

LECTURE 7

CELTIC MYTH AND LEGEND

Evidence of the myths and legends of the *ancient* Celts is scanty. The reason is that those myths and legends were not committed to a written form until the Christian period when they were given a Christian "gloss" and when the ancient gods and goddesses were adjusted to new roles to fit in with the precepts of the new religion.

Even with this fact, the Celtic languages contain one of Europe's oldest and most vibrant mythologies.

What is meant by mythology? It is a sacred tradition embracing a whole set of concepts covering the philosophical beliefs of a given culture. Some have argued that myths are parables to explain ideas on impoderable questions.

Basically, the function of mythology is to give an account of the religious ideas, including the concept of creation, and the fortunes of a people. It leads, almost seamlessly, into the legends of a culture, that is the oral history of the people from the distant past. There is a fine line between legend and the historical reality.

When the insular Celtic traditions were first committed to writing about the 6th century AD, it was a development of a far earlier and highly sophisticated oral tradition. Those entrusted with handing on the myths orally had to be word perfect and, as Julius Caesar remarked, it sometimes took twenty years for trainees to learn the lore before they were regarded as qualified.

Thus, the traditions contained an echo of voices from the dawn of European civilization, a virtual "window on the Iron Age."

The Irish myths still have a particular vibrancy as Ireland was the only Celtic land to escape Roman conquest and was relatively uninfluenced by contact with Rome until the Christian period. Then, however, Latin culture was the vehicle by which the new religion was imported. The Christian scribes tended to play down the pagan vibrancy of the myths and give them a Christian veneer.

Some of this veneer was blatant. For example: the sea god ^{man an'nan} Mac Lir fortells the coming of Christ to save the world. In another story, the great hero Cúchulainn pleads with St. Patrick to intercede with Christ to save him from the 'fires of hell.'

as the stories were set down by individuals, working at varying times and copying more often than not from older books as well as oral tradition, the pre-Christian vitality in Irish myth has not been entirely obliterated.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF IRISH MYTH

Irish myth has been categorised into four sections:

First: is the mythological cycle which relates to the various 'invasions' of Ireland, from that of Cesair, a woman at the time of the flood. There were 50 women and only 3 men, who shared the women. Only one survivor of the "flood", the man Fintan, who hid in a high cave and became a shape-shifting immortal.

Next came Partholon, grandson of Noah and an outlaw with 1000 people. They are said to have come from Spain about the 4th Century BC. Some Irish myths put him much earlier saying that they were harassed from the north by a race of demons called the Formoire or Fomorians and succumbed to the plague.

^{Formoree}
^{Faer'blog}
Nemed (a descendent of Partholon's brother) the Firbolg, who were the first, and then the Tuatha De Danaan, or children of Danu (the mother goddess), followed by a group from the mediterranean, known as Milesians, who were the progenitors of the Gael; all came to Ireland and tried to either exterminate or co-exist with the others.

This group of tales are the closest to the creation myths in any Celtic language. We find that the gods and goddesses, the Children of Danu, have arrived in Ireland from their four fabulous Otherworld cities, to overthrow the Firbolg and claim Ireland for their own.

^{Down} However, the real villains are the Tuatha de ^{Down} Domhain, the children of Domhnu, who are also called the Fomorri (means: undersea dwellers). It becomes clear that the Children of Danu are the deities of light and good, while the Children of Domhnu are the deities of darkness and evil.

The cycle ends with the arrival of the mortals in Ireland, the sons of

Milesius

Milesius. He is identified as an Iberian Celt who has wandered the world selling his military services until coming to Ireland.

The old gods and goddesses are defeated and are forced to retreat underground, dwelling in the hills. They become the "fairies" in folklore. The best known is the banshee (bean ^{shee} sidhe, woman of the fairies) who wails outside the home of the family to whom she is attached when one is about to die.

The great god of arts and crafts, Lugh, was demoted to Lugh chronain (stooping Lugh), anglicised as 'leprechaun.' ~~There~~ 6 myth invaders of Island - 11:36

THE ULSTER CYCLE: - saw in 3rd class.

