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BRIGHTNESS OF BRIGHTNESS

SEEING CELTIC SHAMANISM

BY

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own original work.

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ABSTRACT

Early Irish literature, other Celtic literatures and later folklore are rich with descriptions of personal contact with the sacred. The Otherworld, or spiritual aspect of reality, is a constant and vivid presence in the legends. This reality does not seem distant, but rather, always ready to break through into physical reality, transforming those who encounter it. In earlier times, druids, and sometimes heroes and saints, seem to function fully as shamans as described by Mircea Eliade in his definitive work on shamanism, undertaking spirit journeys into the Otherworld, and returning with gifts for their people.

In later times, when overtly primal shamanic practice was increasingly repressed, personal contact with the sacred became in many cases less defined and more individual. However, we continue to see contact with the Otherworld in folklore, hagiography and the mystical experiences fostered by later spiritual movements.

While scholars such as Carey, Nagy and Melia have recognised and explored some of the shamanic themes present in Early Irish literature, the full complex of these themes, along with their implications for our understanding of Early Irish and Celtic culture, have not yet been fully examined.

A holistic approach to these difficult issues indicates that one must not just dissect the texts themselves for meaning, but take into account the research of archaeologists, anthropologists, psychologists and neuroscientists as well as Celticists. By doing so, I hope to show not only the evidence for Celtic shamanism itself, but suggest possible functions of shamanic experience in Early Irish, and more broadly, Celtic culture. Because shamanic traditions typically have a clear cosmology and ideas about spiritual growth, I have also considered if the early Irish and, more broadly, the Celts may have had such a cosmology and ideas of harmonising with the sacred they came into such intense contact with.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	INTRODUCTION: THE WELL OF THE PAST	1
CHAPTER 1	LOSS AND UNION: INITIATORY ILLNESS AND SPIRIT MARRIAGE	63
CHAPTER 2	TRAINING, TRANCE AND INITIATORY JOURNEYS	103
CHAPTER 3	THE USES OF POWER: KILLING, HEALING AND REVEALING	157
CHAPTER 4	TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS: TEACHERS, TOTEMS AND SHAMANIC EQUIPMENT	193
CHAPTER 5	THE SHAMAN ORACLE AS DEITY	219
	<i>Figures 1-16</i>	285
CHAPTER 6	THE SHAMAN AS GUARANTOR OF COSMIC ORDER	293
	<i>Figure 17</i>	321
CHAPTER 7	CONCLUSIONS: THE SHAMANIC BIOGRAPHY	323
	LIST OF PRIMARY CELTIC SOURCES	333
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	335

INTRODUCTION

THE WELL OF THE PAST

Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? The deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe...the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

Thomas Mann¹

The well with the five streams flowing from it that you saw is the source of knowledge, and the streams are the five senses through which knowledge is grasped. No one will have co-creative power that does not drink from the source or its streams. Those who can create in many ways have drunk from all of them.

*Manannán's description of the Well of Wisdom in "Echtrae Cormaic"*²

Seeing Celtic shamanism requires us to fathom the well of the past and drink from all its streams. It requires looking at, and with, many modes of perception. It requires the tools of anthropology, psychobiology, religious history, mythology and psychology as well as those of Celtic scholarship.³

It also requires the humility to heed Mann's warning and admit at the outset that the well is to some extent unfathomable. To enter the hearts and minds of ancient people is to invoke a paradigm shift we can never really be sure we've made.

We *can* compare the myths, symbols and folk tradition of Celtic culture with others at apparently similar stages of development and cautiously investigate potential meanings. We can scrutinise the archaeological record and classical authors' descriptions for clues. We can also, as Campbell and others have suggested, look to the human psychosomatic system for "structures or dynamic tendencies to which the origin of myth and ritual might be referred" in the earliest times.⁴

¹ Mann, 1936, vol. 1, p. 3

² Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, p. 198, par. 53, trans. p. 216, par. 53. My translation adapted from theirs. I translate the word *dán* as co-creative power for reasons discussed in chapter three.

³ In this introduction, I discuss methodology and subjects that appear throughout this study. For the most part, I don't duplicate all the relevant references that occur later in the introduction, but have placed them in the chapters where I discuss each topic in detail.

⁴ Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, p. 5

In shamanism we examine one of the earliest strata of human ritual and spiritual behaviour, one that may be a source for much of the mythic literature in Celtic and other traditions.⁵

Although some scholars have deemed shamanism “primitive,” it can lead to sublime experiences of spiritual revelation—the kind of transcendent, life-changing experiences that appear in Celtic literature.

These experiences can be referred to as shamanistic or shamanic, depending on the person involved. I have used the term “shamanistic” for activities which may be carried out by somebody other than a shaman, and “shamanic” for activities carried out by a shaman. I will generally use the term “shamanistic” below. However, when the evidence strongly indicates that a figure is acting in the role of shaman for his community, I will refer to his or her activities as “shamanic.”

SHAMANISM AND ANIMISM

Shamanistic cultures have an animistic world-view. Animism essentially means that there is no such thing as an inanimate object, that everything is imbued with Spirit. Tylor developed this concept in *Primitive Culture*, and since then there have been various approaches taken to it.⁶ One of the most important changes is that some anthropologists no longer believe, as Tylor theorised, that animists see the world “erroneously and childishly,” and that only science yields “true” knowledge of the world.⁷

Everything is seen as having some degree of consciousness in an animistic culture. Animism attributes “life or divinity to such natural phenomena as trees, thunder, or celestial bodies.”⁸ We definitely see this approach reflected in what we know of ancient Celtic religion as well.

It is generally accepted that the basic perception underpinning the religion of the pagan Celts was that the gods were everywhere: the landscape was full of spirits. Thus, every tree, spring, lake, river and mountain was numinous. All over Celtic Europe, there is evidence of the very close association between the Celts and their

5 See Glosecki, 1989. Eliade, 1964, p. 7

6 Tylor, 1958. (first printed 1871). For a review of current thinking on animism, see Bird-David, 1999

7 Bird-David, 1999, p. S68

8 Hunter and Whitten, 1976, p. 12

natural world which was, to them, full of supernatural energy, energy which could do humankind good or evil, and therefore needed to be controlled or neutralised.⁹

The shaman is the specialist who “controls or neutralises” these energies in animistic cultures. The word “shaman” comes to us through Tungus Siberian, though scholars have argued that it originates anywhere from a Turkic-Mongolian language to Pali or Sanskrit. In Tungus *saman* means one who is “excited, moved, raised,” but the word shaman may also be related to a word meaning, “to know.”¹⁰ Analogues have been found in Tokharian. In this Indo-European language, *sāmane* means a “Buddhist monk.” The term “shamanism” has been applied to a wide range of phenomena.¹¹

I define shamanism as a body of techniques that bring the individual into a *personal* and *interactive* contact with the spiritual aspect of reality.¹² Shamanistic experiences may also arise spontaneously, without being sought through specific techniques.

I hope to prove that in pre-Christian times there were people in Celtic culture functioning fully as shamans in the classical sense, as described by Mircea Eliade, in his definitive work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*.

ELIADE’S MODEL

I have generally followed Eliade’s model with some adaptations based on more recent research and the special demands of Celtic materials. In Eliade’s book, some subjects, such as the spirit journey, tend to be covered throughout, overlapping with other topics.

After discussing the general features of shamanism in chapter one of his book, Eliade describes the shaman’s initiatory illness in chapter two. I deal with this facet of shamanic experience in my chapter one.

In chapter three, he speaks of the ways the shaman attains magical powers. One way is through acquiring a spirit mate and other spiritual allies such as totem animals as I discuss in relation to Celtic tradition in chapters one and four.

9 Green, 1996c, p. 21

10 Walsh, 1990, p. 8

11 Eliade, 1964, pp. 495-496

12 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 113-117

In chapter four, Eliade discusses methods of shamanic initiation, corresponding to my chapter two. Eliade next discusses the symbolism of the shaman's costume and drum in chapter five, which I relate to Celtic materials in my chapter four.

Eliade has spread his comments on shamanic trance throughout his book. In my study it is in chapter two, which also includes a discussion of the spirit journey, which Eliade considers the defining feature of shamanism.

The shaman performs a wide range of functions in shamanic cultures, including prophesying, healing and conducting shamanic warfare with enemies. Eliade discusses some of these functions in chapter seven, and more generally throughout his book. It would be impossible in a study of this length to document all shamanic functions in detail, so I have selected three representative ones: killing, healing and revealing for chapter three.

I range further afield from Eliade's model in chapter five on trance possession. While Eliade did not originally consider trance possession a shamanic phenomenon in the strict sense, he later admitted that he had not attributed sufficient importance to it.

In chapter six, on the shaman as guarantor of cosmic order I draw upon the work of Eliade, in both *Shamanism* and *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, and that of Walens and others to delve deeper into the cosmological significance of the themes in the preceding chapters.

Chapter seven contains the shamanic biographies of a few key figures in Celtic literature, such as Cú Chulainn. It will be seen that they correspond to the overall picture of the shaman drawn in Eliade's work.

SHAMANIC ELEMENTS IN ELIADE'S MODEL AND THIS STUDY

ELIADE'S <i>SHAMANISM</i>	IN THIS STUDY
1. General Considerations, Recruiting Methods and Mystical Vocation	Introduction Chapter 1 on initiatory illness
2. Initiatory Sicknesses and Dreams	Chapter 1 on initiatory illness
3. Obtaining Shamanic Powers	Chapter 1 on initiatory illness Chapter 2 on training, trance and the journey
4. Shamanic Initiation	Chapter 1 on initiatory illness Chapter 2 on training, trance and the journey
5. Symbolism of the Shaman's Costume and Drum.	Chapter 4 on teachers, totems and equipment
6. Shamanism in Central and North Asia: I. Celestial Ascents, Descents to the Underworld	Chapter 2 on training, trance and the journey
7. Shamanism in Central and North Asia: II. Magical Cures / 9. Shamanism in North and South America	Chapter 3 on shamanic functions
8. Shamanism and Cosmology	Chapter 6, on the shaman as guarantor of cosmic order. Chapter 2 in the section on the realms of the shamanic journey.
9. Shamanism in North and South America	Comparisons drawn from this section throughout.
10. Southeast Asian and Oceanian shamanism	Comparisons drawn from this section throughout.
11. Shamanic Ideologies and Techniques among the Indo-Europeans	Comparisons drawn from this section throughout, with Celtic focus.
12. Shamanic Symbolisms and Techniques in Tibet, China and the Far East	Comparisons drawn from this section throughout.
13. Parallel Myths, Symbols, Rites	Comparisons drawn from this section throughout.
14. The Formation of North Asian Shamanism	Touched on in Introduction in relation to Celtic sources.

Obviously, for an individual to function as a shaman in the way that Eliade describes includes their having a community who turned to them for guidance, help, and healing.¹³ In the later folklore, there are fewer people one can argue functioned fully as shamans on all levels. However, one can argue that various people are described as having personal and interactive contact with the spiritual aspect of reality into later times.

Having defined the term “shamanism” for the purpose of this study, it is important to also define how I am using the term “Celt” before attempting to put them together.¹⁴

DEFINING THE TERM “CELTIC”

Sims-Williams has noted that “the terms ‘Celt’ and ‘Celtic’ have become a battleground.”¹⁵ Two articles he wrote in 1998 sum up the arguments, and my discussion below is primarily based upon the points he raised and data he gathered.¹⁶ It is impossible to go into great detail in the space I have here so I refer the reader to his articles for greater depth.

The earliest textual evidence we have for the people the Greeks called the *keltoi* places them around south-west Iberia, central Europe and around the Danube’s source around the 6th to 4th centuries B.C.¹⁷ The first material cultures that archaeologists identify as “Celtic,” are termed by the name of “type-sites,” that is sites that are used to define a culture. Halstatt was a major site, active from around the 7th to the 5th centuries BC, and La Tène active from around the 5th to the 1st centuries BC. Both gave their names to phases of Celtic material culture.¹⁸

Celtic languages are considered to have diverged from Italic between 1300-800 B.C.¹⁹ The Celtic language ultimately diverged into what has been termed the P or Brythonic and Q or Goedelic branches. In ancient times the P-Celtic branch

13 Eliade, 1964, pp. 123, 136-137

14 In this and the later section on using the literature as a source of information on Celtic shamanism, as well as in other revisions throughout this study, I am grateful to Prof. Tom Clancy for suggesting potential difficulties with my approach and areas in need of further clarification.

15 Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 1

16 See Sims-Williams, 1998a and 1998b

17 Cunliffe, 1997, pp. 2-3

18 Cunliffe, 1997, pp. 28-35

19 Cunliffe, 1997, p. 21

comprised Gaulish, Lepontic, Pictish and and Brythonic, and in modern times Welsh Cornish and Breton. The Q-Celtic comprised Goedelic and Celtiberian in ancient times, and Irish, Manx and Scottish Gaelic in modern times.²⁰

As the Brythonic and Goidelic branches of the Celtic languages diverged from “Common Celtic,” it would seem likely that the cultures would have diverged in other ways as well, so we certainly cannot speak of one monolithic culture, but rather, groups of related tribes whose cultures would have shared some common features. As I have said, this is one theory.

While popular literature produces ever more books with the words “Celt” and “Celtic” in the title, ever fewer scholars seem clear on what, if any, meaning these terms have. Some go so far as to argue that “It is not currently possible to prove that any of the Iron Age peoples who lived in central or western Europe definitely spoke a Celtic language or defined themselves as Celts.”²¹

While this may be so, it is also possible that some peoples we may now consider Celtic felt a kinship with other such groups although they didn’t use the same ethnic terms of themselves that the classical authors used of them.

Some of these ‘Celts’ may not have accepted the Celtic label at first, just as the term *Germani* was at first foreign to most ‘Germanic’ tribes. On the other hand, some Celtic speaking peoples may have regarded themselves as ethnically akin to the *Keltoi*, *Galatai*, or *Galli* even though they rarely or never used those ethnonyms of themselves. Here we can compare the Welsh and Bretons who were certainly aware of their kinship as Britons even though the Welsh increasingly referred to themselves as *Cymry* rather than *Brython*.²²

Despite the fact that inhabitants of Britain and Ireland were never called ‘Celts’ by classical authors, some scholars believe that there are still reasons to see a kinship between Insular and European Celts. Tribal names such as *Parisii* and *Atrebates* appear in both Europe and the British Isles.²³ Cultural links give further evidence.

