100, translation from West 1901: 362.

²⁴ *Sad Dar*, Chapter 36. West 1901: 297.

²⁵ *Zend Avesta*, Fargard V. 42. Translated by Darmesteter 1880.

Nine Nights in Ancient Greek Literature

The number nine occurs frequently in ancient Greek literature in general. The *Iliad* tells of nine heralds summoning the army,²⁶ and there are nine muses, nine spheres in Pythagorean astronomy, etc. Often, the number nine is associated with the dead: Apollo shoots his deadly arrows at the Danaans for nine days,²⁷ the women of Troy grieve for Hektor for nine days,²⁸ Hektor's funeral pyre taking nine days to build,²⁹ and Niobe mourns for her unburied children for nine days³⁰. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus drifts for nine days in mortal danger before arriving in the land of the Lotus Eaters,³¹ nine days after escaping the dangers of Scylla and Charybdis,³² and another nine after being struck by Zeus' thunderbolt.³³ Perhaps an association between death and the number nine is also reflected in the *Theogony* when Hesiod claims that it would take an anvil nine days to fall from earth to the underworld of Tartarus.³⁴

If the journey to the underworld takes nine days, perhaps it is no wonder that the Greek goddess Demeter searches for her vanished daughter Persephone (Kore), who had been abducted by Aidoneus/Plouton, for nine days before finding her in the underworld. Demeter's nine days of sorrow were celebrated during the Eleusinian mysteries, which lasted for nine days.³⁵ Female worshippers fasted for nine days to commemorate Demeter's nine days of grieving.³⁶ It has been suggested that some of the secret rituals connected with the mystery cult may be associated with the underworld and death,³⁷ and Sophocles writes "Thrice happy are those of mortals, who having seen those rites depart for Hades; for to them alone is granted to have a true life there..."³⁸

The Pythagoreans also seem to have connected both death and supernatural insight with nine days; Pythagoras was said to have spent "the usual three times nine days" in the Ideon cave, performing funeral rite for Zeus³⁹ and acquiring divine wisdom.⁴⁰

The 2nd century text *Bibliotheca* (ascribed, probably erroneously, to Apollodorus) tells of Zeus' destruction of humanity at the end of the Bronze Age. Prometheus' son Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha survives the great flood that sweeps over Greece by floating on a chest for nine days and nine nights.⁴¹

²⁶ *Iliad* 2, line 95.

²⁷ *Iliad* 1, line 53.

²⁸ *Iliad* 24, line 820.

²⁹ *Iliad* 24, line 785

³⁰ *Iliad* 24, line 610.

³¹ *Odyssey*, book 9, line 83.

³² *Odyssey*, book 12, line 447.

³³ *Odyssey*, book 14, line 314.

³⁴ *Theogony* 720-725.

³⁵ Although the center of the mystery cult was in Eleusis, sanctuaries to Demeter and Persephone are found all over Greece, which suggests that the cult was widespread (Bookidis and Stroud 1987: 6).

³⁶ Roscher 1903: 16.

³⁷ Bookidis and Stroud 1987: 20.

³⁸ Sophocles *Fragment* 719. See Mylonas 1961: 284.

³⁹ Roscher 1907: 51.

⁴⁰ Ustinova 2009: 190.

⁴¹ *Bibliotheca* 1.8.2. (<http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus1.html>)

Several ancient Greek festivals lasted for precisely nine days. The nine-day Spartan festival of *Karneia* was celebrated each year in August/September in honor of Apollo Carneus to commemorate the death of the seer Carnus.⁴² The festival has been interpreted as a "Death and Resurrection ceremony".⁴³ There was also a nine-day festival of atonement at Lemnos,⁴⁴ at which offerings were made to the dead and to subterranean deities,⁴⁵ a nine-day festival to Bacchos,⁴⁶ and a nine-day celebration of Athena at Athens.⁴⁷ Roscher suggests, based on the frequent mention of nine day periods in Greek literature, that there is ample evidence of an ancient nine-day week among the Greeks.⁴⁸

Nine Days in Ancient Roman Literature

As among the Greeks, the number nine was associated with death among the Romans. Ovid describes Medea gathering herbs for nine days and nine nights to rejuvenate Jason's aging father. But when the daughters of Pelias wish to restore the youth of their aging father as well, Medea deliberately leaves the herbs out of the cauldron she puts his dismembered body in, and he dies.⁴⁹ Elsewhere in *Metamorphosis*, Chiron is wounded by the arrow of Hercules and dies on the ninth day, upon which he turns into a constellation.⁵⁰

A final banquet for the deceased was held on the ninth day after the burial in ancient Rome.⁵¹ Livy refers to the practice of setting out a nine-day banquet for the gods in the streets when people are threatened by the plague or other great disasters.⁵² It has even been suggested that the Catholic custom of mourning for a deceased pope for nine days (*novemdiales*) may go back to the ancient Roman nine-day mourning period.⁵³

Although the Romans used a seven-day calendar week after 45 BCE when the Julian calendar was introduced, there is still a lingering memory of an older nine-day week (*nundinae*). Columella, in his agricultural treatise *Res rustica*, frequently mentions nine-day periods; it takes nine days to make cheese, nine days to hatch eggs, and nine days to salt meat.⁵⁴ Among the three fixed points of each month (Calendae, Idus, Nonae), the Nonae, which fall nine days before the Idus, hint at an earlier nine-day cycle. This memory of a pre-Julian nine-day period is also preserved in the nundinal cycle of the Roman calendar; during the Republic,

⁴² Roscher 1907: 6.

