Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions

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# Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions

*Edited by*
*Emily Lyle*

Amsterdam University Press

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# Preface

The articles collected together here developed out of collaborations spanning the years from 2013 to 2019. I am very grateful for the support of the departments of Celtic and Scottish Studies and of Scandinavian Studies in the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh in bringing the contributors together, and would especially like to thank Dr Neill Martin and Dr Arne Kruse. In the preparation of this volume I am much indebted to Dr Virginia Blankenhorn and Dr Triin Laidoner, and I have appreciated being able to draw on the expertise of the contributors for advice in enriching and coordinating the papers. I also wish to offer thanks to Erin Dailey for his encouragement throughout and to other members of Amsterdam University Press for their work on the volume.

Emily Lyle

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# Introduction

*Emily Lyle*

The topic of 'Myth and History' sets up an opposition between the two partners, but perhaps they are not so very different after all and their juxtaposition offers interesting points of contact to explore. Both are concerned with information networks conceived in human minds and both have points of attachment within conceptions of time.

The main difference is in relation to the truth claim, which is essential in History but is optional or non-existent in Myth. In the Religions of the Book there is a claim to truth which calls upon adherents to subscribe to it, but Myth, like Fiction, belongs to the conceptual world of the 'As If' rather than that of the 'As Is'.[1] When a truth claim is made in an 'As If' conceptual world, it is about the accuracy of a statement within the confines of the container of the work of fiction (e.g. 'Prospero raised a tempest' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) or of the myth of a community (e.g. 'Tane separated heaven from earth', in a Polynesian conceptual system).

This is not to say that the people who knew a particular myth did not accept it and live in a community that included specific culturally posited invisible beings. However, although their mythic system applied to the whole of their world, encounters with neighbouring peoples with different mythic systems were easily accommodated and it was understood that they had different gods and presented no challenge to the indigenous system which could remain intact or could modify to incorporate new elements. The situation was different when an 'As If' mythic community came into contact with a religion which was in a position to enforce its claim to universal truth both in history and in worldview, and this is the situation in the Celtic and the Scandinavian communities that were involved in the engagement with Christianity.[2]

1 Seligman et al., *Ritual and its Consequences*.

2 Lyle, 'Defining the Religion'.

Lyle, E., *Myth and History in Celtic and Scandinavian Traditions*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021
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The works that were written down in manuscripts were the creations of scribes working within networks of tradition. These networks were the work of skilled practitioners in the creation of compositions in prose and verse in both cultures. We can consider them in relation to History on the one hand and Myth on the other.

History attempts to discourse on chronologically ordered facts. These will not be discoverable in full, but the aim is to build a story that is true to the actual events as they unrolled in the course of time. The facts are what actually happened. The history is a necessarily selective account of the facts in order. There is a structure 'out there' in the real world, which is the reference point to which the narrative is attached. The chronological time of history extends from the time of the first written records and is projected forward indefinitely into the future in the sense that it is understood that history will still be made.

The structure of myth is similarly 'out there' as a reference point to which the fictional narratives are attached, but the difference is that the myth itself is fictional. Myth is the verbal part of a socially constructed conception of the universe related to a mode of life. The direct evidence from north-west Europe, which is the result of millennia of erosion, has to be related to the scheme as envisaged and lived in the period of the common ancestry of the peoples that later spoke Indo-European languages. This is not beyond recovery since the shattered remains take a variety of forms in the various branches, allowing principled reconstruction to be undertaken.[3] Since the matrix from which the known myths derive was an oral culture, its conceptual structure was constrained by the limits of biological memory extending to a period of about four generations. Its 'history' was a limited one and its myths were attached to this limited schema.

A major difference between the Christian and the mythic conceptions is the relationship of the universe to the divine. According to the Bible, in the beginning God 'created heaven and earth' and went on to other creations, all of which are undertaken from the outside. In the mythic conception, there is no outside. The gods actually *are* heaven and earth and the other components of the universe. This cosmic dimension of the gods can be glimpsed in the context of the traditions of north-west Europe in the case of Thor, whose mother is the earth,[4] but it was not fully expressed since it was incompatible with the worldview of the Christian authors who have passed the information down to us, and so it has to be re-envisaged if elements of

3 Lyle, *Ten Gods*.

4 Wellendorf, *Gods and Humans*, p. 94, and pp. 165–166, nn. 54–56.

the stories are to make sense. Mark Williams has commented on the various sizes of the gods in the Celtic narratives, who can be seen as either human or gigantic in scale,[5] and the Old Norse gods and giants similarly display this disparity. When considering a fully mythic context, we have to take this a step further and see the large divine beings not simply as huge in relation to humans but as cosmic in scale. When gods are treated in this way, they may be indistinguishable from giants.

