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THE GODS OF THE CELTS AND THE INDO-EUROPEANS

BUDAPEST 1994

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Foreword

My previous study of Celtic gods, myth, and iconography (Olmsted 1979b) constituted an inquiry into all that could be gleaned from an in-depth analysis of the Gundestrup cauldron, a single complex piece containing a large repertoire of iconographic detail. This in-depth study of the Gundestrup cauldron formed the impetus for undertaking a larger broader-based analysis of all the information which could possibly relate to Celtic gods. Although the completed work presented here emphasizes Celtic cultures, it also incorporates an in-depth comparative analysis of gods, myths, and deity names from throughout the area occupied by Indo-European (IE) speakers.

I should note, however, that the research for this work began as a narrowly-based etymological analysis of surviving Gaulish and British deity names. This etymological analysis still forms the basic corpus of the Glossary. It also forms the vantage point from which the comparative analysis of IE deities proceeds in the core of the work itself. The first task in the original etymological analysis was to separate names deriving solely from the names of places (venerating particular deities) from names based upon functional aspects of the deities. Only the functional names give attributes descriptive of the nature of the gods in question.

The functional names can be sorted into groups according to linkage chains arising from inscriptions with overlapping multiple bynames, yet dedicated to a single deity. As often a specific name will be found in more than one such multiple-name single-deity dedication, it is possible to create large groupings of bynames common to single god. Such specific overlapping names provide the linkage to connect the clusters of bynames together. Through determining the significance of the bynames within such interconnected blocks, one gains much information on the nature of the invoked deity. When the functional names are analyzed in the light of their *Zusammenhang* in this fashion, one realizes that early Celtic gods were similar in function to the Gods of Greece, Vedic India, and Scandinavia.

By aligning the attributes derived from the significance of functional names with the attributes derived from iconographic portrayals, one may develop a motif repertoire for each of the gods venerated in Gaul, Celtic Spain, and Celtic Britain. When this repertoire is compared to the attributes of the counterpart characters to be found in the euhemerized mythology preserved in early Welsh and Irish manuscripts, one may develop a fairly complete outline of the structure of the early Celtic system of gods. This Celtic motif repertoire may then be compared to similar repertoires from Greece, Rome, Iceland, Vedic India, Avestan Persia, and Lithuania to develop a prototype structure ancestral to all of the above groups. Thus, the information from a comparative study of the pantheons of other IE cultures provides a check on the conclusions generated from purely Celtic sources. Comparing the resultant Celtic pantheon (and the attributes associated with the individual gods) with the pantheons of other IE cultures not only provides credibility but exhausts the sources of information available for scrutinizing the Celtic gods. Such a comparison in itself then naturally leads to a reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) pantheon.

I would suggest that, for the most part, this prototype religious structure derives from an origin in a PIE cultural horizon. PIE culture dispersed outward from its original homeland, most likely in Central and Eastern Europe, to eventually encompass most of Europe and Anatolia, as well as the Indian subcontinent. This dispersal occurred presumably at the very beginning of the Bronze Age in Central and Eastern Europe, around 2500-2300 BC, if not shortly before, during the final phases of the rather complex cultures to be found in late Neolithic/Chalcolithic horizons of the Hungarian Plain.

Particularly close details in certain Roman and Celtic rituals and myths, however, may presume some later mutual borrowing of traits. However the similarities between Celtic and Indo-Iranian tradition, culturally separated by much greater distances in both time and space, must surely reflect the same common PIE heritage as the languages. In the least, such a

comparative method verifies the accuracy of the reconstructed structure of the early Celtic pantheon. Thus one might evoke later borrowing to explain the many close similarities in detail between the Cybele and Attis ritual in Rome and the mythic motif repertoire surrounding Irish Boand and Fraech. Perhaps these similarities arose even by way of the Galatians. The Tolistobogii controlled Pessinus, the goddess's cult center, and used it as their capital from 278 BC to 230 BC. Thus they controlled the goddess's cult center for a considerable period before her adaption by Rome (204 BC). However, other similarities between the Irish characters Medb, Boand, Mac ind Óc, and Nechtain-Fraech and the Vedic gods Mādhavī (Uṣāḥ), Sárasvatī (Rātrī), Agníḥ (Sūryaḥ), and Apām Napāt suggest that many details of the myth and ritual do indeed have a PIE origin. The ultimate goal of this study is then an attempt to reconstruct the PIE pantheon, primarily through the vehicle of comparing Celtic, Grecian, and Vedic Indian gods.