⁴³ Binney 1905: 99.

⁴⁴ Roscher 1903: 17.

⁴⁵ Graves 1955: 14.5 and 149e.

⁴⁶ Roscher 1907: 6.

⁴⁷ Roscher 1907: 7.

⁴⁸ Roscher 1903: 17.

⁴⁹ *Metamorphosis* 7.234. Cp. Roscher 1903: 17.

⁵⁰ *Metamorphosis* 5.413.

⁵¹ Anderson 1954: 132

⁵² 5.13, 7.2, 8.25, 21.62, 22.1.

⁵³ Anderson 1954: 133.

⁵⁴ *Res rustica* 7.8.5, 8.5.10, 8.11.11, 12.53. Cp. Roscher 1903.

every nine days (eight days, counted inclusively) is a "market day" (*nundinum*), marked as such on the calendar.⁵⁵

Nine Days in Lithuania

In ancient Lithuania, the moon god Menulis was regarded as the guardian of night and time.⁵⁶ The same word is used for the moon (*menuo*) and a time period of a lunar month,⁵⁷ and, as one scholar observes, "the Moon was used as the natural cosmic instrument for measuring time."⁵⁸

There is ample evidence that the ancient Lithuanian week was nine days long.⁵⁹ The medieval Lithuanian calendar, the Gediminas Scepter, divides the year into twelve lunar months, each beginning with the new moon,⁶⁰ and the week into nine days. The days of the week were simply numbered 1 through 9 and were not named after the planets.⁶¹

The nine nights and the moon in ancient Indo-European culture

Although scholars of Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Germanic literature have individually argued that there is evidence of an old nine-night/nine-day week in each of these cultures, no one has as yet suggested, to the best of my knowledge, that these traces of an old nine-night week may be an inheritance from a common Proto-Indo-European past. The widespread occurrence of the nine-night period in ancient Indo-European texts makes it likely, however, that the nine-night cycle has old Indo-European roots.

So why nine nights? I would suggest that the nine-night period may be related to lunar time reckoning. In most Indo-European languages the very term for "measuring" is related to words for the moon. The PIE root **me-* ("to measure") is the basis of words like the English "measure" and "meal" (eating at an appointed time), "moon" and "month". The oldest time measurements among the Indo-Europeans seem to be more oriented toward the moon than the sun.⁶² Originally, many Indo-European people seem to have counted nights, rather than days. Tacitus, for example, in his description of Germanic tribes, commented on their habit of reckoning time by nights, rather than by days, and to use the new or full moon to determine meeting times.

But why *nine* nights in particular? It has been suggested that nine simply represents the holy number three squared,⁶³ but I would argue that it is more likely that the nine-night cycle is related to lunar measurements of time. Three nine day weeks fit perfectly into a sidereal month, or the time period it takes the moon to return to the same point among the fixed stars (27.321661 days). A division of the

⁵⁵ Rose 1944, Allen 1947.

⁵⁶ <http://www.lithuanian.net/mitai/cosmos/baltai5.htm>

⁵⁷ Vaiskunas 2006: 172.

⁵⁸ Vaiskunas 2006: 172.

⁵⁹ <http://www.lithuanian.net/mitai/cosmos/baltai5.htm>

⁶⁰ Vaiskunas 2006: 173.

⁶¹ <http://www.lithuanian.net/mitai/cosmos/baltai5.htm>

⁶² Cf. Roscher 1903: 5.

⁶³ Weinhold 1897: 3.

sidereal month into three equal "weeks" among the Proto-Indo-Europeans may be preserved in the Lithuanian calendar, which divides each month into three weeks of nine days. Although the traditional Hindu calendar generally uses a seven-day week (influenced by the Greeks), there are also echoes of a nine-day week in Hindu astronomy: each day of the month is named after a *nakṣatra* or lunar asterism that the moon is in at the time of sunrise. There are nine heavenly rulers of the *nakṣatras*,⁶⁴ and they rule over the days of the month in three nine-day cycles. Each Hindu month therefore consists of 27 lunar days, divided into three 9-day periods. Based on the texts discussed here, as well as others that time would not permit me to talk about today, I would propose that there existed a Proto-Indo-European calendrical division of a lunar month into three nine day cycles.

But "nine nights" are not only associated with the lunar calendar, but also, as we have seen, with notions of death and danger. As we have observed in several ancient Indo-European texts, the number nine is frequently associated with a period of suffering and transformation, and passage between the realms of the living and the dead.

Perhaps the reason for this might be that the moon lends itself so easily to symbolic representations of danger, death, and rebirth. The moon's changing appearance in the night sky throughout the lunar month – its waning, disappearance, and eventual re-emergence is evocative of both death and a tentative hope of a new birth.

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⁶⁴ Ketu, Venus, the sun, the moon, Mars, Rāhu, Jupiter, Saturn, and Mercury. Rāhu and Ketu are lunar nodes, or theoretical points of intersection between the paths of the sun and the moon.

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