20 Cunliffe, 1997, pp. 22-23

21 Champion, 1995, p. 411

22 Sims-Williams, 1998b, pp. 25-26

23 For the argument against British and Irish tribes being seen as Celts, see Collis, 1996, p. 21. For the opposing view, see Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 26

...observers like Caesar and Tacitus refer to linguistic, cultural and political links between Britain and the Continent, including the Druids of Gaul going to Britain for further study, and to similarities ‘in the character and customs of the people’ (*ingenia cultusque hominum*) between Britain and Ireland. These are telling facts for an ‘objectivist’ ethnologist, and undermine Collis’s ‘subjectivist’ deduction that ‘there is no logic in calling the indigenous inhabitants of the British Isles ‘Celts.’²⁴

Classical authors use the term “Celtic” in both linguistic and ethnic senses. There is also direct evidence of Celtic peoples in the form of Celtic language inscriptions, place names, and personal names in Italy, Switzerland, France and Spain from 600 B.C. on.²⁵

Linguistic evidence gives strong indication of a Celtic presence because it is difficult to imagine the Celtic languages taking root in Britain and Ireland any other way. The ancient Britons and Irish adopting Celtic languages in the absence of at least *some* degree of Celtic migration would be like the current British population suddenly beginning to speak French for no apparent reason.

The issue of ethnicity as applied to the Celtic question is very contentious, shadowed as it is by issues of racism and how data might be used ideologically. Genetic research of European populations is in early stages and the population samples the data is based upon are quite small.

For example, “Celtic” genetic features were determined by sampling 135 Irishman with Irish surnames and 88 Welshmen from Anglesea with Welsh surnames. The European genetic surveys have only sampled about 3,000 people, hardly enough to be truly confident in the results.²⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the data appears to be contradictory.

The fact that Finns, Sami, and other non-Indo-European language speaking peoples are “outliers when nuclear gene frequencies are analysed” supports the idea that genes and language evolve together.²⁷ Sokal’s work appears to back this up,

24 Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 26

25 Sims-Williams, 1998a, p. 508

26 Richards, 2003, referring to Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza, 1984. Also see Bodmer, 1993, for “Celtic” genetics.

27 Sajantila, et al., 1995, p. 42

noting that “speakers of different language families in Europe differ genetically and that this difference remains even after geographic differentiation is allowed for.” However, he goes on to say that “since language differences themselves are likely to be barriers to free gene flow, they will enhance genetic differentiation.”²⁸

In some respects, it appears that the only firm conclusions we can draw are that the past is not simple, and that much more work is needed before we have clear genetic and linguistic maps of Europe, Britain and Ireland during the relevant periods in their respective pasts.

We cannot and should not make grand assumptions about Celtic continuities over time and unity between diverse population groups over extended geographical areas. However, there are linguistic connections over time and space between groups that have been considered Celtic. Therefore we arrive at one basic definition: that a Celt was a person speaking a language of the Celtic group.

Celtic language and Celtic ethnicity often go together.²⁹ Celtic art and archaeology cannot be as clearly tied to Celtic peoples because they may be the result of a non-Celtic person seeing an object or image, liking it for aesthetic or other reasons, and copying or importing it. A modern example might be the fact that many objects in Britain were made in Taiwan and other East Asian countries, and Eastern art and ideas such as *feng shui* currently influence British design. However, though there are some immigrants from Taiwan and other East Asian countries, the mass immigration is more one of objects and ideas than of people.

I agree with Sims-Williams that the uses of the term Celtic in relation to language, art, ethnicity and archaeology “have some historical validity and are too useful to abandon.”³⁰ In what follows I have tried to heed his warnings about excessive cultural generalisations, while sticking to a broad definition of the Celts as a grouping of tribes in Europe, Britain, Ireland and Asia Minor, speaking related languages of the Celtic group, and having a number of common cultural features.

These features demonstrate some degree of continuity over time. For example, aspects of the heroic ethos described by classical authors does not seem at

28 Sokal, 1988, p. 1722

29 Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 33

30 Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 33

too far remove from the world described in early Irish literature. For example, Athenaeus describes how the bravest hero traditionally got the best piece of meat at a feast, and if another contested his right to it, a battle would ensue between them.³¹ In *Fled Bricrend* we see this described in great detail when Cú Chulainn contests for the hero's portion with other Ulster warriors.³² Variants of deity names that appear in inscriptions in the pagan Celtic world later appear in early Irish and Welsh literatures, given to characters that at least in some respects appear to relate to the earlier pagan gods.³³

Celtic society was made up of numerous tribes and alliances of tribes who would have had personal totems and deities, perhaps associated with local environmental features like rivers and wells.³⁴ A practice in one area, or something that may have occurred on one occasion, would not necessarily reflect widespread Celtic belief or practice. That having been said, there seem to be some widely worshipped deities and widely performed practices in the sources.³⁵

Therefore, one hypothesis I am beginning with is that there were linguistic and cultural links between the peoples we now call Celtic, and that we can meaningfully speak of a Celtic culture, by no means homogenous, but sharing some common traits in artistic, social and spiritual realms. This grouping of possible common features is what I mean when I speak of Celtic tradition or Celtic culture.

THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

I am seeking knowledge first about the more remote pagan Celtic past, and the extent to which shamanism in the strictest sense may have played a role in Celtic religion from the first recognisably Celtic peoples around 500 B.C., to around 500 A.D. when the Christian conversion process was well underway.

However, because it is clear that some elements of what we may term Celtic culture survived beyond this period, I have not limited myself to sources dating from this period. The Celtic languages still survive, so in the the linguistic sense,

31 Athenaeus, 1928, p. 201 (Volume 2, Book 4, Section 154)

32 Henderson, 1899, pp. 15-17

33 For example, Lugh. See Ross, 1993, pp. 249-252

34 Ross, 1993, pp.84-85

35 Ross, 1993, p. 27

Celtic culture can still be said to exist. Some other features, like aspects of tribalism and the heroic ethos, could even be said to have existed until the Highland clan system was dismantled.³⁶ As Sims-Williams notes, even modern peoples who declare themselves Celtic may have a claim no more “tangential than the modern Greek claim to descend from the ancient Greeks, which everybody now accepts, at least in the spirit of discourse.”³⁷

Therefore, I am also interested in the extent to which a shamanistic world-view, which I will argue was present in earlier stages of Celtic culture, may have persisted into the Christian period, along with shamanistic techniques of vision-seeking. This may be indicated in the animistic features of some of the prayers and invocations in *Carmina Gadelica*, as well as other sources I will refer to in future chapters.

This brings me to another point. One reason I feel I am justified in ranging so far across time is that people are often conservative in strands of their religious practices. Even when people change religion, aspects of their former world-view tend to hang on and mingle with the new one.

SYNTHESIS, CONTINUITY AND CONSERVATISM

While shamanistic cultures are often receptive to new ideas because they believe in fresh revelation, they are often conservative in that they want to continue shamanistic practice. The personal experience of the sacred is not something people readily relinquish.

We find a modern example of the process in Haitian Vodou. Modern devotees continue the African animistic and shamanistic practices and beliefs of their tribal ancestors. These elements have intermingled over the years with Catholicism, a sprinkling of European ritual magic (which, itself, incorporated strands of European paganism) and a host of modern cultural elements.³⁸ Rather than give up their gods, they integrated them into their Catholic cosmology as saints. Rather than give up their old shamanistic techniques of trance dancing and

36 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 149

37 Sims-Williams, 1998b, p. 27

38 See Cosentino, 1995, pp. xx-xxii, and 25-38.

possession, they employed them in the service of their new hybrid religion.

I hope to show that Irish sources yield evidence of a similar combination of conservatism and synthesis, such as the way in which the goddess Brigit became St. Brigit.³⁹ Her example and others show that some Irish clergy went to unusual lengths to respect older beliefs and and incorporate them into their type of Christianity. Carey reflected on the stories of Columba's conversation with a youth at Carn Eolairg and Túan mac Cairell.⁴⁰

These two tales reflect the ability of the early Irish church to find a place for much—in some cases startlingly much—of the older beliefs of the people. It is important not to oversimplify: the spirit of rapprochement which I am endeavouring to describe represents only one strand in a complex culture, full of controversy and contradictions. But is a notably interesting strand, reflecting a mentality for which I know of no close parallel in medieval Christendom. All across Europe, to be sure, pagan beliefs and practices survived among the common folk...But in Ireland scholars and bishops were also busy with the old traditions, seeking to create a hybrid, composite culture which would be both wholly Irish and wholly Christian. One can perhaps compare these efforts with the adventurous syntheses of Mirandola and Ficino; but I can think of nothing nearer, or earlier, to which to liken them.⁴¹

This shows a clear qualitative difference between Irish Christianity and Christianity elsewhere at this time. In this way at least, one strand of Celtic Christianity is shown to be different in a substantive way, despite some scholars' opinions to the contrary.⁴² Throughout this article, Carey demonstrates the unusual lengths to which some Irish clerics and philosophers went to integrate the Aes Síde into Christian cosmology as "neutral angels," or as a branch of Adam's children who never "fell."⁴³

Why this difference? Why didn't clerics in Norse countries, with an equally vibrant pagan tradition, incorporate their older gods into the Christian cosmology in

39 See Ó Catháin, 1995

40 Meyer, 1899, Carey, 1984b

41 Carey, 1999b, pp. 10-11

42 For an overview see Davis, 1992

43 Carey, 1999c, pp. 36-38

a similar way?

It is far beyond the scope of this study to go into this important question in detail, but one might speculate that Christianity came to Ireland before it had acquired the more monolithic authority of later centuries. Doctrines were in a more fluid state. The Norse, by contrast, converted later, to a church with centuries more established authority and set doctrines.

One might also speculate that certain elements of Irish paganism must have been very deeply rooted for the Irish scholars and priests to go to such pains to integrate these elements into the church's world-view. It is possible that the Irish, including those very priests and scholars, would simply not accept a faith in which all their gods and ancestors were either demonic or damned. It might also be that they would not accept a faith which did not foster personal, visionary experience, given the centrality of this experience in many folklore and literary accounts.

O'Loughlin, of course, makes a good point when he says that the idea of a Celtic theological "fringe" has turned the study of the early Irish Church into "a search for the peculiar, the unique, and the bizarre: what is common between that culture and the rest of Christendom becomes invisible, and what seems jarring becomes the norm."⁴⁴

This point is certainly essential to bear in mind while looking at the sources. However, when seeking the evidence for Celtic shamanism, one cannot ignore the fact that some of it *is* peculiar and bizarre, at least by comparison with the experiences and behaviours found in some branches of modern Christianity. For example, Adomnán's initiatory and visionary experiences are unusual to say the least—but fit very well into overall schema of shamanistic activity.⁴⁵ It should not surprise us to find shamanism and Christianity, or any religion for that matter, co-existing to one degree or another.

Shamanistic techniques themselves are neutral. Shamanistic and Christian elements may co-exist as easily as shamanistic and pagan elements.⁴⁶ An Irish example, discussed further later, is the fact that St. Patrick himself allowed the

44 O'Loughlin, 2000, p. 20

45 See Melia, 1983

46 The only tension arises when Church teachings and an individual's shamanistic experience are in conflict, of which more below.

visionary technique of *imbas forosnai* to continue, because it involved no sacrifice to pagan gods. Therefore the technique itself was seen as neutral, despite having come out of paganism and despite it having a shamanistic purpose.⁴⁷

Of course, the first native written accounts date from the Christian period. The question is, do they have bearing on the question of Celtic shamanism?

THE USE OF LITERATURE AS A SOURCE

My starting point and primary focus has been early Irish literature from the areas of classification commonly referred to as the Mythological, Ulster, Fenian and Historical Cycles.⁴⁸

I chose this focus because Early Irish literature seems to have preserved some of the oldest and least “polished” mythological elements. This is for a variety of reasons, including the above-mentioned sympathy of some Irish clerics and scholars for pagan traditions and the fact that the manuscript material we have from Ireland is earlier than that from Wales.⁴⁹ Dillon, Mac Cana and others have convincingly argued for the archaism of aspects of Irish tradition.⁵⁰

By contrast, some scholars such as Carney argue that Irish literature is primarily Christian and European in its influences, and literary in its aims, with genuine archaic pagan and mythological elements few and far between. However, even Carney has admitted that archaic, possibly pre-Christian, elements are present in some early Irish poems, such as those relating to kingship.⁵¹ He also admitted that the *Táin* consisted “in part of traditional material, in part of imaginative reconstruction of the remote Irish past in form and terms that belong to the mixed culture of early Christian Ireland.”⁵²

Above, I noted the similarity between Athenaeus’s description of Celts contesting for the best portion of meat at feasts and the competition for the “champion’s portion” in the early Irish tale *Fled Bricrend*.⁵³ The use of the war-

47 See chapter five.

48 Rees, 1961, p. 26

49 Ross, 1993, p. 43

50 Dillon, 1947, Mac Cana, 1981, 1995, Jackson, 1964

51 Carney, 1989, p. 41

52 Carney, 1955, p. 321

53 Henderson, 1899, pp. 16-17

chariot is prominent in early Irish literature, such as the *Táin*, in classical accounts, and in Celtic archaeological remains, such as those of the La Tène culture. Elements of Celtic social structures, descriptions of head-hunting, the roles described for the druids and poets—in short, many elements—also appear with some degree of consistency in cultures identified as Celtic over a wide period of time in archaeological, classical and native vernacular literatures.⁵⁴

There may even be more specific relationships between the tales and historical events. Specifically, Ross noted the connections between archaeological finds at Emhain Macha and the events and settings of the Red Branch Cycle.⁵⁵

I base my research on the hypothesis that the vernacular literature reflects aspects of pagan Celtic religious life as well other elements of ancient Celtic culture such as feasting and warfare. The various examples above, and others I shall give throughout this thesis, indicate that this is a reasonable hypothesis. And, as Jackson suggested so many years ago, with regard to the idea that pre-historic aspects in all areas of Irish life are reflected in the literature, “There is nothing in such a hypothesis which need alarm us.”⁵⁶

Celtic tales mention figures with names which can be related to deities we know from pagan Celtic inscriptions, such as Lug, or the Welsh Llew, probably from Lugos and other variants in the earlier inscriptions. In the tales, some of the deity’s attributes may also appear. This indicates that at least some features of pagan Celtic religion remain in the texts.⁵⁷

There are also many correlations between elements present in generally recognised shamanistic cultures and elements present in Celtic literatures. In part in this study I am comparing narratives that we can be sure are shamanistic from the oral and literary traditions of known shamanistic cultures with Celtic narratives. If the tales of, or inspired by, shamanistic experience have similar or identical elements and themes to Celtic tales, then we have another reason to suspect that Celtic culture, particularly before the 7th century AD or so, was also shamanistic.

I believe it to be highly unlikely that the Irish *literati* wrote stories that have

54 Jackson, 1964, pp. 35-42

55 Ross, 1982, pp. 209-210

56 Jackson, 1964, p. 4

57 Ross, 1993, pp. 249-252

such a wealth of correlations to shamanistic traditions in other cultures by pure chance and literary inventiveness.

The diagrams at the end of each of my chapters clearly illustrate the sheer number of correlations between Celtic and shamanistic cultures. The diagrams in chapter seven show that these correlations extend to the biographies of shamanic figures in Celtic culture. These could have easily been multiplied but for lack of space. Ultimately, I think it highly unlikely that this number of correlations would be present if strong shamanistic elements never existed in Celtic culture.

The fact that we can find multiple examples of all shamanistic behaviours, multiple examples of shamanic biographies, and an overall pattern that corresponds entirely to that of known shamanistic cultures seems to me to present overwhelming evidence of Irish shamanism, and by extension, Celtic shamanism.