The authors in this collection who have treated *Cath Maige Tuired* ('The Battle of Mag Tuired') are dealing, as Nagy has pointed out, with 'the establishment of a new order'.[6] The Fomoiri are defeated by the Tuatha Dé. This can be appreciated, as is done very thoroughly and skilfully by Gray and Tuomala, both in terms of the self and the other, and of the conflict and interaction between the Irish and the vikings in historical time. Carey has considered especially the Fomorian side of the equation in his authoritative survey and has concluded that it is unsatisfactory to see the Fomoiri as dark beings opposed to the Tuatha Dé as light beings. In this connection, I suggest that keeping in mind the unfolding in time as outlined by Nagy may be a useful approach. Sheerly within the text itself, Lug of the Tuatha Dé comes later than his Fomorian opponents, Balor and Bres, in terms either of descent or of succession. Lug is at the centre of the new order.

*Cath Maige Tuired* is an amalgamation of a variety of elements, but its core is brought out in this summation by Williams:

> Lug, Balor's grandson, kills the Fomorian leader with his sling, smashing his deadly eye out through the back of his head where it decimates the Fomorians. Bres is found alive in the aftermath of the battle, and is spared by Lug on the condition that he teaches the Tuatha Dé how to plough, sow, and reap.[7]

It is this core that I propose to explore here, both to demonstrate the possibilities opened up by considering Celtic and Scandinavian materials together and to show how both can be related to myth conceived cosmically. The core has two components: a single combat fought with a missile and its outcome. The opponents are Lug and Balor/Bres.

In the earlier version of *Cath Maige Tuired* the combat is treated within the body of the battle but in the later version of the work it takes place as

5 Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 95–96.
6 Nagy, 'How Time Flies', in this volume.
7 Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, pp. 94–95.

a preliminary encounter involving only Balar and Lugh.[8] The rest of the Fomoiri, apart from Balar's helpers, and the rest of the Tuatha Dé hide behind their shields in order to avoid being destroyed by Balar's gaze. The situation is comparable to the single combat of David and Goliath before the engagement of the armies of the Israelites and the Philistines, as has been pointed out,[9] and Lug's use of a sling may be a borrowing from the biblical story.

When the two combatants are isolated in this way, they are directly comparable to the combatants Thor and the giant Geirrod in Snorri's *Edda*. Geirrod, using tongs, picks up a red-hot ingot from one of the fires in his hall and hurls it at Thor who catches it and hurls it back so that it goes through the giant and destroys part of the building.[10] In the later version of *Cath Maige Tuired* Lugh calls on the smith, Goibhnionn, to provide him with a missile and Goibhnionn 'grasps the sling-stone in his tongs, and, as the last covering is being removed from Balar's eye, throws it from the doorway of the forge'. Lugh catches the missile and casts it at Balar 'so that it pierces the head and carries the eye with it'.[11] It is to be presumed that the object thrown by the smith from his forge is metal. As Bernard Sergent expresses it: 'Goibniu envoie à Lug une pierre de fronde en metal incandescent' ('Goibniu throws Lug a sling-stone of glowing metal').[12] The situation is very similar to that of the Geirrod story, although in the one case the hero catches the ingot thrown by his opponent and in the other there is a third character involved and the hero catches it when it is thrown to him by an ally.

Although the object hurled in the Irish context is called a 'sling-stone' it is not a simple stone like the one that David in the Bible has taken from a brook. The word *táthluib* means something glued, cemented, or welded together,[13] and would be quite appropriately used of a piece of metal worked by a smith. In a short poem found in BL Egerton MS 1782, the ball which Lug throws at Balor is a composite made by Briun, son of Bethar, consisting of such things as the blood of toads and bears cemented together with sand.[14]

8 Ó Cuív, *Cath Muighe Tuireadh*, pp. 33–35.