The repertoire of the Irish *Dindsenchas* and the Ulster Cycle largely have been ignored in previous studies of comparative Indo-European religion. Here, however, these sources have been utilized extensively. When the whole body of material from Irish manuscripts is combined with the epigraphic evidence from Gaul, Britain, and Celtiberia, the data on the nature of early Celtic gods and myths is of a size comparable to that found in Greek and Vedic sources. To these three major resource areas, Celtic, Greek, and Sanskrit, one may add the smaller and more fragmentary material preserved in Scandinavian, Latin, Lithuanian, and Iranian sources. Through these combined sources one then may reconstruct the nature of the Proto-Indo-European pantheon. One may also reconstruct much of the associated mythology which gave rise to each of the attested historical religions.

The corpus of mythological material preserved from throughout the Indo-European area is immense and the level of detail, on the linguistic side alone, is daunting. I have attempted to present the material collected here in the most consistent fashion possible. I must ask the reader's forbearance where I have failed in this endeavor. During the 15 years in which I have been researching and writing this work, I have read most of the published secondary sources in addition to the primary sources relating to early Celtic society and religion (although this is not necessarily reflected in the bibliography given here, which lists only the quoted and most useful sources for this study; some other useful sources, not listed here, are included in Olmsted 1979b: 252-79). I cannot say the same for the secondary sources relating to Indian, Persian, Greek, Roman, and Icelandic gods, epics, and myth. Here I have had to be more selective, limiting myself mainly to the primary sources and those secondary sources whose repute is widely recognized. Doubtless I have missed many items which would have proved useful. The published scholarship is simply too vast, and life is too short.

What I present here which is new is a thorough study of the Celtic pantheon and mythology utilized to shed light upon the study of other Indo-European myths and pantheons, and vice versa. From my view, the light from this Celtic window shows up the details in what has, hitherto, been a darkened room. Thus, the first stage in this process of reconstructing the Proto-Indo-European pantheon was to reconstruct the Proto-Celtic pantheon. As noted, I had attempted this task through a comparative study of Gaulish and Romano-Gaulish deity-name inscriptions and Irish manuscript sources. However, one should note from the start that the etymologies of Gaulish deity names are highly ambiguous. Developing unambiguous etymologies can be accomplished only through analyzing a large body of bynames for each of the individual deities in question. With a large number of names, the names themselves provide the context of a semantic field with which to restrict the ambiguity.

In this analysis I have indicated two levels of etymological probability for the translated names, giving first those names whose etymological significance is reasonably clear, to be followed by those names whose etymological significance is more obscure. Here the translations of the more-obscure names are enclosed in question marks, as in *Moritasgos* "?Sea-Seeking?", and indicate no more than possibilities which are consistent with the

semantic field generated by the more certain names. Some may feel that such names are best left with unattempted etymologies. However, much information is gained in the realization that etymologies are possible (if not necessarily probable) for the less certain names which would render them consistent with the more certain names. For many of the questionable names, although the etymological analysis in isolation would seem little better than guess work, the context of the etymological field of the more certain names provides the substantiation required to put them forward as suggestions. It is these names whose translations I enclose within question marks. However, the reader should note carefully that for the less certain names the context of the more certain names provides the rational for choosing between the etymological possibilities and not necessarily the subtilty of the linguistic rationalization. Thus for the names inclosed in question marks all etymologies which are *linguistically possible* stand on an equal footing to be judged by the semantic context of the more certain names utilized within the same contextual field. Finally, I have indicated the most uncertain names simply by "?". But even here, I have often indicated remote possibilities within the text of the Glossary.

But the ambiguity of the Gaulish names is by no means the sole problem to be confronted in this task. The Irish sources have their own special problems. The Irish sources are not only abstruse and of various dates but are partially euhemerized, obscuring their vital structure. At the time of their preservation in the manuscripts, the original association between different bynames of the same deity was not always clear to the compilers themselves. Original connections were thereby obscured. One must be particularly careful to give greater weight to the earliest sources (dating to the seventh-century AD).