Perhaps the strongest evidence in my opinion is that there are elements in folk tradition and literature that are explicable by looking at activities as shamanistic and people acting in a shamanic role. Many of these elements make little sense when looked at in any other way.

For example, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, why would an Irish king order that a feathered cannibal woman who had depopulated his barony be restored to sanity rather than killed? The Christianity of the day had nothing against executing murderers. I can literally think of no other explanation that would make sense other than the one I have offered in the next chapter—that Mis is a potential shaman who is therefore crucially important to the community. Even if we see the tale from a purely literary angle, viewing it through a shamanistic lens seems to be the only way to create a clear and focussed picture.

I think the most persuasive aspect of my argument is that seeing Celtic, and particularly early Irish literature from the Mythological, Ulster and Fenian cycles, as well as the cycles of the kings, through a shamanistic lens makes the most sense of a great deal that happens in these tales *as a whole*.

In the upcoming chapters, I do not simply pick one or two stories with shamanistic elements. I range quite broadly through Irish literature and include elements from Scottish, Irish and Welsh folklore and traditions as well.

Despite the fact that shamanistic elements in general are widely and well attested, I cannot provide several examples for *each individual* element. I therefore need to address a further difficulty in my investigation, that of the quantity of materials available to us.

WHAT REMAINS

When I began my PhD, Professor Gillies told me that surveying the materials available to us for the study of Celtic paganism is like surveying a bomb crater. Little bits remain around the edges of a huge hole in the middle.⁵⁸

Consequently, while some shamanistic phenomena, such as the spirit journey, are quite well attested in the literature, others occur in only one or two places. Given the fact that Christian monks wrote and edited what we have, it is only surprising that they preserved as much “pagan” Celtic lore as they did, as Carey noted in the quote above.

As we are lucky to have what evidence we do, I do not feel that we can afford to ignore any of it. It is simply impossible to provide numerous examples of all shamanistic phenomena in Celtic literature. However, I believe the case for shamanistic features that only occur in one or two places can be supported by looking at broader patterns of ritual, behaviour and symbolism.

Returning to Mis’s tale again, as I will describe, Dubh Ruis dug a hole in the earth and bathed her in deer broth heated with stones. He scrubbed her feathers from her and she emerged transformed. This incident correlates strongly with the bath given to the Kwakiutl *Hamatsa* as part of his initiation, and relates to broader ritual patterns of cooking as “initiating” or “civilising,” examined at great length by Lévi-Strauss.⁵⁹

What Celtic correlates can we find? There’s nothing precisely like it, but there are other relevant accounts, where a person enters a bath and emerges transformed. Many of them also make it clear that supernatural power is involved.

King Cormac washes in a bath dug into the earth and heated with stones that float in and out of the water of their own accord during his encounter with

⁵⁸ Prof. William Gillies, personal comment, University of Edinburgh, 1996

⁵⁹ Lévi-Strauss, 1970

Manannán in *Echtrae Cormaic*.⁶⁰ This may be seen as shamanically initiatory, since he encounters a God and receives magical objects and spiritual instruction. Giraldus Cambrensis gives us an account of a king's inauguration in Ulster. It includes being bathed in the broth of a mare.⁶¹ Cú Chulainn is calmed and "cooled" from his *ríastrad* by being placed in a bath.⁶² His *ríastrad* has supernatural qualities and Eliade has associated it with the shamanic ability to generate mystical heat.

In the *Cath Maige Tuired*, warriors of the Tuatha Dé are restored to life by being dipped in a cauldron.⁶³ A figure being dipped in a cauldron or possibly drowned is on the Gundestrup cauldron.⁶⁴ This is of course Thracian, but contains elements of Celtic iconography.

All the above examples feature a person or persons, immersed in a bath or cauldron of fluid, sometimes broth or an herbal mixture, from which they emerge changed. Taken together, this seems to me to be evidence that the theme of an initiatory or transformative bath was present in ancient Celtic culture.

In the above case, this is the evidence I use to support the idea that Mis's bath was not a purely cosmetic procedure. In other, similar cases, this is my reasoning for using this kind of corroborative evidence.

FACTS, FICTIONS AND TRUTH

Overall, literature may, of course, have greater or lesser "factual" elements. Sometimes the difference between a novel and a biography is simply that the names have been changed. Even when literature does not depict factual specifics, it often depicts real situations and ideas that existed in the culture.

For example, "Star Wars," though obviously a fantasy, would still be a valid film to analyse if one was writing about American gun culture. While it is a work of fiction, and lasers rather than guns are fired, it reflects attitudes towards firearms that are also prevalent in American culture. The heroes engage in battles, come out largely unscathed, and the whole process is largely depicted as an

60 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, p. 185

61 Markale, 1994, p. 153

62 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 191-193

63 Gray, 1983, pp. 54-55, par. 123

64 Olmsted, pp. 221-222, plate 3, figure e

adventurous good time.

In a different vein, Amos Tutuola's works, including *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, depict a fantastic reality, yet one that reflects the animistic, shamanistic world-view the author grew up with, and the kinds of visionary experiences people in his culture have.⁶⁵

Celtic literature and later folklore abound with curious elements that don't make strict narrative sense, or even lend themselves to making a better story. Many tales that have come down to us are unsatisfying as narratives. It seems likely that there are other reasons they were preserved. Composer Judith Weir who has based some of her work on Scottish folktales, said that folklore contains a lot of "the mental history of the world."⁶⁶ Perhaps one might add that it contains some of the mythic history of the world as well.

THE GRIT IN THE OYSTER

If the great Irish hero Cú Chulainn was based on an historical figure, all sorts of legends and stories from various sources might have become attached to him over time. These could have been stories about other heroes or shamanistic figures, stories about divinities, or anecdotes attributed to him to craft a better tale. As a result, his biography may be that of a type of person in Irish culture more than a heroic biography of a particular person

However, I think it likely that myths tend to grow around something or someone—a real type of figure in the culture, or a real person. The type, or the person, give the initial impetus to the myth-making process, rather like a piece of grit in an oyster creating a pearl. If we could go back in time, the historical person might, of course, be no more recognisable as the source of the mythic pearl that has grown around him or her than a piece of sand is seen first as a pearl *in potentia*. However, if the motivating myth-making force was a person, there *must* have been something special about them to motivate the creation of those first stories. Ó Cathasaigh addresses these issues in detail in his *Heroic Biography of Cormac Mac Airt* with reference to the 1963 English translation of Jan de Vries 1959 work,

⁶⁵ Tutuola, 1954

⁶⁶ Weir, 2002

Heroic Song and Heroic Legend.

The second problem concerns the relation of the individual realizations of the heroic biography on the one hand with the facts of history on the other: this is a question with immediate relevance to personages like Cormac mac Airt. De Vries' discussion of this problem is valuable and his general position seems to me to be unexceptionable. He shows that, in some cases at least, the heroic life demonstrably bears some relation to historical facts, but he argues that in these cases the facts of history are transmuted in the heroic biography. Using the concept of *Ganzheiten* ('entities'), he claims that 'the historical event and the heroic legend can be said to oppose one another—as entities...the heroic life is a life *sui generis*, which does not belong to history and which cannot be rivied by ordinary mortals' (p. 209). He goes on to say that the heroic legend is a myth 'not of a god, but of a man who raised himself to the level of the gods' (p. 241).

It seems unnecessary to speak of the hero's 'raising himself to the level of the gods.' What is important is that by means of the heroic biography the human person (real or imaginary) is transmuted into something *quite other*, that is, into a sacred personage. The hero is a mortal personage whose life is characterised by certain definable features which mark him off as sacred. The treatment of a personage in this fashion does not prove that his name and acts bear no relation to the facts of history.⁶⁷

We can all think of examples of figures who historians believe existed but who also had mythological elements grow around them in the tales told of them. For example, the Buddha is believed to be an historical figure. However, aspects of his story, such as being sheltered by a multi-headed serpent while he meditated, are likely mythological—perhaps mythically *true* in a spiritual sense but not historically *factual*. Maybe the Buddha saw the serpent in a vision and later told his students. When they, (or *their* students) passed the story on, it might have become a physical fact in the re-telling.

Christ is also believed to be an historical figure, yet we know that the date of his birth, and certain mythological aspects of it, were borrowed from the

67 Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, p. 5

Zoroastrian legend of Mithras. The Bible gives evidence that certain aspects of his life may have been visionary experiences he had, later transmuted into physical fact. For example, Luke gives the following account of Christ's baptism. "Now when all the people were baptised, it came to pass, that Jesus was also being baptised, and praying, and the heaven was opened, And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased."⁶⁸ Here, the entire crowd sees the Holy Spirit descend bodily as a dove.

John gives the following version, which takes place after John has said that Jesus is the one who would come after him to baptise with the Holy Spirit. "And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptise with water, the same said to me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptiseth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."⁶⁹ Here, John sees, and bears witness to the others.

In Matthew and Mark, however, only Christ experiences this vision. Matthew has: "And Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased."⁷⁰ Mark gives a similar account.⁷¹

None of these versions are more mythically or spiritually *true* than the others, but taken together they make the point that what may have been Christ's (or John's) personal, spiritually real, experience could then have been transmuted into a group, physically real, experience in the context of the story's development by others. John's version says specifically that he bore witness, telling others what he saw. In the versions where only Christ sees the dove, he must have told his disciples at some point for the story to be preserved.

68 King James Bible, St. Luke, 3: 21-22

69 King James Bible, St. John, 1: 32-34

70 King James Bible, St. Matthew, 3: 16-17

71 King James Bible, Mark 1: 10-11

Examples of mythic elements in history and historical elements found in myth or oral history can be multiplied from other sources. For example, the “mythic” city of Troy, was believed to have existed only in literature until Schliemann dug it up.⁷² Additionally, the archaeological finds at Emhain Macha support aspects of the tales of the place in the Ulster cycle, as noted above.⁷³

THIS STUDY’S APPROACH

I mentioned above that archaeology and other sources have shown that at least some elements of pre-Christian Celtic culture are reflected in the literature. Therefore, I believe that it is both useful and valid to approach the tales on their own terms, in the way that Ewa Sadowska did in an article based on her PhD thesis on martial aspects of the *Táin*.

She said that she used the *Táin* “as it stands, as a literary exposition of a raid addressed to the twelfth century audience, on the assumption that it is textually unified. Its two recensions are final versions of a long creative process of literary composition, and tell a story which deserves examination in its own right.”⁷⁴ She treats phenomena such as the *ferg* or “battle fury” of the Ulster warriors as a real phenomenon, at least in the context of the story, and discusses its effects on warriors in the tale.⁷⁵ She speaks simply of Conchobar, Cú Chulainn and the others as people, and quotes them directly. My approach is similar.

I base my investigation on the hypothesis that the literature reflects, to some extent, real spiritual beliefs and practices in Celtic culture, and that the figures who fulfill shamanistic roles, such as Cú Chulainn, may be based on real people. If they are not based on a single real person, they may be based on a real *type* of person who existed in Celtic culture.

Therefore, when I discuss Cú Chulainn, I will speak of him as I would speak of a real person. This does not mean that I consider every facet of his tale and character to be factual, just that it is the most workable way to approach my subject. I am also *not* failing to acknowledge that there is a writer behind the story

72 See Schliemann, 1875

73 Ross, 1982, pp. 209-210

74 Sadowska, 1997, p. 8

75 Sadowska, 1997, pp. 35-38

by doing this. As in a biography, one can acknowledge the reality of the subject and the artistic input of the writer at the same time.

As an example of how I will treat these figures, I say in chapter one that Mis, behaves “unusually, both violently and sexually for a woman of her time,” referring to the time the writer placed her in, that is, when the story is set. I say this as I might also note that a cannibalistic character in a Jane Austen novel was behaving unusually for a woman of her time. I could say this while acknowledging the fact that Austen’s novel, like the tale of Mis, is a written work.

When I refer to a figure such as Taliesin’s “later career,” I mean his later career as described in the literature. When I say, “Taliesin says,” I mean what I would mean if I said “Madame Bovary says...” In the latter case I would be referring to the words Flaubert wrote and placed in her mouth. In the former, I refer to the words the writers place in Taliesin’s mouth. To say “as Taliesin is made to say by writer or writers unknown” would be cumbersome. The words spoken may or may not relate in some way directly to a historical personage. However, they *were* seen by writers as consistent with the figure of Taliesin, and therefore, with this *type* of inspired poet.

Another point must be made in relation to what these characters say. One example is the dialogue between St. Columba and Oran, discussed in chapter two. In a nutshell, Oran and St. Columba debate on the nature of heaven and hell, Oran then seeks the answers by a three-day burial which I will argue was a spirit journey. Oran’s answers don’t follow church teachings, and this disturbs Columba, who orders that Oran be reburied for good.⁷⁶

It might be argued that because this is a story, we are not dealing with “real” opinions but with manufactured, “fictional” ones. However, real opinions can be put in the mouths of fictional characters. In fact, an idea, or opinion can never be more or less real than any other idea or opinion. Ideas, of their nature, are thoughts formed in the human mind and expressed in various forms, sharing the same degree of reality (or unreality).

These particular ideas are opinions that the author or authors of the tale saw

76 Carmichael, 1900-1971, v. 2, pp. 338-340

fit to put in the mouths of St. Columba and Oran. As such, they must have seemed reasonable opinions, and the discussion must have seemed plausible, even if only in a narrative sense.

I am not saying that this exact incident necessarily occurred between St. Columba and a monk called Oran, or even that it occurred at all. However, one of the most telling things about this story to me is that it depicts the conflict between orthodoxy and personal experience in a way that does not flatter St. Columba. Why would a story be preserved that did not fulfill any sort of “propoganda” needs, for lack of a better term? Why would a story be preserved that depicts St. Columba executing a man over a theological disagreement? This seems to me to indicate that the opinions expressed must have been very real indeed, at least to those who preserved and transmitted the tale, even if the incident itself was not. I am not suggesting that those who preserved the tale necessarily “sided” with Oran, just that the points of view must have seemed sufficiently significant to record.

LAYERS OF MEANING

Obviously, there are many ways to look at Celtic literature and folklore. My approach does not under any circumstances seek to negate any other aspects of these tales, or other layers of meaning that they may contain. Shamanistic meaning does not preclude other levels of meaning. Conversely, the fact that there are other possible explanations for an action, name, tradition or event in the tales does not mean that there is no shamanistic level of meaning to be found.

There is almost never one stand-alone reason for *anything* a culture does. Why do people get married, tell stories or have funerals? There is no one set reason or explanation for any of the above. Shamanistic cultures are even more resistant to crystal clear either / or analyses.

An objection might be raised, for example, that the Camerons were at one time called Clann ‘ic Gill Onfhaidh, or the Clan of the Lad of the Storm, because a progenitor was born on a stormy night. However, even if this is one reason for the name, one must also look at the root impulse to name a person after an elemental force. Is there also a totemic reason behind it? People don’t seem to regularly name

their children after environmental phenomena now, so something must have changed. I would suggest that it might be a sense of the interconnectedness of things, a sense that someone born during a storm may partake of that power.