9 1 Samuel 17; McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, pp. 158–159.

10 Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson, Edda*, pp. 81–83. For the cluster of stories including Geirrod's, see Warmind, 'History and Myth in Saxo', in this volume, and Taggart, *How Thor Lost his Thunder*, esp. ch. 5, sections 3–4, and ch. 6, section 1.

11 Ó Cuív, *Cath Muighe Tuireadh*, p. 3.

12 Sergent, *Celtes et Grecs*, p. 227.

13 Gwynn, 'Some Irish Words', no. 11, pp. 64–65: *táthluib* 'means originally some cohesive substance or cement, and secondarily a missile formed by means of such cement'. See eDIL s.v. *táthluib*, dil.ie/40228, and also eDIL, s.v. *táth*, dil.ie/40201 'joining, welding, soldering, binding'.

14 BL Egerton MS 1782, f. 41ra, lines 9–22; Meyer 'Mitteilungen', p. 504. See also the English translation in O'Curry, *Manners and Customs*, vol. 2, p. 252.

The missile in this story complex can take different forms. In an Icelandic parallel where Thor's human counterpart, Thorstein, encounters the giant Geruth, he kills him by throwing a stone and pointer, with which he has just produced fire, through the giant's eyes.[15] In the episode in the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen*, which is a recognized parallel to the combat of Lug and Balor, when the giant's special eye is unveiled the giant simultaneously throws a spear at Culhwch who catches it and hurls it back so that it goes into his eye and out through the nape of his neck.[16] In this episode it appears that the gaze, which is not in itself harmful, is embodied in the spear. Behind the varying representations of gaze and flung object there seems to lie the idea that the missile in this encounter is the actual physical eye of the giant or cosmic god. Thor in another story hurls the eyes of a dead giant up into the sky where they become stars,[17] and I have already suggested that this episode can be interpreted as a parallel to the completion of the Geirrod story at the cosmic level and that a single eye, like that of Balor, becomes a star.[18]

The myth can be expressed in the following way. When the blazing sky god encounters a young upstart god, he plucks out his fiery eye and throws it at him intending to destroy him. The young god catches it and throws it back so that it goes through him and continues onwards to become a star. Both the sky god and his metonymic representative, his eye, would potentially be identifiable with the star, but the eye and the god who has lost his eye might have separate representations. And there is no question about the identity of the Scandinavian supernatural being who has lost one of his eyes. He is Odin, and this feature of a lost eye is already present in material objects that predate the literary evidence, as Ruud notes in Chapter 9. It is of some interest that a linguistic parallel has recently been drawn between Balor and one of the names of Odin.[19]

In the Old Norse story found in *Voluspa* and retold by Snorri, Odin plucks out his eye in order to be allowed to obtain wisdom by drinking from a well.[20] However, the connection of eye to well may be of a different kind as explored by John Carey.[21] The Geirrod complex of stories suggests that, when the conflict took place at the beginning of time when nothing existed

15 Pálsson and Edwards, 'Thorstein Mansion-Might'.
16 Davies, *Mabinogion*, p. 194; Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 137.
17 Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 68. The giant is Thiazi.
18 Lyle, 'Thor's Return'.
19 Blažek, 'Balor: "the Blind-Eyed"?'.
20 Faulkes, *Snorri Sturluson, Edda*, p. 17; Larrington, *Poetic Edda*, p. 7.
21 Carey, 'Irish Parallels to the Myth of Odin's Eye'.

outside the gods, the only weapon available would be a detachable body part and so the sky god throws one of his eyes at his opponent.

When the young god throws back the missile with such force that it goes through the giant and on into the sky where it becomes a star,[22] his action apparently removes the threat of the burning up of the earth, a motif that is best caught in an Irish folktale.[23] However, in the cosmogonic scheme of things, some benefit to humankind should also accrue from the god's action, and Nagy's stress on the ordering of time present in *Cath Maige Tuired*, taken together with the discussions of Bres's ransom by Nagy, Carey, and Gray, has led me to posit the idea that the new star brought into existence in this way is the Pleiades cluster, which offered a time-signal for the seasons.