This is the second group of tales and are the stories of the deeds of the 'warriors of the Red Branch', the military elite of Ulster whom Cuchulainn was the great champion.

This group of tales contains the famous epic *Tain Bo Cuailgne*, often regarded as the Irish equivalent of the *Iliad*. This is the story of the campaign waged by Medb, the masterful queen of Connacht, to capture the famous Brown Bull of Ulster. She leads a vast army against the kingdom of Ulster whose warriors are prevented from defending it by a strange debility inflicted by the war goddess Macha. Only the youthful hero Cuchulainn is able to carry on a single-handed resistance against her army.

^{cu cal in} goddess of war originally - Demoted, - blamed for her men's death
^{Tain} goddess of Ireland itself, sovereignty

The *Tain* is the longest and most powerful of all the Irish myths. The other stories of the cycle are enlargements on themes occurring in the *Tain*, preparatory tales leading up to the epic, romances that were added later to fulfil peoples desire to know the fortunes of the main characters, and a group of entirely independent tales but with related characters.

THE CYCLE OF THE KINGS

The third group of tales or legends relate to semi-legendary kings who undoubtedly had a real existence in remote Irish history but who had become the subject for romanticising so that we no longer know where reality ends and the story-telling begins.

For example, Niall Noighallach, known as Niall of the Nine Hostages, who is recorded as being high king from 379 AD to 405 AD, is regarded as progenitor of the Ui Neill dynasty, the kings of Ulster.

(oo) & Neel

He is recorded as raiding Britain and Gaul during the time of Theodosius the Great and encountering the Romans.

the story of Niall is a typical case in which history and myth are combined in the minds of the story tellers. Symbolism is used to mark his birth; signs are given to point the way to his being the lawful king; he survives attempts to destroy him by those seeking to evade the prophecy given by a goddess of sovereignty, that he will be the greatest high king.

No videos short enough

THE FENIAN CYCLE

os'see a nyc

Sometimes known as the Ossianic Cycle, is The fourth and last group of stories are the adventures of Fionn MacCumhail and the warriors of the Fianna, the elite bodyguard to the high kings of Tara.

Fee u na

Fee on

Fee a cha gh

The Fianna are said to have been founded in 300 BC by Fiachadh and

said

consisted of twenty five battalions raised from two clans, Bascna and Morna. Fionn Mac Cumhail (anglicized as Finn McCool) became the leader of the Fianna under the high king Cormac Mac Art.

Art

The stories of Fionn and his Fianna are innumerable, covering his birth to his death. These stories were highly popular in late medieval Ireland and although the Irish had produced their own native Arthurian saga, many tales of which are not translated into English, nor even acknowledged by 'Arthurian scholars', the stories of Fionn were not displaced as the great hero tales of Ireland.

Fee u na

Grants known 2.36

SOURCES

The oldest surviving sources of Irish mythology are two books dating from the 12th century known as The book of the Dun Cow and the book of Leinster plus a couple others known only from manuscript numbers. These were done in a monastic setting.

LTN ster

Only about 150 stories are known of Irish myth but it is estimated that at least another 450 remain unedited and untranslated even today.

The world of Irish mythology is remote from the classical world of Greek and Latin myth. Yet one is constantly surprised by the fact that Irish mythology seems to share a curious mediterranean warmth with its fellow Indo-European cultures.

The brooding blackness that permeates Nordic myth is not there and, at times, it is difficult to realise that we are looking at a north-western European culture. A happy spirit pervades the majority of tales, even the tragedies. There is an eternal spirit of optimism. Death is never the conqueror and we are reminded that the Celts were one of the first cultures in Europe to evolve a doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

Parallels to Irish mythology lie in Hindu mythology. And to say that a happy spirit pervades the Irish myths is not to say that evil is never encountered. As in the real world, good and evil constantly rub shoulders and the malevolent forms of the Fomorii, the gods and goddesses of darkness and death, are constantly hovering on the edge of the Northern ocean.