When we look at a tale such as Máel Dúin's, it may be argued that it is clearly a fictional, fabulous tale. Point taken, however it also deals with *real* human issues such as bereavement, forgiveness, desire for vengeance, joy and sorrow.⁷⁷

What people write generally relates in some way to what they see around them, from accounts that attempt to have a documentary focus, to fantasies that may be reactions against a person's daily life experience.

Even if a tale is totally fanciful, it cannot help but reflect something of the person who wrote it, something of their ideas, preoccupations and interests. If Celtic literature revealed nothing real, factually or mentally, of the lives of those who wrote it, it would be the only literature in the world that did not reflect the culture from which it sprang in one way or another.

VIEWING CELTIC MATERIALS THROUGH A SHAMANISTIC LENS

Seeing the evidence for shamanistic practice in many Early Irish and other Celtic sources involves viewing Celtic materials through a shamanistic lens, a lens that I believe pulls many obscure aspects of Celtic literature and spirituality into clearer focus.

The value of examining this literature and other evidence through such a lens is manifold. If we can place Celtic culture in the broader category of shamanic cultures, it will give us a wealth of additional material to explore shamanic practices and the possible meanings behind them. It will also give us additional insights into the history and development of religion and the psychology of spiritual experience into the present day.

For example, the shaman's initiatory crisis appears in shamanic cultures world-wide. Modern people may experience analogues to it in psychological crisis, therapy and near death experiences, as documented by Stanislav Grof. He notes that the experience can "result in dramatic alleviation of a variety of emotional, psychosomatic, and interpersonal problems that have previously resisted all

⁷⁷ Stokes, 1888, Van Hamel, 1941, pp. 26-77, Oskamp, 1970

psychotherapeutic work.”⁷⁸

Shamanistic experience lies at the heart of most religions, and continues to manifest in many refined spiritual disciplines. For example, the classic shaman’s dismemberment vision manifests in Tibetan Buddhist and Tantric rites as *chöd*, where the practitioner offers his flesh to be eaten by demons to remove his self-absorption.⁷⁹

The shamanistic basis of most religions gives us one of the most important reasons to apply a shamanistic lens to pagan Celtic religion. If we find that pagan Celtic religion is likely to have been shamanistically based, it can give us another window on the constellation of meanings typically found in the early stages of these religions. It can also offer an intriguing insight into the transition between pagan and Christian in the conversion process.

From the other side, anthropology and psychology can provide insights into aspects of Celtic literature and culture that have puzzled many scholars. For example, the nature of the fairies and the meaning of the illnesses suffered by figures such as Cú Chulainn and Óengus. Overall, as I hope to prove, the shamanistic worldview seems to make the most coherent sense of pagan Celtic spirituality as a whole, and also casts light on shamanistic experience in later Christian contexts. I reiterate here that shamanistic techniques are neutral. They can, and have, been applied to many religious systems.⁸⁰

There is increasing scholarly support for interdisciplinary approaches. Ann Ross believes that “investigation into the Celtic world, pagan and Christian, ancient and modern, can only be conducted by combining several disciplines.”⁸¹ Mac Cana says that numerous topics in Celtic myth and literature “invite close scrutiny in the light of the immense extension of our knowledge of human experience brought about within our lifetime by the (more or less) modern sciences of anthropology, mythology and comparative religion allied to comparative linguistics.”⁸²

Obviously, I can only scratch the surface in a study of this length. My hope

78 Grof, 1988, p. 234

79 Eliade, 1964, p. 436

80 Kalweit, 1988, p. vii

81 Ross, 1982, p. 204

82 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 153

is to prove that the full complex of shamanistic practices exist in Early Irish literature, and to some extent, in other Celtic literatures, the archaeological record, and the other sources I list below. This may encourage more scholars in Celtic and other disciplines to look at individual texts through a shamanistic lens, perhaps doing new translations from this perspective.

As I hope I shall show, particular words and phrases, such as the use of the word *comhairge* in the *Serglige Con Culainn*, discussed in chapter six, may be of key significance in revealing the shamanistic nature of certain figures and activities. The significance of these terms is sometimes obscured in translation.

My goal is to enter and advance the dialog in this area already begun by scholars such as Chadwick, Nagy, Carey, Melia, Lonigan and Mac Cana. Although these scholars have advanced the understanding of shamanistic and related areas of Celtic spirituality, I was told by many that I was going where angels fear to tread when I began this study. My hope is to make this area of scholarship safer for mortals to explore by providing a map and guideposts on the way.

PAGAN CELTIC RELIGION

There are many theories about the nature of pagan Celtic religion. In this study, I explore the idea that it may have been shamanistically based, but that should not be confused with the idea that it was somehow primitive.

The use of shamanistic techniques of entering alternate states of consciousness such as sensory deprivation, chant and other kinds of music exist in highly developed religious systems with elaborate ritual and hierarchical structures, like those of Tibetan Buddhism, Catholicism and Vodou.⁸³

Therefore, the existence of an organised priesthood does not preclude the additional presence of a strong shamanistic element. As I will discuss below, religions can be seen to exist on a kind of continuum. The earliest manifestations of the religious impulse probably descend from the Paleolithic hunter gatherers, and have to do with the magic of the hunt, the animal powers and the elemental forces.

⁸³ This is not to say that all music in liturgy is trance inducing, but these three in particular use, or have used, music in a deliberate way to cultivate a sense of contact with the Sacred.

The modern !Kung are an example.⁸⁴ Yet as even this example shows, religions at this “stage” of development, if it can be called that, are far from primitive or disorganised.

It is true that as religions develop a greater hierarchical structure they may grow increasingly concerned with consolidating power in a more political sense, limiting access to alternate states of consciousness to an ever more specialised priesthood to enhance their prestige and privilege.⁸⁵ I propose that pagan Celtic religion falls somewhere along this continuum. As I will discuss further below, the Druids are better described as shaman-priests than shamans, in that they appear to fulfill both cultural roles. They are also the figures of Celtic tradition who most frequently present us with the most classically shamanic examples of behaviour.

SHAMANS AND DRUIDS

The idea that the Druids may have had a shamanic role is not a new one. Pokorny made the comparison in 1908, and Piggott in 1962.⁸⁶ They are described by Roman authors as sacrificial priests, diviners, lawgivers and magicians. This does not mean that they could not have also had a shamanistic role—indeed, a good deal of divination is based upon shamanic techniques.⁸⁷

Shamans in other cultures have multiple roles as well. The main roles of the Sámi shaman were “physician, diviner, psychopomp, hunting magician, and sacrificial priest.”⁸⁸

It is extremely important to remember that the Romans and Greeks, so often accepted as factual sources of information on the ancient Celts, also had strong biases. The easiest bias to perceive is the one all people share—they don’t see what they don’t know.

Roman and Greek religions were for the most part far from the shamanic roots all religions share. They were highly organised, with highly codified rituals and pantheons. Some of their rituals, at least, were carried out by rote, their original

84 See Campbell, Joseph, 1984, pp. 90-101

85 Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, pp. 231-238

86 Pokorny, 1908-9, p. 16; Piggott, 1962, p.118

87 Eliade, 1964, p. 184

88 Pentikäinen, 1984, p. 127

meanings forgotten. This does not usually happen in shamanistic cultures because meanings, like the rituals themselves, are continually “refreshed” from the Otherworld. They were generally fairly practically minded and intellectual in their religious observances. Their religious practitioners, with the exception of the Delphic Oracle and Roman Sybils, don’t appear to have relied heavily on alternate states of consciousness to do their jobs.⁸⁹

By contrast, we know from the comments of the Greeks and Romans, Celtic religion was less codified. There was a tendency to worship outdoors, rather than in temples. Classical authors may well have found the Celtic attitude to worship excessively casual. They don’t seem to fully understand it. Worshipping out of doors, in a less codified manner, is consistent with an animistic, shamanistic culture. There is also a telling statement made by Tacitus in his *Germania*.

While the following statement is ostensibly about a Germanic tribe, we know that Roman authors frequently confused Celtic and Germanic tribes. For example, Tacitus identifies Ambiorix of the Eburones as a German, as well as the Celtic-named prophetess Veleda. Dio Cassius calls her successor, Ganna, Celtic.⁹⁰

Additionally, there is no question that Celtic and Germanic tribes influenced each others religious beliefs, with some scholars arguing that Odin was borrowed from the Lugh of the Celtic pantheon, or that they both descend from a similar deity.⁹¹ Therefore, it is reasonable to look to one to glean possible ideas about the other. Tacitus says as follows.

They do not, however, deem it consistent with the divine majesty to imprison their gods within walls, or to represent them with anything like human features. Their holy places are the woods and groves, and they call by the name of god that hidden presence which is *only seen by the eye of reverence*.⁹²(Italics mine.)

By definition, directly perceiving Gods in a reverent, contemplative sense is a shamanistic practice. Of course, as I have noted several times, all religions may

⁸⁹ See Grant, 1957, p. xiii, Rose, 1935, pp. 10-11, 92-115

⁹⁰ Ellis, 1994, pp. 96-97

⁹¹ Puhvel, 1987, pp. 166-188, particularly 187

⁹² *Germania IX*, (p. 109, Mattingly 1970 edition)

be seen to have a shamanistic basis in that they are founded by people who have a direct experience of the Sacred. Most religions also continue, in one way or another, to foster that experience for at least some of their adherents, even if it may be limited to a few “saints” of exceptional shamanistic abilities.

However, in the quote above, Tacitus affirms that Celtic religion was based so strongly upon this kind of experience and technique that idols of most Gods were deemed both unnecessary to the experience of the worshipper and insulting to the God. It would be hard to come up with a stronger statement in favour of the idea that pagan Celtic religion was shamanistically based.

The lack of interest, or actual distaste for representations of the gods evidently changed dramatically, however, in the Romano-Celtic period. Four hundred or so deity names occur in the iconography of this period, which points to an animistic culture, with local tribal or territorial deities.⁹³ It also points to a shamanistic culture because animistic cultures who seek to contact and propitiate the spirits of particular places need a medium for discovering and communicating with them. That medium is the shaman.

Because the Romans and Greeks did not have prominent shamanic figures in their own priesthods, it is not surprising that they would not generally recognise a shamanic figure in another land. (Obviously they would not have used the term shamanistic either. What I mean is they do not generally note shamanistic features in the Druid priesthood.)

When they do recognise a figure with “prophetic” or supernatural abilities that I might term shamanic, such as Veleda, those figures tend to have analogues in their own culture. Veleda would have borne some resemblance to the Sybils or Delphic oracles.

Classical authors seem to have difficulty categorising the druids, meaning that there must have been something about their role that made it hard for Classical authors to pigeon-hole them. Could it have been their shamanic role?⁹⁴

The fact that, when we turn to native Celtic sources, primarily early Irish literature, the Druids take on a much more strongly shamanic cast would tend to

⁹³ Green, 1993, p. 12

⁹⁴ Rankin cites this as a possibility in his *Celts and the Classical World*, pp. 277-278

support this argument. For example, Mogh Roith, with his bird-feathered head-dress and ability to make aerial spirit journeys, discussed below.

Priests in different cultures may invoke and even see divine beings, but the shaman engages in discourse with them, intercedes with them on behalf of their people and makes spirit journeys into their realm. He may also act as an oracle for the deities.⁹⁵

The shaman traditionally has a central role in the community. He may act as advisor, priest, physician and custodian of the cultural myths. He adds to these myths through his adventures and experiences in the other world. He is above all, “the great specialist in the human soul; he alone ‘sees’ it, for he knows its ‘form’ and its destiny.”⁹⁶ He is a liminal creature who exists between the worlds and is fully functional in both.

The Druids obviously had various other functions—observing the rituals of the society, determining auspices or acting as judges and lawgivers. The view of them as a learned caste of people in Celtic society, similar to the Brahminic caste of India, makes a lot of sense.⁹⁷ Just as all Brahmins are not priests, so all of the “Druid caste” would not have been priests or have had the same specialities.

Therefore, some druids may have had a shamanistic role and some not. Various religious specialists co-exist in many shamanistic cultures. A tribe may have both a shaman and a sacrificing priest.⁹⁸ I am not arguing that shamanism is *per se* the religion of the ancient Celts, or that the entire magico-religious life of the Celts crystallised around shamanism. One could not say that of even generally recognised shamanic cultures, like the Tungus.⁹⁹

Obviously, from what Classical authors tell us of the organisation, hierarchy and twenty years of material to be learned by Druids, pagan Celtic religion was not a primitive or wholly primal religion. It was a developed religion with what I will argue are strands of primal and shamanistic elements running through it. I will also argue that shamanistic figures within Celtic culture had a role in developing that

95 Eliade, 1964, p. 82

96 Eliade, 1964, p. 8

97 Ellis, 1994, pp. 48-49

98 Eliade, 1964, pp. 4-5

99 Eliade, 1964, p. 7

religion. Eliade has noted that “Generally shamanism coexists with other forms of magic and religion.”¹⁰⁰

The religions of Central and North Asia extend beyond shamanism in every direction, just as any religion extends beyond the mystical experience of its privileged adherents. Shamans are of the ‘elect,’ and as such they have access to a region of the sacred inaccessible to other members of the community. Their ecstatic experiences have exercised, and still exercise, a powerful influence on the stratification of religious ideology, on mythology, on ritualism.¹⁰¹

Shamanism appears to be a universal feature in early religions.¹⁰² Alternate states of consciousness play a central role in people’s lives in these early, shamanistic cultures. All people’s access to alternate states of consciousness and therefore, the Otherworld, tempers the shaman’s leadership. In effect, it is a spiritual system of checks and balances.

It must be noted that there can also be a kind of continuum between shamans and priests. As alluded to earlier, it appears that, at earlier stages of culture, typically that of the nomadic hunter-gatherer, shamans are the dominant leadership figures in society.¹⁰³

However, later, as cultures grow more codified and stratified, specialisation and the consolidation of political power leads to visionary practice being limited to an elite composed of shaman-priests. Still later, this elite become wholly priests, that is, social functionaries who act as intercessors with the Otherworld, but may have no ability to communicate with it via alternate states of consciousness.¹⁰⁴

I suggest that we may think of the Druids, or at least some of their number, the shamanic “specialists in the Sacred,” as shaman-priests falling somewhere along this continuum. They were not purely shamans, because they also fulfilled various social roles as custodians of tribal knowledge, lawgivers, celebrants of seasonal rites and so on. However, they were not just priests, because the evidence suggests that their practices included a strong visionary element. Their name also

100 Eliade, 1964, p. 5

101 Eliade, 1964, pp. 7-8

102 Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, pp. 229-239

103 See Campbell, Joseph, 1984, pp. 90-101, 1991c, p. 240

104 Walsh, 1990, pp. 15-16. See also Gilberg, 1984, Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, pp. 229-240

suggests a shamanic role.