The Irish sources are extremely difficult to master or to criticize philologically. The manuscript copies of the originally oral tales were first written down at varying dates and in varying phases in the evolution of their social utilization. What begins as myth ends up as courtly saga (on this process see Puhvel 1974: 175-84). Scholarly sources of information are also widely dispersed. For these reasons, in their comparative studies previous IE researchers, such as Dumézil, have largely confined themselves to a single Irish source, *Cath Maige Tuired*, concerning whose mythic origins there was universal agreement among scholars.

However, *Cath Maige Tuired* comprises less than one percent of the total early Irish corpus of primary tales and variants. Many of the other tales also have relevance to the nature of Celtic myth and the Celtic pantheon. I suspect that Dumézil, for example, was largely unaware of many of the important Irish sources utilized here. In the least, he seems to have been unaware of the mythological significance of many of these tales. Further, Dumézil lacked an adequate glossary of the Gaulish deity names and their etymological significance.

Thus, Dumézil, the most prominent of earlier IE comparativists, was forced to work with only minor recourse to Celtic sources (such as his analysis of Medb and Mādhavī or that of Nechtain and Boand). Additionally, his methodological assumption that the Greek sources were greatly contaminated by the Minoan world (Dumézil 1970: I, 61-62) then led him, for the most part, to limit his major analysis to documents from four regions, India, Iran, Rome, and Scandinavia. Thus Dumézil restricted his study to considerably less than half of the relevant primary data.

Of the data from these four regions utilized by Dumézil, Roman sources are particularly difficult and suffer from the fact that Roman cult passed through a phase of casuistry and formalism before entering manuscript tradition (Dumézil 1970: I, 112). Such formalism led to a puritanical and juridical attitude toward the deities. This formalistic phase generated a multiplication in the development of omens and a degradation of the mythology. Such a "demythologized religion, surviving only in rites whose mythological and theological justifications have been forgotten" is almost unknown elsewhere among IE cultures (Dumézil 1970: I, 58).

The Iranian sources utilized by Dumézil are closely tied to the Vedic Indian. Ultimately the data from Iran and India must be studied in conjunction. Excluding the Greek and the Celtic sources from thorough consideration, Dumézil was then forced to work with but one major source, Indo-Iranian, combined with two minor sources of information. Thus Dumézil compared the data from India and Iran to that obtained from a demythologized and puritanical Rome as well as to that from the highly condensed and metaphorical Icelandic *Eddas*.

Nonetheless, Dumézil was fortunate to have begun with Indo-Iranian sources for his early work on PIE gods, *Mitra-Varuṇa* (1948, first published in 1940). The oldest complete source of information on an IE pantheon is that contained in the *Rig Veda* (some of the hymns of which date to ca. 1200 BC). Thus Dumézil's earlier work is perhaps his best. It is this work which depends most heavily upon the *Vedas*.

In contrast to Dumézil's work, my own study began as a analysis of Celtic sources and utilizes the Greek and the Indo-Iranian sources as well as the minor sources. Thus the work presented here is based upon a comparison of three major sources and several minor sources of information. A multi-source comparison provides much greater credibility in the detail of reconstruction than a work based mainly upon a single major source.

Under the light of the semantic field and structure provided by the *zusammenhangend* linkage of Gaulish bynames, the Irish sources may be sifted for material relevant to the nature of the earlier Celtic deities. The Celtic sources, in turn, show ample linkages to the Greek as well as to the Sanskrit sources, making it clear that (contra Dumézil) the Greek sources should not be excluded from any study of IE gods. Without the Celtic and Greek sources, the Sanskrit sources, even with the admixture of the Roman and Scandinavian fragments and allusions, provide too few comparative points from which to reconstruct the original prototype religion. For this reason, Dumézil's works, significant as they are for structural details of specific motifs, such as Mādhavī and Medb or the correlatives of Mitráh/Várunah, fail in reconstructing the basic pantheon or in outlining the nature of PIE myth and cult.

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