In these stories both the deities and the humans (immortals and mortals) are no mere physical beauties with empty heads. Their intellect and Physical abilities are equal. They are subject to all the natural virtues and vices, and are involved in many wrongful things.

Their world, both this one and the Otherworld, is one of rural happiness, a world in which they indulge in all the pleasures of life in an idealised form: love of nature, art games, feasting and heroic single combat.

The myths and legends of Ireland are also to be found in the Manx and Scottish Gaelic traditions for these languages did not begin to separate from their old Irish parent until the fifth and sixth centuries AD, just as the British Celtic language diverged at the same time into Welsh, Cornish and Breton.

WELSH MYTHOLOGY

In Welsh mythology we can see themes that show that the Irish and Welsh have a common source for there are echoes of a common Celtic mythological, religious and perhaps, historical experience. Nevertheless, the Welsh material is nowhere near as extensive or as old as the Irish tales and sagas.

The earliest surviving Welsh mythological texts are from the 14th century AD. The tales are collectively known as *The four Branches of the Mabinogi*. The term 'Mabinogi' originally meant 'a tale of youth' and has

since become simply 'a tale'.

M& b'n 89ee

There are twelve tales that comprise the 'Mabinogi'. I will mention a few. The story of Pwyll, lord of Dyfed, echoes the 'Holy Grail' theme for Pwyll adventures in Annwn, the Otherworld, and searches for a magic vessel.

An when

H& n&s Taliesin ^{shining} Brow

One of the most interesting stories is *Hanes Taliesin*. Taliesin was a poet who flourished in the Celtic north of Britain in the sixth century AD. He is mentioned in the *Historia Britonum* and the 14th century *Book of Taliesin*, a group of 12 poems, may be his authentic work.

this is a highly mythological tale which shows Taliesin as the child of a goddess, ^{Ceridwen} Ceridwen, who goes thru a number of reincarnations before he reaches the state of being Taliesin.

this book, *Hanes Taliesin* was developed in North Wales sometime during the 9th or 10th century but had its roots in Welsh culture long before then. Certainly if Taliesin did live in the 6th century this would be so.

He certainly appears in other Welsh myths, such as the story of Bran and Branwen. His name is frequently coupled with that of Merlin and given as an authority on prophecies.

M&ington - 3:45

~~Shan... Taliesin... M&ington... 3:45~~

W. tube - 6 mythological legends of Ireland.

4 - 11:36

Grants away - 2:36

Wales - The M&ington meet video... 3:45

THE CONTINENTAL CELTS

Since the only complete Celtic mythological texts to survive are from the insular Celts, we do not know nearly as much about the Continental or Gaulish Celtic mythology.

Archeology has to be relied on to find the names of gods and goddesses, and often they are in their Latin forms, which are found on inscriptions throughout the continent.

Some fragments so seem identifiable with their insular counterparts. Mainly, however, the gods of Gaul can only be glimpsed through Roman eyes. Caesar, as we have seen, was content simply to give Roman names to the gods--Mercury, Jupiter, Mars, Minerva, Apollo and Dis Pater (Pluto). This has merely confused their identification and functions.

No Greek or Latin writer has made clear the origin myths of the Celts on the continent, though we may deduce these from a compendium of evidence and a comparison with Hindu mythology;

In the fabulous and epic histories of Livy we can see some similarities with the insular Celtic stories. Livy was raised in Gaul and it is entirely possible that his family were among the early Romanized Celts. Reason: his histories are unlike the usual straightforward Roman accounts.

They were influenced by Celtic oral epics he heard in his youth. for example: In discussing a challenge made by a Celt for one to one combat with a Roman, a young Tribune Valerius, age 23, accepted the challenge. Livy's description has more in common with Celtic ideas and symbols than Roman. Here is a description of the Duel:

The duel proved less remarkable for its human interest than for the divine intervention of the gods, for as the Roman engaged his adversary, a raven suddenly alighted on his helmet, facing the Celt. The tribune first hailed this with delight, as a sign sent from heaven, and then prayed for the good will and gracious support from whoever had sent him the bird, were it god or goddess. Marvelous to relate, not only did the raven keep the perch it had once chosen, but as often as the struggle renewed it rose up on its wings and attacked the enemy's face and eyes with beak and claws, until he was terrified at the sight of such a portent; and so bewildered as well as half blinded, he was killed by Valerius. The raven then flew off out of sight towards the east.