The etymology of the word “Druid” has two components. Pliny connects the “dru” part to the Greek *drus*, meaning oak. This goes back to the Indo-European root word for “oak.” The word may also derive from an Indo-European root meaning “strong,” the same root that gives the English “true.” The second component, **wid-*, connects to the same Indo-European root we get “witness” from. It relates to knowledge of things seen.¹⁰⁵ You will recall, as noted above, that the Tungus word *saman* may also be related to a word meaning “to know.”¹⁰⁶

Therefore, one meaning could be one who has “strong wisdom.” That is, wisdom personally known or seen. This has strong shamanic connotations, in that shamans see spiritual reality for themselves. They do not *believe* there are spirits, they *know* there are.

If the etymology relates to *drus*, “oak,” as Pliny suggests, this could also connect to shamanism. “Wisdom of the oak” may not relate to a tree cult as much as it relates to the use of the tree in linking the worlds. In many cultures shamans climb to the upper world on a tree or fly off its upper branches, or follow its roots down into the lower world in the spirit journey.¹⁰⁷ So the word may relate to the “oak wisdom” or wisdom gained by using the oak to travel to different realms.

Some have argued that the root is actually the same, since the oak is the “strong tree.”¹⁰⁸ If this hypothesis is true, the combination of the ideas of strong wisdom, the oak as “world tree,” and the fact that the wisdom is based on personal experience (the **wid-* root), powerfully suggest shamanism.

If, on the other hand, the words “oak” and “strong” come from different roots, the word “druid” would have come from one or the other. Even if this is so, it is also possible that the ancient Celts may have noticed the similarities between the two words themselves. Certainly the later Irish *literati* delighted in finding multi-layered etymologies and double meanings in words. This would have an effect on the term’s perceived meaning similar to the words coming from the same root.

As I shall seek to prove below, it seems clear to me that all the general

105 Piggott, 1994, p. 100

106 Walsh, 1990, p. 8

107 Eliade, 1964, pp. 314-315

108 Prof. William Gillies, personal comment, Celtic Civilisation lecture, University of Edinburgh, 1996

features of shamanism are present in the accounts of Druids we find in the Early Irish literature. I'll go into further detail of each facet in the chapters to follow. As one example, we find spirit flight in *Forbuis Droma Damhgaire*, as well as mastery of fire, and the use of classically shamanic accoutrements, such as the *encennach*, the bird-winged headdress.¹⁰⁹ Medb and Ailill's Druid, Mac Roth, has many shamanic characteristics, not the least of which is his ability to go "could go all around Ireland in a day."¹¹⁰

The name of the *filid*, is of course also from the same Indo-European **wid-* root relating to sight, the same root that gives us the Welsh *gwelet*. The *Dictionary of the Irish Language* says that it originally meant "seer or diviner...and in earlier documents generally implies occult power or knowledge."¹¹¹ There seem to be reasons to connect these later seers with the earlier Druids, and to connect both with shamanic practice.¹¹² The *filid* also wore a *tuigen*, or bird feather cape and bird features are the most common theme in shamanic costuming.¹¹³

Of course, shamans do not exist in a vacuum. To function as shamans, they must be recognised as such by their culture. Druids are often recognised as specialists in the Sacred in the way shamans are in other cultures, as examples in future chapters will show.

CELTIC SHAMANISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

A survey of 488 cultures found that ninety percent utilised alternate states of consciousness to facilitate people's personal experience of the Sacred. The scholar who did the study, Bourguignon, feels that the capacity to enter alternate states of consciousness is part of our psychobiological inheritance as a species. We are "hard wired" for it.¹¹⁴

Eliade noted that since the ecstasy or trance "seems to form an integral part of the human condition, just like anxiety, dream, imagination, etc., we did not deem

109 Sjoestedt, 1979, 110-113. Eliade, 1964, p. 373

110 O' Rahilly, Thomas F., 1946a, p. 519. O' Rahilly, Cecile. 1976, p. 159

111 Royal Irish Academy. 1990, p. 306. headword *filí*

112 Low, 1996, p. 110

113 Low, 1996, p. 109

114 Harner, 1980, Price-Williams and Hughes, June 1994. Bourguignon, E., 1973, See also Weil, 1972, Siegel, 1989

it necessary to look for its ‘origin’ in a particular culture or historical moment.” He goes on to say:

As an *experience*, ecstasy is a non-historical phenomenon...a primordial phenomenon in the sense that it is coextensive with human nature. Only the religious *interpretation* given to ecstasy and the techniques designed to prepare it or facilitate it are historical data. That is to say, they are dependent on various cultural contexts, and they change in the course of history.¹¹⁵

Given all this, it would be surprising *not* to find these methods in the Celtic context. I believe that shamanistic patterns exist in Celtic culture because humans have innate abilities to enter alternate states of consciousness, and many individuals and cultures appear to have innate desires to do so, as Bourguignon’s study shows.

Evidence is plentiful. Contact with the Otherworld, or spiritual aspect of reality, is ubiquitous in Celtic literature. Initially we hear of this contact in the myths and epics. Sometimes it occurs through the love of a woman of the *Síd*, as in the *Serglige Con Culainn*, or through following an animal in to an enchanted wood, as in the tale of *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed*.¹¹⁶ Sometimes this contact is traumatic, but in one way or another, it is usually transformative.

The person may return with special spiritual gifts that he can give his people. For example Pwyll, in his exchange with Arawn, becomes a better ruler.¹¹⁷ Alternately, the Otherworld contact may prove fatal, as King Muirchetach meets his doom when he meets the fairy woman *Sín*.¹¹⁸

When pagan aspects of Celtic practices became increasingly repressed in later Celtic society, these experiences became less defined and more individual. The person experiencing contact with the sacred is not necessarily doing it to return with gifts for the people. In fact, in some cases having the *dà shealladh*, the two sights of Scottish tradition, may be regarded as curse rather than a blessing.¹¹⁹

All of these manifestations have something in common: a direct personal experience of the sacred. Behind all the tales, there is a person, mythic or actual,

115 Eliade, 1961-1962, p. 154

116 Dillon, 1975, p. 4, para. 11, Guest, 1906, p. 17, Ford, 1997, p. 37

117 Ford, 1977, p. 42, Guest, 1906, p. 17

118 Rees, 1961, pp. 339-341

119 MacInnes, 1989, p.15

who sees, at least for a moment, not through a glass darkly but face to face. A person, in short, who sees shamanistically.¹²⁰

SHAMANIC CULTURES

An important feature of cultures with practising shamans is that while not everyone feels the call to become a shaman as a vocation, generally everyone uses shamanic techniques. For example, amongst Native American tribes, most people seek spiritual power and a connection with guardian spirits, obtained by the same shamanic techniques the shaman uses.¹²¹

Just as one doesn't have to be a monk to pray, so one doesn't have to be a shaman to experience the spirit journey or personal contact and interaction with the Otherworld or spirit beings.

This is an essential distinction, especially when I move to later sources. I am not trying to argue that people in later Celtic tradition were shamans in the strict sense of the word.¹²² I will seek to show that they utilised shamanistic techniques to enter trance and have the personal interaction with the other world to which I have been referring.

For example, in the 1690's, Martin Martin describes a ceremony to receive a vision not unlike the *tarbfeis*, a ceremony where the seer is wrapped in a bull's hide described in Irish literature. The seer in this account is not a shamanic "specialist" but a member of the vision-seeking group chosen by lot.¹²³ This shows that any of them were believed to be able to induce visions in the right circumstances.¹²⁴

SHAMANIC DESCRIPTIONS OF REALITY

The fact that shamanic cultures typically draw no distinction between this world and the Otherworld in conversation and ritual is crucial for our understanding of the way shamanic themes may be described in Celtic literature.

120 Harner, 1980, xi

121 Eliade, 1964, pp. 156-158

122 Eliade, 1964, p.8

123 Martin, 1934, p.172

124 MacInnes, 1989, p.15

The idea that experiences of spiritual reality may become mythologised over time as experiences of physical reality, discussed above, is worth bearing in mind as I examine the early Irish tales. Some of the things that occur in the tales would have been physically impossible. However, if they reflect a spiritual reality, they become readily explicable.

Shamans are aware when they are in one reality or the other. However, they do not typically distinguish between the realities *in speech* because it would be unbearably cumbersome.

I'll use a Shuar shamanic song to illustrate my point. The italics in square brackets are mine, saying which reality the shaman is singing about in each part.

I am like Tsuni,¹²⁵ I am like Tsuni, [*spirit reality*] When I drink natema, all my body becomes cold, [*physical reality*] and I easily suck out the *tsentsak*.¹²⁶ [*spirit reality*] I am always above the clouds, and thus I have power. [*spirit reality*] I drank natema. [*physical reality*] I drank enough to have power... [*spirit reality*] there is a very large body of water. [*physical reality*] Thus, I am like a great body of water... [*spirit reality*] Now I am going to become dizzy, [*physical reality*] I will see [*spirit reality*] when I have become intoxicated.¹²⁷ [*physical reality*]

One can see how awkward it would be for the shaman to draw distinctions between the realities in his song. He would also not find it necessary to say which reality he is talking about, largely because shamanic cultures tend to view things more holistically. They do not draw such hard lines between flesh and spirit, daily life and religious activity, this world and the other. Where modern Western culture favours an *either / or* approach to life, shamanic cultures approach life as more of an *eitherall* proposition.

I have heard anthropologist Roy Willis suggest that “*alternate* states of consciousness” is actually a better term for visionary states than “*altered* states.” Kalweit uses the term *alternative* states of consciousness.¹²⁸ Where alternate or

125 The mythical First Shaman of the Shuar.

126 A spiritual parasite, viewed as the cause of illness.

127 Harner, 1980, p. 161

128 Kalweit, 1992, pp. 81-83

alternative both imply one of various equally acceptable states, altered implies that these states deviate from *one* “normal” state of consciousness.¹²⁹ Alternate states is certainly a term more in accord with the way shamanistic cultures see their activities.

The use of the term *dà shealladh*, “the two sights,” in Scottish Gaelic may reflect a similar shamanic view that the two worlds are of equal importance. In the Gaelic both sights hold equal weight, unlike the English translation of the term as “second sight.”

Kearney suggests that Irish intellectual tradition also has a holistic approach to reality, cultivating “an intellectual ability to hold the traditional oppositions of classical reason together in creative confluence.”¹³⁰

Mac Cana specifically speaks of the sense of overlap or continuum between spiritual and physical reality in Celtic culture. He says that modern anthropologists “have commented on the deep and continual concern of the people in Irish rural communities of, say, thirty of forty years ago with the inter-relationship between the two worlds, and there can be no doubt that this is one of the underlying continuities from primitive to modern Irish society.”¹³¹

As I will argue in chapter ten, the way spiritual and physical realities overlap in the tales also has deep significance when we consider the nature of certain mythic figures such as the fairy folk. In later times, people with shamanic abilities were sometimes viewed as being incarnate fairies.¹³²

Of course, descriptions that suggest shamanic modes of perception in narratives are only one kind of evidence. As I’ve shown above, there are many other kinds of evidence for the presence of shamanistic themes in Celtic literature and culture.

METHODOLOGY

Disparate kinds of data and the diversity between branches of Celtic tradition make it difficult to find general truths about Celtic spirituality. Some

129 See Zinberg, 1977, p. 1

130 Kearney, 1985, p. 9

131 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 145

132 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp.368-374

would say that even seeking such truths is pointless, prejudiced, or both.¹³³

I obviously tend instead to agree with scholars such as Mac Cana and Kearney, cited above, who do not consider the quest for common Celtic ground to be pointless or prejudiced. I think the earlier arguments I noted in relation to Celticity in general can also be used to argue for the usefulness of looking at Celtic spirituality as some sort of whole while simultaneously acknowledging changes over time and diversity between different branches of Celtic culture.

I have utilised all the traditional sources of Celtic scholarship in my research: the archaeological record, classical authors, the cycles of Irish literature, later folklore, some later religious practices, linguistic analysis of particular terms, and cultural comparison, particularly with other Indo-European cultures. However, an interdisciplinary study such as this has also required the use of other materials such as articles and books from the fields of anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and other sources mentioned above.

I have obviously not been able to include every possible source of evidence in this study. I used the specific examples of apparent shamanic phenomena and techniques I found within early Irish literature as a taking-off point to look at the other sources below. There were also occasions when my prior knowledge of shamanism, for example, in the area of initiatory illness, led to my actively searching the literature for phenomena of that nature. While I have made an effort to take in as much as I could, I have not made an exhaustive study of possible shamanic materials in hagiography, later folklore or Welsh materials.

SOURCES AND THEIR USE

ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeological evidence is by its nature objective because it consists of material remains, but how those remains are interpreted is as subjective as the interpretation of all other sources.

One limitation with archaeological evidence is that we can only recover

¹³³ See for example, Davis, 1992, Sims-Williams, 1986

what the environment preserves. Different materials are preserved best in different conditions. For example, waterlogged, anaerobic environments such as peat bogs will preserve some kinds of organic remains such as leather, skin and fabric, but will dissolve bone. Metal and stone by contrast often survive best when buried.

It also goes without saying that what is found on a dig is never all that was there, so our picture is never complete. Suppose we make a wild (and perhaps optimistic) guess and say that 15 percent of what was at a site might be preserved in the archaeological record. That's not a lot to go on.

For comparison, think about a room in your house. If you randomly selected 15 percent of the objects it contained, would a person be able to reconstruct your life story from them? And—how many *other* stories could they make up that weren't your life?

That being said, the chief advantage of archaeology is that, where history *always* comes embedded in the tellers' viewpoints, archaeological remains were not designed to deliver a message—at least not to a future observer. Therefore we can make our own interpretations and observations based upon the objects themselves, not the ideas others have had about them.

THE CLASSICAL AUTHORS

The pagan Celts generally transmitted spiritual knowledge orally, or via inscriptions and images that can prove cryptic to the modern observer. Therefore, the earliest clear written sources we have are those of the classical authors. While some useful information can be gained from these sources, they must also be taken with a grain of salt. It was in the Romans' interest to depict all the races they conquered as barbarous, or at best as “noble savages” who benefited from being “civilised.”

When I am trying to separate the wheat from the chaff in these sources, I look first at the tone of the commentator. For example, the tone Caesar uses when describing the “wicker man.”

Some tribes have colossal images made of wickerwork, the limbs of which they fill with living men; they are then set on fire, and the victims burnt to death.

They think that the gods prefer the execution of men taken in the act of theft and brigandage, or guilty of some offence; but when they run short of criminals, they do not hesitate to make up with innocent men.¹³⁴

His tone *seems* inflammatory here, though it is of course difficult to judge tone in a written source. His description may be intended to outrage those hearing it, as Romans did not condone human sacrifice at that time, despite the deaths in the arena for more frivolous amusement. There is clear archaeological evidence for sacrifice, but most seem to be individuals. Ann Ross has suggested that at least one might have been the self-sacrifice of a Druid.¹³⁵ I do not discount Caesar's statement entirely, but would look for corroboration from other sources before taking it fully on board.