In the Scandinavian context, this tightly grouped set of stars within the constellation of Taurus was known simply as *the* star (*stjarna*) when it was employed for time-keeping at night as the sun was during the day.[24] The cluster was also used in this way in Ireland, as in this record from Neale, Co. Mayo:

> *The Pleiades* are frequently known as *The Stróilín*, and neighbours, when visiting, or on céilidhe, time their departure by the position of this constellation. If the Pleiades are setting they will say 'It is late, the *Stróilín* is going down!'[25]

This awareness of the Pleiades in relation to diurnal time in the Scandinavian and Celtic contexts makes it a likely candidate as the 'star' that fixed the timing of the agricultural year for them as it has done in many other cultures worldwide. As noted by Broughton Richmond in *Time Measurement and Calendar Construction* (1956):

> Observation of the stars provides a means of indicating time within the year with great precision. Indications by seasons are not exact as the phenomena to which they are related are fluctuating. [...] Counting by stars, particularly by the Pleiades, is still practised by certain primitive

22 Lyle, 'Double Perspective' and 'Thor's Return'.

23 Curtin, *Hero Tales*, pp. 293, 311; Lyle, 'Double Perspective', p. 129.

24 Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfússon, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, p. 594.

25 See dúchas.ie, 023/140; search under 'Pleiades' (accessed 31 July 2020). On this sense of *stróilín*, see: http://irisleabharnagaedhilge.fng.ie/index.php?irisleabhair_function=9 G11, 1901, Deireadh Foghmhair, 174, 133, Le haghaidh Feise Laighean agus Midhe, 295–297: 'Uili bhodach, bhuili bhodach [the peasant's clock] ... the stróilín or | cluster of stars. (Pronounce | willy wudach)' (accessed 29 June 2020).

> peoples. The appearance of a certain star is connected with seasonal phenomena and used for determining agricultural occupations.[26]

When Bres's offer that 'the men of Ireland shall reap a harvest in every quarter of the year' is refused, the terms of the refusal indicate that the agricultural year was thought of as falling into halves with a period of work and growth running from the beginning of spring at Imbolc (1 February) to the beginning of autumn at Lughnasa (1 August), and then a period of rest. The year falls into two parts with transitions at Imbolc and Lughnasa and there are three necessary activities to be undertaken: ploughing and sowing in spring and reaping in autumn. Bres's final offer, which is accepted, relates to the three activities and ties them to particular points of time: '"Tell [the men of Ireland]" says Bres "that their ploughing be on a Tuesday, their casting seed into the field be on a Tuesday, their reaping on a Tuesday"'.[27]

This could be a revision of older traditional wisdom that was cast in rather different terms. It can be suggested that it came about through a fusion of two related ideas: 1) that the times to start work at the transitions between the periods of growth and latency were indicated by temporal markers, and 2) that the important activities of ploughing, sowing, and reaping had to be undertaken with properly observed ritual or the crops would fail. These two ideas are found separately but in close proximity in Hesiod's advice to a farmer in *Works and Days* (lines 383–384, 391–395):

> When the Pleiades, daughters of Atlas, are rising, begin your harvest, and your ploughing when they are going to set. [...] Strip to sow and strip to plough and strip to reap, if you wish to get in all Demeter's fruits in due season, and that each kind may grow in its season. Else, afterwards, you may chance to be in want and go begging to other men's houses.[28]

If the terms of the advice to Hesiod's farmer and to the men of Ireland are equated, we can see a probable abandonment of the prescription to work naked in favour of a prescription to begin the work on specified days. The idea of specified times occurs in the other part of the traditional wisdom, and this would have been tied (as in Hesiod), not to an arbitrary day of the week that could only have operated magically, but to a phenomenon that has been observed worldwide as a time-signal in the agricultural year.

26 Richmond, *Time Measurement*, p. 159.
27 Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired*, p.107.
28 Evelyn-White, *Hesiod. Works and Days*.

It is interesting that Mary MacLeod Banks, who demonstrated the longevity and force in Scotland of the Tuesday prescription relating to ploughing, sowing, and reaping in her study of the 'three Tuesdays' charm, commented in passing:

> Dr Maclagan, in his MS. notes bequeathed to the Folk-Lore Society, refers to a Hebridean belief that the right times for agricultural labour were indicated by the seven stars of the Pleiades (known as *an t-seachd reultaich*, the seven-starred).[29]

The use made of the Pleiades was very varied and a particular culture at a particular period would select the appearances, disappearances, and positions that suited its own agricultural needs. The constant is the use of the Pleiades as a sign from heaven that the time is ripe for some activity. If the secret of the Pleiades was the underlying meaning of the advice given by Bres it would have had a real, and not just a magical, application.