This story is repeated by others using Livy as the source. Now, this symbolism is scarcely Roman. We know that one of the personae of the Celtic war goddess was in the form of a Raven. This is particularly evident in Irish myth.

This was not the first time Livy used Celtic symbolism. One of his best known accounts is of the Celts climbing up the Capitol in Rome at night with the sacred geese of Juno cackling a warning to the Roman garrison.

Juno, the wife of Jupiter, was goddess of women and marriage and mother of Mars (Ares), the god of war.

Livy says that these geese were kept as a sacred totem in the temple. In fact, the Roman geese were not sacred to Juno but kept in the Capitol's temples for ritual slaughter during divination practices. If the geese were not sacred to Juno, one cannot help wondering if there is any other reason why Livy introduces them into the epic.

It could well be that he is recounting simple fact. On the other hand, as he was raised among Celts, was possibly even a Celt himself, there could be a link with Celtic symbolism here. How?

Geese are most commonly associated with war in Celtic iconography. Because of their watchful and aggressive natures, the birds were used as an appropriate symbol or companion to the gods and goddesses of battle.

Thus the goose as a warlike symbol, aggressive and watchful, is found in Celtic culture long before the sack of Rome. It seems the 'sacred geese of Juno' came into Latin mythology from a Celtic source. We are told that thereafter the Romans carried the geese on litters, with purple and gold cushions, in an annual ceremony in Rome and their feeding was made the responsibility of the censors.

In the same ceremony, dogs were crucified on stakes of elder, to remind the people they had not barked a warning of the Celtic attack. This ritual was done in Rome well into the Christian era.

LEGENDS OF KING ARTHUR

To the modern popular mind, the most famous of Celtic mythological figures is Arthur, even though this is a comparatively recent development. He is undoubtedly an historical person, living during the late fifth or early

sixth centuries AD.

Within a few centuries after his death, this British Celtic 'war cheif', fighting the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britian, had become firmly embedded in mythology. The earliest reference to Arthur comes from the late sixth century in a poem by ^{An 2r in} Aneirin who speaks of an attempt by 300 elite warriors whose cheifton was at Edinburgh, attempting to recapture Catraeth from the Anglo-Saxons.

^{C& tr& eth} There are historical references dating from 500 AD to 1000 AD speaking of his conquests. In a Latin history of 955, it is said that Arthur and Mordred fell at the battle of Camluan in the year 537 AD.

^{C& m l& & n}

As it seems to be a tendency that Celts make their heroes into gods and their gods into heroes, over the next few centuries, following the death of the historical Arthur, the Celts embellished his story with earlier mythological themes, giving him a special circle of warriors, who later became Knights of the Round Table, but were originally closer to the ^{F&e u na} Fianna of Fionn Mac Cumhail. In fact, many of the Arthurian tales seem to have been embellished with themes from the Fenian Cycle.

Christian themes soon began to replace the Celtic elements; for example, the search for the magic cauldron of plenty from the Otherworld developed into a search for the Christian Holy Grail.

Other elements, however, remain in their pure Celtic form--the magic sword of Arthur, now popularly known through a Latin corruption as Excalibur, was, in fact, the Welsh ^{C& l& ad walk} Caladfwlch (Hard Dinter) which seems to have been taken from the Irish form ^{C& l& ad clog} Caladcholg, the sword of the hero Fergus Mac Roth in the Red Branch cycle.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100-1155) developed Arthur into something approaching his popular heroic image in his *Historia Regnum Britanniae*. Since Geoffrey's development, a great amount of literature has sprung up. Arthur was an accepted character in both Welsh and Irish Mythology.