LATER RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Various scholars have asserted that once organised Druidic teaching on cosmogony and eschatology was emasculated, pagan and Christian spiritual systems were able to co-exist to some extent. The two systems "became complementary rather than competing, and there is some evidence that they remained so for as long as the Gaelic order endured."¹³⁶

We find a very shamanistic worldview in early Irish Christian poems, stories and hymns, reflected in their reverence for nature, and belief in the interconnectedness of all things.¹³⁷ Of course, most cultures appreciate nature as well—this is nothing uniquely Celtic. It must also be noted that scholars such as Ó Corráin have pointed out that some of these works, such as the "hermit poetry," may have been purely conscious art, written by the learned, rather than an autobiographical experience of the sacred in nature written by hermits.¹³⁸

However, prayers and invocations from *Carmina Gadelica* provide a different kind of evidence. These prayers *were* used for personal devotion, and reflect the same experience of the immanence of the sacred in natural phenomena

134 Handford, 1951, p.33

135 Ross, 1989, pp.41-52

136 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 149

137 Flower, 1949, pp.25-66

138 Ó ' Corráin, 1989, pp. 261-264. For more on Celtic Christianity and nature, see also Low, 1996

that we see in the earlier Irish works. Carmichael gives one prayer called *Jesu Who Ought to be Praised*, (*Eosai Bu Choir A Mholadh*) composed by a woman in Harris. According to the story, she had healed herself of leprosy by bathing in a kind of broth she made of sea plants and shell-fish.

There is no plant in the ground,
 But is full of his virtue,
 There is no form in the strand
 But is full of his blessing.
 Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu! Meet it were to praise Him.

There is no life in the sea,
 There is no creature of the river,
 There is naught in the firmament,
 But proclaims His goodness.
 Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu! Meet it were to praise Him...

Ni bheil lus an lar

Nach bheil lan d'a thoradh,

Ni bheil cruth an traigh

Nach bheil lan d'a shonas.

Eosai! Eosai! Eosai!

Eosai! Bu choir a mholadh.

Ni bheil creubh am fairge,

Ni bheil dearg an abhuinn,

Ni bheil cail an fhailbhe,

Nach bheil dearbh d'a mhaitheas.

Eosai! Eosai! Eosai!

*Eosai bu choir a mholadh...*¹³⁹

While experiencing the sacred in nature may be animistic without

139 Carmichael, 1900, vol. 1, pp. 38-41

necessarily being shamanistic, healers and others seem to appropriate these sacred powers to effect change in a possibly shamanistic way. We find one example in an “exorcism” of the evil eye. Here the practitioner says that they trample upon it “as tramples the host of the elements” (*mar a shaltrais feachd nan dul*).¹⁴⁰

Power of wind I have over it,
 Power of wrath I have over it,
 Power of fire I have over it,
 Power of thunder I have over it,
 Power of lightning I have over it...

Ta neart gaoith agam air,

Ta neart fraoich agam air,

Ta neart teine agam air,

Ta neart toruinn agam air,

*Ta neart dealainn agam air...*¹⁴¹

Working with elemental powers can be a shamanistic technique. To work with them the practitioner must be able to at least invoke them. This in and of itself is not shamanistic. However, ideally, to work most effectively, the practitioner should be able to interact with or at least see them to know if the invocation has been successful. This is shamanistic.

As I noted when I quoted from Carey, above, the early Irish church seems to have gone to unusual lengths to preserve some traditions and techniques that could be seen as shamanistic. I therefore feel that some of the early materials and teachings of the Irish Church may offer clues about Celtic shamanic practice.

FOLKLORE

Folklore, the study of traditional beliefs and customs, is generally gathered from oral traditions. Some of the most notable collectors of Celtic traditional lore such as Carmichael and Campbell worked at the close of the 19th Century. At this time, some of the overt hostility towards older, possibly pagan traditions had died

140 Carmichael, 1900, vol. 2, pp. 44-45

141 Carmichael, 1900, vol. 2, pp. 44-45

down, at least to the extent that “witch burying” had ceased. At this time, Carmichael and others were well aware that time was running out. People were not only less interested in persecuting people with traditional beliefs, but were less interested in these beliefs in general.

Recent years have seen a revival of interest in folk traditions, particularly those of a shamanic or pagan nature. The fact that so much traditional lore has been published presents the folklorist with the difficulty of determining how much of their informant’s data is truly folk-tradition as opposed to popular revival.

Fortunately, I have less difficulty using these materials than someone primarily concerned with archaic continuities. This work is more about continuity of shamanistic experience than continuity of religious orientation.

Due to revival or continuity, Celtic folklore gathered during the 19th and subsequent centuries offers vivid testimony to continued experiences of contact with the Otherworld, or at least stories that dealt with this sort of experience. These stories have clear parallels in shamanistic cultures.

Evans-Wentz gathered a great deal of information about what he termed the “Fairy Faith.”¹⁴² Some accounts that he gathered clearly describe a shamanistic experience of the sacred. He gathered the following account from a Protestant Scottish minister, a native of Ross-Shire living in the Western Hebrides at the time of the interview. Evans-Wentz says that because “he speaks from personal knowledge of the Fairy Faith as it was in his boyhood and is now, and chiefly because he has the rare privilege of conscious contact with the fairy world, his testimony is of the highest value.”¹⁴³

When I was a boy I was a firm believer in fairies, and now as a Christian minister I believe in the possibility and the reality of these spiritual orders, but I wish to know only those orders which belong to the realm of grace. It is very certain that they exist. *I have been in a state of ecstasy, and have seen the spiritual beings which form these orders.*¹⁴⁴ [Italics mine.]

The 17th Century Scottish minister, Robert Kirk, wrote an entire book

142 Evans-Wentz, 1990

143 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 90-91

144 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 90-91

describing both folk tradition and his personal experience.¹⁴⁵ Kirk described the state in which he had his own visionary Otherworld contact as a “rapture, transport, and sort of death” that the seer experiences as if “divested of his body and all its senses, when he is first made participant of this curious piece of knowledge.”¹⁴⁶ Among the Araucanian Indians, a person often first receives the vocation to become a shaman when they fall in trance “as if dead.” Numerous other examples of this kind of behaviour can be cited.¹⁴⁷

The great advantage of folklore as a source is that it reflects, to some extent, the beliefs and experiences of the informant. There is less possibility that it is wholly fictional—barring the well known phenomenon of an informant having a joke at the researcher’s expense. Because shamanism is all about a personal experience of the Sacred, this kind of information is invaluable.

CULTURAL COMPARISON

Cultural comparison, particularly within other Indo-European groups is a relevant source of information on Celtic shamanism, particularly when there was continued contact. There are certainly many comparisons between the Norse myths and the Celtic.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, comparisons between Indian myths and teachings and those of the Celts are too numerous to list in their entirety.¹⁴⁹ One archaeological example is the resemblance between *Siva Pashupati*, the lord of the animals, as depicted on an Indus Valley seal, and the much later representation of a figure who may be Cernunnos on the Gundestrup cauldron.¹⁵⁰ The horns, posture, and accompanying animals depicted are strikingly similar.

The cauldron itself, of course, is the product of diverse influences. Manufactured in Thrace and deposited in Denmark, it also features elephants. Therefore, it might well be argued that if it depicts elephants it might also depict *Pashupati*. The cauldron, like Celtic tradition itself, incorporates many influences, so we cannot positively say where particular elements came from. Nonetheless, it is

145 Kirk, Robert, 1893, (1st edition 1691)

146 Kirk, 1990, p. 58

147 Eliade, 1964, pp. 53-58

148 Eliade, 1964, pp. 375-387

149 Rees, 1961, pp. 16-21

150 Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, p. 169, Olmsted, 1979, p. 308, plate a

an interesting comparison.

Besides looking to other Indo-European cultures, commonalities in shamanistic practice world-wide can be used to illuminate possible Celtic practices.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

One of the problems with the mass of popular literature on Celtic spirituality is that it misses real items of spiritual interest, and puts false assumptions in their place.

For example, the way Scottish Gaelic speaks of the self as separate from emotions, physical states and belongings says more to me about a Celtic sense of the self than ninety percent of what appears in popular literature.

To say, "*Tha an t-eagal orm,*" or "The fear is upon me," is very different than saying the English equivalent: "I am afraid." Though the root grammatical structure underlying the English does not identify the fear with the self, the construction as it is used does. "I am afraid" is like saying, "I am Joe," it identifies emotional affect with the self. It implies that the emotion is not a state, but is what one is. The Gaelic by contrast implies that the self is a separate essence from its emotional states.

Points such as this may easily be missed in translation. Even when a translation is mostly accurate, one often finds that translators leave out certain passages because they are obscene, offensive or strange. This is particularly true of the earlier translators, and particularly problematic for the subject I am researching, which may have elements of all three.

When the translator is interested in "reconstructing" what they see as a pagan Irish tale, they may leave out passages that betray clear Christian influence. They may also leave out interesting passages because they do not relate to the primary story. For example, Gantz doesn't translate the segment relating to kingship in the *Serglige Con Culainn*.¹⁵¹ While it is unrelated to the central tale, it has useful references to the *tarbfeis*. It also seems significant that someone saw fit to insert it in this story dealing with initiatory illness and the spirit mate.

¹⁵¹ Dillon, 1975, pp. 8-11, par. 21-27

Gantz also doesn't include the final scribal "disclaimer," as follows:

So that is the destructive vision shown to Cú Chulainn by the people of the *Síd*. Demonic power was great before the faith, and it was so great that devils would fight bodily against the people, and they showed pleasure and hidden things to them as if they were existing permanently. It is thus that one believed in them. So it is on account of those visions that the ignorant talk of the *Síd* and the folk of the *Síd*.¹⁵²

This is obviously not pagan, probably the reason it was cut, but it is revealing. It illustrates that people in prior times, according to this scribe, did have a personal and interactive experience with Otherworld beings. They even fought bodily with them, possibly implying a human oracle. It also says that the "ignorant" *still* talk of the *Síd* "on account of those visions" at the time of writing.

All that having been said, there are good translations of many tales, and as it would have been impossible to translate all tales with points of shamanic interest myself, I have utilised these translations where they exist. Of course, where my interpretation has hinged on a particular reading of a word, I have examined the text in the original. I have also translated some texts of particular importance to my case in full, like the *Aislinge Óenguso* and *Serglige Con Culainn*.

Needless to say, my translations owe much to those who have previously translated the stories or segments I have later translated myself, Jackson and Dillon in the above cases.¹⁵³ I additionally owe many thanks to Prof. R.M. Scowcroft and Prof. William Gillies for those translations done under their supervision.

OLD IRISH AND MIDDLE WELSH LITERATURE

The tales of Old Irish and Middle Welsh literatures were written down, edited and "re-visioned" in many ways by the Irish and Welsh *literati*. Consequently, we can never be positive what came from where, and what is missing from the picture of pre-Christian Ireland they convey. However, Mac Cana believes that the Irish monastic *literati* preserved a surprising amount.

152 Dillon, 1975, p. 29, par. 49, my translation.. Missing from the end of Gantz's translation, see Gantz, 1981 p. 178

153 Jackson, 1971 and Dillon 1953b

...a remarkable wealth of pagan story, usage and belief, much of it extremely archaic and a good deal that might seem amoral or scabrous to modern eyes, but, as I have argued elsewhere, they were for all that selective in what they preserved...there are certain areas of pre-Christian belief and practice which are almost wholly undocumented and yet which we know must have existed because the general contextual pattern suggests so and because the suppression of evidence has not been perfect.”¹⁵⁴

There are passages dealing with explicit sex and assorted bodily functions that certainly offended the earlier 19th and 20th Century editors and translators enough that some of them left the passages out, such as the Dagda’s intercourse with the Fomoiré girl in the *Cath Maige Tuired*. There are also themes that seem to be pagan Celtic. The scribes sometimes added a disclaimer, as at the end of the *Serglige Con Culainn*.¹⁵⁵

Some sources even appear to hint at a continuity of worship. For example, the 10th century poet, Eochaid ua Flainn, finds it necessary to put this aside into a poem: “Though he (the author) enumerates them, he does not worship them.” (*Cia dos·ruirmem nīs adram.*)¹⁵⁶ (That is, the Tuatha Dé Danann.) His statement implies that there were those who did, or were at least believed to, at the time of writing. Another source says that the *Aes Síde* are “*dei terreni* or *Síde* worshipped by the folk.”¹⁵⁷

The question of continuity, is, of course, only one difficulty that confronts us as we attempt to view the texts through a shamanic lens. I believe that one of the best ways of sorting out possible pagan continuities and evidence of archaic forms of shamanism is by use of materials not generally used in Celtic scholarship.

A holistic approach to the problem of Celtic shamanism, the only approach likely to yield significant results, requires the tools of anthropology, comparative religion, psychology, neuroscience and the new physics as well as those of the Celtic scholarship.

154 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 144

155 Dillon, 1975, p. 29, para. 49

156 Lehman, 1923, p. 178, translation, O’Rahilly, T.F. 1946a, p. 261, fn. 1

157 O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, p. 261

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF CELTIC SHAMANISM

Many linguists and Celticists have missed evidence of shamanic themes in early Irish literature because of their lack of experience in shamanism. There are various notable exceptions, of course. Without their precedents my own work would have been made much more difficult if not impossible.

Most recently, after I completed my MSc on initiatory illness, I was excited to find that Carey had drawn the same conclusions about Cú Chulainn's wasting sickness in a paper published in the proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies.¹⁵⁸ Melia's article on Adamnán's shamanic initiation as the source of power and legitimacy that enabled him to promote the *Cáin Adomnáin* is also very useful.¹⁵⁹ Nagy's work on Finn mac Cumail and other areas of shamanic interest in the literature has been invaluable. I also owe much of my own work on the goddess figures of early Irish literature to Mac Cana's prior work.¹⁶⁰ Although he does not explicitly refer to shamanism, his idea of the queen as a symbolic goddess is only a step short of mine that the goddess manifested in the person of her shaman-oracle.¹⁶¹

From the other side, anthropologists have not been able to utilise Celtic materials because they don't have the necessary linguistic skills. Another reason is the fact that they have an easier time working with living, well-documented cultures. The problems of transmission and continuity that I have listed above are sufficient obstacles to discourage all but the keenest from investigating Celtic shamanism.

One of the few anthropologists to have studied Celtic materials to any extent for shamanic phenomena is Eliade himself. In particular, he speaks of the episode where Cú Chulainn's battle heat must be cooled in vats of water, not unlike the frenzy of the Kwakiutl *hamatsa* after his trance possession.¹⁶² He also devotes a section of *Shamanism* to possible shamanic phenomena amongst the Indo-Europeans.¹⁶³

158 Carey, 1999

159 Melia, 1983

160 Mac Cana, 1955-1956, 1955-1956b

161 Nagy, 1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1985

162 Eliade, 1958a, pp. 84-87

163 Eliade, 1964, pp. 375-427

A very important source of information is recent research on how the brain functions, learns, and may experience transcendent states. The brain's structure has not changed in the couple of thousand years between the ancient Celts and ourselves. Researchers from diverse fields have come to new understandings that may be used to shed light on mystic experience in general and that of the Celts in particular.