The advice given by Bres is the verbal counterpart of the material result of the combat in the Old Norse case as posited here. The eye of a cosmic god becomes the star that serves to secure the proper conduct of the farming year; it is the direct outcome of the cosmic conflict. In the Celtic case, the defeated cosmic god passes on the knowledge of how the agricultural year can be organized through reference to a star.

A postulation of this kind should make it abundantly clear that the stories in the literature found in historical time have a separate existence from the mythic dimension of a cosmic scheme from the prehistoric period. The mythic dimension is not being forced into the literature which has its own integrity. When Bres says Tuesday, he means Tuesday. The fact that the value of his advice has been found debateable suggests that this is what Gray speaks of as a 'creaky joint'[30]. There is a question that is not resolved at the level of the literature but, if it is taken to a higher level of abstraction, it has a clear answer.

The cosmological approach offers a new perspective that has not yet been explored but I anticipate that it will be rewarding for future study of the archaic elements that have been retained in the literature. However, there is much more to the literature than that. One particularly rich field in the Irish context has been that of pseudohistory, a genre that lies at the interface

29 Banks, 'Na Tri Mairt', p. 133. The Maclagan papers referred to are now in the Archives of the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.

30 Gray, 'Tuatha Dé and Fomoiri', in this volume.

between actual provable chronology and the fictions that draw strength from a claimed connection with it, as already seen in *Cath Maige Tuired*. Murray gives a fine exposition of the idea that the Irish preferred their history as fiction in exploring the legendary matter of *Orgain Denna Ríg*, dealing with the Laigin of Leinster. The past, real or imagined, was the subject of stories which gave the community its identity. History was strongly connected with geography in that there were places of remembrance to which historical legends were attached. Bergholm looks at the pagan/Christian interface in a case where (at least in legend and quite probably in actuality) there was a set of stones that served as a focus for worship by the pagan Irish and for condemnation by Christians. Of particular interest in regard to history and myth is the use of one of the stones as a witness; it bore a mark that was said to be that of St Patrick's staff when he destroyed the idol in it and so people beholding it were brought into connection with the sacred past. Hagiography is a strong strand in the Celtic material, as illustrated also by Kudenko's study of the life of St Berach which demonstrates a close interlocking of space and time. Episodes that were probably imaginary and projected into the past became charters for landholding in the author's present. The life includes an interesting case of prophecy which takes us back in time before the events related – an elaboration of the chronological sequence.

A great deal of the Irish material is anonymous but in the Old Norse case, although there are anonymous works that fill out the story, much of what we know is filtered through the minds of two major authors, the Dane, Saxo Grammaticus, and the Icelander, Snorri Sturluson. In my own chapter, I aim to show how their separate schemas of kings and gods can mesh together, but I emphasize the rather neglected contribution of Saxo, and Warmind makes a stirring appeal for greater attention to be paid to this author. Bek-Pedersen and Wellendorf, on the other hand, find that Saxo's work has nothing of value to offer for the approaches they take in their chapters here.

Bek-Pedersen surveys all the other primary sources in the literature on Baldr but her focus is on material objects, a set of bracteates with intriguing images. She argues convincingly that an earlier interpretation in terms of the Baldr myth is insupportable and goes on to suggest a more fruitful approach to the solution of the puzzle they offer. Ruud's chapter serves as a complement, dealing as it does with artefacts potentially relating to Odin, with the exception of bracteates. He emphasizes the valuable contribution of place-name evidence.

Parkhouse makes a strong case for the need to allow for bias on the part of Snorri when it comes to an assessment of the maligned god, Loki. Wellendorf confidently and persuasively takes on the formidable task of questioning previous scholarship in a way that offers new possibilities for future study.

All in all, it is a pleasure to present this rich and diverse set of papers, and it is particularly pleasing to see studies of aspects of the two vital and imaginative cultures of the Celts and the Scandinavians brought together between the covers of a single volume.

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## About the Author

**Emily Lyle** in an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her publications include the monograph *Ten Gods* (2012) and the edited collection *Celtic Myth in the 21st Century* (2018).