^{Tris t& n} ^{Ar is ult} ^{*****} TRISTAN AND ISEULT

A Second world-famous myth developed out of the Celtic world, the story of Tristan and Iseult. ^{Is ult} There was an historic king ^{mark} Marc'h of Cornwall, identified as Marcus ^{Cu nom ar as} Cunomarus. Marc'h comes from the Celtic word for horse, and one writer let it slip that he had ears like a horse.

His capital in Cornwall was at the hill-fort of Castle Dore occupied from the 2nd cent. BC to the 6th century AD. His son was named Drustaus which, scholars claim, is a philological equivalent of Tristan. *Drus Taus*

However the myth developed, the basis is that Marc'h of Cornwall married Iseult, daughter of an Irish king. He sent Tristan, his nephew in the myth, to fetch her and Tristan fell in love with her.

They eventually fled Marc'h's court. The core motif is a traditional Celtic elopement tale, and most of the essential elements are to be found in other Celtic stories, such as the elopement of the king's wife with the king's nephew, or the tales of Diarmuid and Grainne. *Dr. mac Gr. na*

There are many different versions of the tale written in practically every European language but scholars have traced them back to one extant manuscript written in the middle of the 12th century AD. It was written in French, copied from a Breton source, or a Cornish source, written in Gaelic.

MAGIC CAULDRONS

One motif that frequently occurs throughout the Celtic world is that of the magic cauldron, including the cauldron of plenty, which feeds everyone, and the cauldron of rebirth whereby the dead are put in and come out alive.

Cauldrons can be found from the late Bronze Age period --vast cauldrons with a capacity of 60-70 liters. One silver one has been found in a peat bog (in May 1891) in north Jutland that had a capacity of 130 litres.

The Celtic motifs are absolutely clear on the cauldron. We have the antler headed god Cernunnos, with his neck ring, and a sequence of animal symbolism. *Cernunnos*

One of the fascinating scenes on the cauldron is that in which a god accompanied by warriors holds a dead warrior over a cauldron while previously dead warriors march away. This is clearly the cauldron of re-birth.

Cauldrons have been found throughout the Celtic world dating from as early as 600 BC. These back up the mythological traditions surviving in Irish and Welsh texts. They are found in both Hallstatt and La Tene graves.

The Dagda had a magic cauldron that came from the fabulous city of Murias. It was so enormous, we are told, that the Formorii could make a porridge in it with goats, sheep, pigs and eighty measures each of milk, meal and fat. No one left the cauldron hungry.

Ma thol ch
IN the Welsh tales, we hear that Matholwch of Ireland possessed a magic cauldron into which the dead were cast to appear the next morning whole and well except that they had lost their power of speech.

This cauldron was originally the property of Bran the Blessed who is perceived as an early god. He gave it to Matholwch but, after hostilities broke out, the cauldron had to be destroyed before Bran and his Britons could overcome Matholwch.

Ma thol ch
The story recounts how the cauldron emerged from the Lake of the Cauldron on the back of a huge man accompanied by a huge woman. Were they deities whose role has been obscured? who knows for sure.

Cloo wech's
Yet another magic cauldron appears in the tale of Culhwch's search for Olwen, for one of Culhwch's tasks is to obtain a magic cauldron which belongs to Diwrnach of Ireland and which is full of all the treasures of Ireland.

CONCLUSION:

Our knowledge of Celtic mythology overall is greatly obscured by the Greek and Roman interpretations in the classical allusions. It has been argued that the Celtic peoples did not possess a uniform mythology but, instead, a plethora of different myths which are only comparable to a limited degree.

Since we have no systematic record before the insular Celts began to set down their stories at the start of the Christian era, it has also been argued that we have no means of forming a complete picture of pre-Christian mythology.

However, knowledge in this field is still very fragmentary and new information is constantly coming through. The native sources are not yet exhausted and full comparisons with other Indo-European cultures have yet to be carefully made.

To sum up the last few classes we'll watch a section from "The Celts" -
(pagan trinity → after 1 hr, 29 min) - Stop at
altre Christianity. Start no later than 8:30