For example, Arnold Mandell describes how severe stress may induce transcendent experience in his article *Towards a Psychobiology of Transcendence: God in the Brain*. Much earlier, Pavlov discovered that a curious thing occurred when his dogs nearly drowned in a flood. Some of them seemed in a beatific state. Put under severe stress, nearly up to their noses in water when rescued, the hippocampus in the brain shut down all external stimuli and amplified the internal. This may have created the sort of grand unified experience described by mystics, sometimes after severe penance, fasting, and other austerities.¹⁶⁴

This is relevant to the exploration of trance induction via ascetic practices. Methods such as fasting, praying in freezing rivers, and the initiatory ordeals of figures such as Adamnán are well attested in Celtic literature.

Adding the perspectives afforded by these branches of research, is, however, only one part of the equation. The other is to attempt, however cautiously, to see shamanism itself in some respect as those who practice it, and apply those insights in turn to Celtic tradition.

WHEN THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS ARRIVE THE GODS LEAVE THE ISLAND

There are two ways to approach cultural research. One is as the academic, standing back and viewing the subject. The other is trying to get inside the minds of the people you're researching—to view the myths, the practices, and the universe closer to the way the subjects might have viewed it.

In this and many other areas, scientists and academics are moving towards more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches. They are coming to recognise that while dissecting reality into bite-size chunks is useful and necessary in terms of

164 Collins, 1991, pp. 207-219

discussing its aspects, the method shouldn't be confused with reality itself as a whole.¹⁶⁵ A number of anthropologists in recent times have highlighted the importance of actually *experiencing* shamanism to their research.¹⁶⁶

There is a Haitian proverb: "When the anthropologists arrive, the Gods leave the island."¹⁶⁷ Holger Kalweit, an ethnopsychologist with degrees in psychology and anthropology, likens using only Euclidean concepts and rational thought to understand shamanism to using a tape recorder to record a painting. All you get is the hum of the machine itself.¹⁶⁸ In the same way, the researcher records more of his own perceptions than those of his subjects.

Reductionist and materialist viewpoints alone cannot make sense of Celtic spirituality. I think to understand the Celts one must understand a more holistic view of reality itself, reflected in the Celtic sense of connection to nature, and in the experiences of oneness with creation that we find in the myths.

In acknowledging these other views of reality, we do not remove empiricism, but expand it and become *more* objective. As my father, Dr. George Mueller, modern re-founder of the science of organic geochemistry and a NASA scientist, used to say, to view the scientific method as the only method of perception is, in and of itself, unscientific.

Without throwing the intellect out the window, one has to acknowledge the validity of a world view that does not draw hard lines between body, mind, and spirit, religion and daily life, this world and the Otherworld. Therefore, to hope to come to an understanding of an ancient culture, we cannot solely use methods and a mindset that might well have been totally alien to the people in question.

Shamanic cultures that we know of, such as the Kwakiutl, tend not to view man as the prime mover in the universe. Therefore, if their behaviour is discussed purely in terms of kinship, warfare, and prestige issues, we miss the true motivation behind it.¹⁶⁹ The outward social form *is based upon* myth and visionary experience.

This appears to be equally true of Celtic culture. As John Carey has said

165 Bohm, 1980, p. 2

166 Willis, 1999, Harner, 1980, Peters and Price-Williams, August 1997

167 Kalweit, 1988, p. 235

168 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 242-243

169 Walens, 1981, p. 3

in a recent article, “Again and again in early Irish writing, history is rooted in eternity: society, and the kingship in which society is crystallised, derive their legitimacy, and indeed their existence from the supernatural realm.”¹⁷⁰

The *Táin* provides us with a prominent example of supernatural considerations superceding practical ones. The passage begins with a gathering before the raid.

So, then the four provinces of Ireland were gathered together in Crúachain Aí. Their prophets and druids did not permit them to go thence, but kept them for a fortnight awaiting an auspicious omen...On the Monday after the autumn festival of Samain they set out

*Doemalta dano iarum ceithre cóiced Hérend co mbátar hi Crúachnaib Aíi. Ocus nis teilcset a fáthi ocus a ndruid ass sein co cend cóicthigis oc irnaidi seóin...In lúan iar samain is and documlaiset.*¹⁷¹

In practical terms, Samain is an awful time to go on a raid. *Cath Ruis na Ríg* recommends late spring and summer for raids because the roads are dry and smooth, the rivers shallow, the woods sheltering with their foliage and the warriors in good spirits.¹⁷² Sadowska attributes the decision entirely to religious concerns.

Contrary to all practical considerations, the winter timing of the campaign could be considered auspicious precisely because its start was linked with the great religious festival...by assembling at Crúachain Aí the hosts were perfectly positioned for the *samain* night celebrations, being close to the famous *Sídh ar Crúachain*, known as the “Hell Gate of Ireland,” believed to provide entrance to the Otherworld...It was believed that the festival temporarily removed barriers between the natural and the supernatural, bringing the universe back into primordial chaos. However, it was from this disorder that the New year emerged as a commencement of a new cycle...It could be suggested therefore that it was these magic and symbolic ideas of the “dissolution of established order” and the marking of a “new beginning” that prompted Medb and her druids to a campaign

170 Carey, 1996, p. 201

171 O’ Rahilly, C., 1976, p. 114, lines 21-23

172 Fitzgerald, 1979, p. 151

at the onset of the otherwise inauspicious winter season...The regeneration of...nature was thus symbolically linked with the attempt on the part of the Connacht leaders to establish a new order in the political arena. It can be postulated that the Ulster raid was staged not so much for the purpose of a single loot for cattle from Cúailnge, but in order to crush for good the enemy's military and political strength...the ideological associations generated by the festival would offset the practical inconveniences and disadvantages of staging the raid in winter.¹⁷³

Of course, we cannot attempt to examine the nature of the interchange between this world and the Otherworld in early Irish literature without addressing one of the most knotty problems of Irish Studies. That is, the conflict between the so-called nativist and anti-nativist approaches to Irish literature and myth.

For something to be considered a myth, rather than just a tale, presupposes that it has some validity to its culture. This is one reason why Claude Levi-Strauss' view that all variants on a myth are equally valid has not been embraced in Celtic studies.¹⁷⁴ Alterations made to Aboriginal myths are made by Australian Aborigines who still believe in, and experience, to some extent, their ancestor's cosmology. By contrast, pagan Celtic tales came through the hands of Christian *literati* promoting a different cosmology. The question remains: can we see a continuity of any sort and what is its significance?

RETURN OF THE NATIVIST

Scholars of Old and Middle Irish have viewed early Irish texts in various ways. For example, the tale Ó Cuiv called *The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis* was seen by Mac Cana as a manifestation of the theme of king and goddess, emanating from pagan Celtic tradition.¹⁷⁵ One might wonder whether she is a female Suibhne, and a largely literary endeavour.

The *Aislinge Óenguso*, or *Vision of Óengus*, is a sophisticated literary work. However, it also contains themes that may go back to the Indo-Europeans. For

173 Sadowska, 1997, p. 14

174 Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, p. 9

175 Mac Cana, 1955-56, pp. 370-377

example, Dillon thought that the *sercc ecmaise*, “love in absence” or “love of a spectral love” in Irish literature bore a resemblance to the Indian literary convention, *adrstakāma*, defined as “love of an unseen one.”¹⁷⁶

Carney dubbed some Irish scholars “nativists” because he felt they paid too little attention to the literary contributions and Latin influences of the monasteries.¹⁷⁷ *In general*, scholars such as he and McCone tend to view Irish tales as literary products, not reflecting ancient traditions to any great extent.¹⁷⁸ By contrast, scholars such as Ó Cathasaigh, Dillon and Mac Cana see them as possibly retaining very archaic pagan elements.¹⁷⁹

The anti-nativist position may be seen as a pendulum swing reaction away from the work of earlier scholars. Some of these scholars, like O’Rahilly, tended to over-emphasise themes such as solar worship, pagan mythology and nature-based religion to the exclusion of other possibilities. Early research into Celtic spirituality reflects romantic ideas of the “nature-worshipping” noble savage prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁸⁰

In a very important article, Sims-Williams states his belief that the idea of the visionary, occult Celt is largely derived from an 1854 essay by Renan, although Ireland was regarded as a land of saints for a long time before.¹⁸¹ He is, of course, quite correct that classical authors Celtic ethnology may be as suspect as modern, coloured as it is by ideas of “noble savages” and mysterious Celts with a “special, profound spiritual discipline.”¹⁸²

However, there is also no reason to say there was no spiritual discipline simply because others have exaggerated it. Similarly, simply because some may have exaggerated Celtic contributions to medieval Otherworld literatures, as Sims-Williams suggests, does not mean that Celtic literature does not have a strong visionary component. Folklore about the *dà shealladh* in Scottish tradition, and visionary experience in other Celtic traditions also suggest that the visionary

176 Dillon, 1947, p. 256

177 Carney, 1955, pp. 276-277

178 See Carney, 1955, pp. 276-323, McCone, 1991, pp. 1-28

179 See Dillon, 1947, Mac Cana, 1976, 1981, 1995

180 Ross, 1993, pp. 30-32

181 Sims-Williams, 1986, pp. 78-79

182 Sims-Williams, 1986, p. 90

component is supported by actual practice.¹⁸³

Sims-Williams also notes that the Celts themselves have apparently cultivated the perception of themselves as visionary and “other” from ancient times.¹⁸⁴ They must have had their reasons. To cultivate a pose means that, at the least, you see some power or good in it.

One example of the kind of exchange that occurs between “nativist” and “anti-nativist” schools of thought is Mac Cana’s response to Carney’s assertion that the Otherworld is described in a Christian fashion as a place of chastity. He says that one thing “is clear beyond all doubt: the Irish Otherworld of *Immram Brain* and comparably early texts is not ‘characterised by an extreme of chastity.’”¹⁸⁵

Mac Cana feels that Carney misreads the evidence because he presumes that *Immram Brain* “is a thoroughly Christian composition: given this premise, it is easy to assume that, where sexual relations are concerned, sinlessness is synonymous with chastity. If, on the other hand, one adopts a less absolute approach to the text, if in particular one allows the native and traditional element to find its own level in the course of the enquiry rather than reduce it or preclude it in advance, one will arrive at a very different interpretation.”¹⁸⁶

If one allows the native element in, it opens at least the possibility that no sin does not necessarily equal no sex. There is also the option of sinless sex.

Given the nature of my research focus, it should come as no surprise that I tend to put myself more on the nativist side of the fence—with certain caveats. As Mac Cana says, I believe we must approach the texts with an open mind, and allow “the native and traditional element to find its own level in the course of the enquiry.”

I also freely acknowledge that I am concerned with literature here, albeit a literature with elements arguably drawn from pagan mythology and oral tradition.¹⁸⁷ Mac Cana Believes that the Irish *literati* were clearly conscious that they were doing something new and creative with their cultural inheritance.¹⁸⁸

183 Sims-Williams. 1986, p. 82

184 Sims-Williams. 1986, pp. 76-77

185 Mac Cana, 1976, p. 106

186 Mac Cana, 1976, p. 101

187 Carney, 1955, pp. 321-322

188 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 149

Whether it was synchronising Irish mytho-poetic history with the Bible, consciously archaising their own compositions, or ingeniously synthesising foreign influences like Isidore of Seville with their own materials, imagined or oral, they were certainly writers, not just scribes.

Even if we were able to directly observe the pagan Celtic religion of two thousand years ago, Eliade noted that “nowhere in the world or in history will a perfectly ‘pure’ and ‘primordial’ religious phenomenon be found.”¹⁸⁹

pagan Celtic religion must have incorporated many influences even before the Christian. Thus, we cannot seek a “pure” Celtic manifestation of the universal phenomenon of shamanism. Nor can we ever wholly resolve questions of origin and influence, since no religion is ever wholly “new.” Celtic literature in part reflects what visibly remains of pagan Celtic religion.

I once heard Dr. Scowcroft say that Celtic texts may be viewed as mushroom-like in that the fungus itself is actually under the ground and not visible. The mushrooms are the flowering bodies above ground.¹⁹⁰

The myths and sagas aren't identical with pagan Celtic religion and philosophy, which remains largely hidden, but in some ways, the myths may be seen to manifest what they grew from. Moreover, as Ó Cathasaigh has said, the myth making process did not stop in Christian times.¹⁹¹ Tales of Cormac Mac Airt still served as myths, inspiring and guiding those who believed they descended from him, long after Ireland had been Christianised.¹⁹²

The implications of the conflict between nativist and anti-nativist views to my study are various. Shamanic phenomena manifest in most cultures and religions, at least for certain people. You could look to St. Theresa of Avila, or St. Gertrude the Great of Helfta, as well as to Balinese shamans and the heroes of Celtic myth for accounts of divine marriage. A Covenanter going through a “dark night of the soul” experience, an Eskimo shaman going through his initiatory crisis, and a modern day person experiencing “spiritual emergency,” may also describe a strikingly similar state. By my definition, all of these experiences could be called

189 Eliade, 1964, p. 11

190 R.M. Scowcroft, personal communication

191 Ó Cathasaigh, 1993, pp. 131-132

192 Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, pp. 104 - 106

shamanistic.

On this level, whether the experience stems from pagan, Christian, or a combination of both traditions is ancillary to its reality and essential nature as a shamanistic experience.

Therefore, this study has two strands. The first is identifying shamanistic experience in Celtic culture wherever it occurs. The second is drawing attention to facets of experience or practice that may represent continuities of pagan Celtic religion and shed light on its nature.

One example of how I shall try to untangle these strands is the way I deal with initiatory crisis in chapters one and six. Those who experienced an initiatory crisis in later times did not do so in a purely or perhaps even partially pagan context. However, what I hope to prove is that these experiences occurred, and did so in a way which is so classically shamanic that the survival of some pagan elements seem likely. In turn, as I shall detail in chapter six, I believe that the use of the word *comhairge* or “guarantor” in the *Serglige Con Culainn*, may reflect something of the shamanic figure’s role in pagan Celtic religion.

One might question if some of the elements of initiatory crisis that I take to be possible pagan continuities might not rather be drawn from Biblical accounts, albeit ones that may themselves have shamanistic features.

For example, the Biblical tale of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness, where a spiritual crisis makes him grow talons and feathers, and flee into the wilderness, could be a source for the tale of Mis.¹⁹³ One remarkably close shamanic analogue to her story is that of the Pacific Northwest Coast Kwakiutl *hamatsa* or cannibal dancer. Some features appear in the cases of Mis and the *hamatsa* which do not appear in the account of Nebuchadnezzar. These include cannibalism, a bath in water heated by hot stones to return them to sanity and the sense that the illness itself is of crucial importance to the community. The theme of immersion in fluids to restore to sanity also occurs in stories of Cú Chulainn, leading Eliade to draw parallels between them.¹⁹⁴ To me, this makes it seem likely that these tales preserve vestiges of pre-Christian Celtic shamanism.

193 Daniel, 5 : 31-33, King James version

194 Eliade 1958a, pp. 84-87

Of course, the similarities between Mis, Cú Chulainn and the *hamatsa* also lead to the question of where Celtic shamanism may have come from.

FROM WHENCE CELTIC SHAMANISM?

The similarities between Kwakiutl, Siberian and Celtic shamanism that I will reveal in upcoming chapters raise the question of origins. As mentioned earlier, brain functions transcend culture. Place someone in a situation of sensory deprivation over three days, whether in a modern purpose-built tank, a cave, buried under loose sods, or in a tomb, and *something* will happen.

There may also be strong similarities from one person to the next in the content of their experience. The symbols that may arise are frequently those of the “collective unconscious,” as Jung put it. These are the mythic themes that pop up everywhere, from death and resurrection to spirit marriage. Campbell has related them to the “innate releasing mechanisms” observed by students of animal behaviour. These are inherited structures in the nervous system enabling animals to respond to stimuli never before experienced, as the new-born turtle knows to race to the sea or the chick knows to flee the silhouette of a hawk passing overhead.¹⁹⁵

There are also theories of direct diffusion, starting with those of Frobenius, which explain Siberian / Native American and other connections.¹⁹⁶ Thomas Burrow, in *The Sanskrit Language*, notes that the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-Europeans must have lived in long and close contact with a race speaking proto-Finno-Ugric, ancestor of later Siberian languages. This race gave them various loan words.¹⁹⁷ Eliade felt that Hindu meditative practices directly influenced Siberian and Asian shamanism, which would bring us full circle. If Indo-Europeans influenced Siberians and Asians, their practices in turn, might have fed back into Celtic shamanism via later contact.¹⁹⁸

There is also the matter of foreign influences. As Celtic art incorporated foreign influences from the earliest times, it is hard to imagine the Celts were not influenced by other cultures in deeper ways. Perhaps the best way of looking at this

195 Campbell, Joseph. 1991c. pp. 30-32

196 Campbell, Joseph. 1991c. p. 15

197 Quoted in Wasson, 1968. p. 13

198 Price-Williams and Hughes. 1994. p. 3

influence is the way in we look at the integration of foreign elements in Celtic artwork. We see the influence, but the Celtic craftsman made the motifs his own.¹⁹⁹

Shamanic cultures are characteristically receptive to new teachings, adapting them to what they already know. People in shamanic cultures can always ask the spirits themselves if a particular practice or idea is right for them.

By contrast, *some* branches of Christianity believe that God's message for humanity, once and for all, is in the Bible. While they may believe that the devotee can commune with Christ, any teachings received through that communion would need to be in line with existing scripture to be acknowledged as divine, rather than diabolical, revelation. "Revealed" teachings that contradict church teachings on, say, sex outside of marriage, are not accepted in *this kind* of Christianity, though it goes without saying that this is *not* true of Christianity as a whole.

St. Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg in Ireland was supposedly built for this purpose, although it evidently had a lively pre-Christian history as well.²⁰⁰ The Irish refused to believe in a hell or heaven unless they saw it for themselves. Hence the three days in a dark cave, akin to the burial under sods we hear that St. Columba's disciple, Oran, practised.²⁰¹ A primitive sensory deprivation chamber, where shutting out the sight of this world opens sight of the other. The end of the tale, where Oran is buried yet again, lest he cause dissension, reveals the limits within which visionary practice could be allowed in later times.

It must also be stated that the Christianity which replaced the pagan Celtic religion brought with it strata that relate to Mithraic and other forms of ancient religion. Just because it is not Christian does not mean it is pagan Celtic.

Conversely, I might add that just because it is Christian does not mean it is not *also* pagan Celtic, since the Celts would probably not have accepted a religion that bore no relation to what went before. For example, by the archaeological record and Classical accounts, the symbolism of sacrifice was obviously important to pagan Celts.²⁰² It is also central to Christian theology.²⁰³ It is not a far stretch to

199 Powell, 1995, pp. 115-116

200 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 442-448

201 Carmichael, 1900-1971, v. 2, pp.338-340

202 See Green, 1997a, pp. 72-87

203 See I. Bradley, 1995

imagine that some kind of meeting of the minds might have occurred between Christians and pagans around this symbolism. Attempting to unravel all these strands will be a key and difficult part of the equation.

CONCLUSIONS: THE DIFFICULTY OF DEEPER READING

The outline above shows enough comparisons with Eliade's classical model of shamanism to warrant this study. My goal is to give the scholar a place to go to begin their quest. It is an entry in a conversation already begun by Eliade, Carey, Melia and others, one that I hope will both stimulate further discussion and provide a useful matrix to frame it.

As far as the evidence that follows goes, I'd suggest that the reader bear in mind Occam's razor. The simplest explanation that encompasses all the phenomena we will discuss in the upcoming chapters is likely the best.

Generally speaking, if it goes into trance like a shaman, wears feathers like a shaman, journeys like a shaman, heals and hexes like a shaman—in short, shamanises like a shaman—it probably is a shaman.

However, the basic documentation of shamanic phenomena in Celtic culture is, I believe, a place to start but not finish. The bigger question is what may it mean? Cosmology and underlying philosophy are special challenges in Celtic materials because pagan spiritual exegesis, among other things, is precisely what monastic redactors removed.

As Mac Cana has said of *Noinden Ulad*, the tale of Macha's Twins, "...one suspects—and not entirely without evidence—that in the Druidic schools of the pre-Christian period such narratives would have been accompanied by a body of exegetical commentary, but that this was suppressed by monastic redactors by the simple expedient of not recording it."²⁰⁴

Mac Cana finds a parallel to the tale of Mongán mac Fíachna's precocious wisdom found in a cosmogonic tale of Vishnu as a child.²⁰⁵ McCone argues that the story of the boy Jesus in the temple is a more convincing source, and that "vague similarities with a highly evolved Indian theological exposition" do not necessarily

204 Mac Cana, 1982, p. 148

205 Mac Cana, 1972, pp. 135, 141

point back to a common Indo-European prototype.²⁰⁶ Again, one problem with this assertion is that theological exposition is *precisely* the sort of thing the literati would have edited out.

What I have looked for, in part, is the “gutted” narrative, those stories that have incongruous elements that plainly suggest that there’s something missing. The perspective afforded by comparison with shamanic cultures and reference to Norse, Indian and other Indo-European literatures has sometimes suggested possible deeper layers of meaning in these tales.

I fully recognise, as Carey has noted, that anyone engaged in “deep reading” risks imposing his or her own interpretations on the material and seeing the symmetries their own theories suggest, and, as he concludes, “the deeper the reading, the greater the risk.”²⁰⁷

However, as the samurai used to say, the greatest victory lies an inch from your opponent’s blade. I have played it close to the blade—but, I hope, not too close.

206 McCone, 1991, pp. 17-18

207 Carey, 1998, p. 64

CHAPTER 1
LOSS AND UNION
INITIATORY ILLNESS AND SPIRIT MARRIAGE

*...the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of a god.
The prophetess of Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona are out of their minds
when they perform that fine work of theirs for all of Greece...but they accomplish
little or nothing when they are in control of themselves.*

*Plato*¹

Shamanic initiatory illness is an experience of psycho-spiritual darkness and dissolution that tears down the individual's old ego structure.² Many shamans begin their career with this dramatic episode of altered consciousness.

Traditional Western psychiatry has tended to class initiatory illness and other forms of what some have termed "spiritual crisis," as manifestations of mental illnesses like schizophrenia or psychosis.³ Recently, however, psychiatry has demonstrated greater openness to more holistic views. For example, the recognised standard psychiatric diagnostic manual, the *DSM IV*, recently added "religious or spiritual problem" as a possible diagnosis.⁴

Lukoff's work draws valuable distinctions between psychotic disorders and shamanistic initiatory crisis and other kinds of spiritual crisis.⁵ For one thing, MEPF, Mystical Experience with Psychotic Features, the diagnosis he proposes for what I term spiritual crisis, generally has an internal coherence. There is a clear story, and that story has archetypal components. Wilber suggests that anyone "familiar with the *philosophia perennis* can almost instantly spot whether any of the elements of the particular psychotic-like episode have any universal-spiritual components, and thus easily differentiate the "spiritual channel" psychoses-neuroses from the more mundane (and often more easily treatable) pathologies that originate solely on the psychotic or borderline levels."⁶

I cannot detail all the ways of differentiating between mystic experience

1 From Phaedrus. Cooper, 1997, p. 522, section 244-244b

2 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 109 - 110

3 Grof, 1989, pp. 2-7, 78

4 American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 741, V62.89

5 Lukoff, 1985, p. 160, 1990-1991.

6 Wilber, 1984, p. 108

with psychotic features and straight psychosis or schizophrenia here, however, one widely agreed upon point is that the shaman is *invariably* healed and thereby gains the power to heal others.⁷ A person cannot become a shaman unless they have moved through their crisis to a place where they are fully in control of their states of consciousness.

When anthropologist Michael Harner was studying with the South American Jívaro tribe, he noticed a man who was always in the jungle talking with spirits. He asked one of his Jívaro informants if the man was a shaman. “No,” came the response, “he’s crazy.”⁸

The Jívaro considered him crazy because he had no control of his state of consciousness. Shamans move between the worlds. This man was always in the Otherworld. Additionally, his communications with spirits were apparently not applicable to his community, or to what that community saw as a productive life.

By contrast, the passionate and personal relationship with the sacred that shamans attain does not psychologically disassociate them from physical reality. It leads them to greater effectiveness in all facets of life.

THE UNION THAT FOLLOWS LOSS

Many cultures see acquiring a spirit-mate as part of the shaman’s initiatory process. That is why I include it in this chapter.

The spirit-mate forges an intimate and deeply felt bond between the shaman and the Otherworld.⁹ The spirit-mate instructs the shaman and enables him to perform feats. Both the shaman and his mate become intermediaries between their respective worlds and the other.

Many mystical traditions, not just the overtly shamanic, have seized on the imagery of human love and marriage as a natural way of seeing and experiencing the union of the soul and the sacred.¹⁰ For example, in several Catholic orders, nuns traditionally received a wedding ring, and ceremonially responded, “I love Christ, whose bed I share.” Metaphysical eroticism features in East Indian mysticism,

7 Eliade, 1964, p. 27a, Lukoff, 1990-1991, Noll, 1983

8 Michael Harner, personal communication

9 Eliade, 1964, p. 73

10 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 128, 142-143, Underhill, 1955, pp. 136-137

since “someone embraced by the primordial self can be neither within nor without.”¹¹

Needless to say, in these traditions God is not *just* a spirit-mate, but God’s union with the soul may be depicted as a symbolic marriage. It should also be noted that conversely, in animistic cultures that see all parts of creation as facets of Deity, the spirit-mate is potentially not *just* a spirit-mate either. The spirit-mate, like the totem animal, is potentially a conduit for vast power. They can become, in effect, the personal manifestation of the God or Goddess for the shaman.

THE STAGES OF INITIATORY CRISIS

The stories I’ve chosen to explore here for evidence of the themes of initiatory illness and spirit marriage are *Aislinge Óenguso*, *Serglige Con Culainn*, and *The Courtship of Mis and Dubh Ruis*. These tales show classically shamanic features and yield some evidence of a shamanic culture surrounding the afflicted person’s experience.

Because initiatory illness has several distinct phases, I’ve synthesised each story first below, then gone on to examine each stage as it manifests in all three. Later chapters dealing with other themes will not follow this more complex structure because there is no “storyline” involved as there is in the stages of initiatory illness.

The stages are onset and ordeal, recovery, and the transmission of gifts. In the first, the protagonist experiences psycho-spiritual crisis.¹² In the second, he is healed, in part by uniting with a supernatural or supernaturally gifted being. Finally, he transmits the spiritual gifts he has received to his community.

THE TALES

THE COURTSHIP OF MIS AND DUBH RUIS

This fascinating story illustrates many aspects of shamanic initiatory illness. Mis, daughter of Dáire Dóidgheal goes mad after her father dies in battle and she

¹¹ Kalweit, 1988, p. 143

¹² For more on the theme of madness and the figure of the “wild man” in the Celtic context, see Frykenberg, 1984b

drinks his blood. She races from the field in madness, and goes into the wilderness. Her hair grows long and she grows a coat of fur or feathers. She becomes a menace, killing animals and humans. The area where she lives becomes a wasteland. Despite this, the King of Munster offers a great reward for her capture alive.

Dubh Ruis, harper to the king, takes up the quest. He attracts her with his music, and succeeds in reawakening memories of her father and past life. They make love, and gradually Dubh Ruis begins to reintroduce her to civilised ways of eating, sleeping, and bathing. In two months, he helps her return to sanity. The coat falls from her and he takes her home and marries her. She bears him four children, and becomes one of the most beautiful and accomplished women in Munster. Sadly, Dubh Ruis is later killed while collecting rents and Mis composes a song over his body.¹³

I have generally referred to Brian Ó Cuív's synopsis for the "broad strokes" of the text, and his edition of the text has been used for translation purposes where there was a need to go into greater narrative detail

AISLINGE ÓENGUSO

Óengus, son of the Dagda and the Boann, sees a young girl in a vision each night, playing upon a stringed instrument by his bed. He tries to draw her to him but she vanishes. He becomes ill, and his mother decides they must find this girl. They encounter many obstacles along the way and get help from many quarters before they finally succeed. The girl, Caer, takes the form of a swan on alternate years. To win her, Óengus must call to her when she is in swan form on the lake at Samhain. He does so, and they unite. They return to the lake, then take flight, returning to Óengus' home. They sing so beautifully together that they put everyone there in trance for three days and they stay together thereafter.

References to the text are to Kenneth Jackson's translation. I note where I differ from his reading. For my own, I used Fr. Francis Shaw's 1934 edition.¹⁴

13 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, pp. 325-333

14 Jackson, 1971, pp. 93-97, Shaw, 1934

SERGLIGE CON CULAINN

This story also begins with a supernatural visitation. Cú Chulainn and the Ulaid are at Mag Muirthemne for the Samhain festival. A flock of glorious birds arrives and all the women want them. Cú Chulainn succeeds in getting birds for the other women but misses out Emer, his wife. She is displeased, so when two birds that are more beautiful arrive, he sets out to catch them, despite the fact that Emer and Lóeg, his charioteer, fear they are supernatural birds.

He misses his cast at them, something that had never happened before, and sits against a particular standing stone in an ill temper. He falls asleep, and two fairy women beat him with horsewhips until he is almost dead. He remains in a catatonic state for a year, until a fairy man comes to him, saying that everything happened because Fand, a fairy woman and wife of Manannán, desires his love. First Lóeg, then Cú Chulainn go into the Otherworld.

Fand and Cú Chulainn become lovers, much to the consternation, and “only jealousy” of Emer, who gets the “long knives” out for Fand. In the end, Fand returns to Manannán, and Cú Chulainn to Emer. Druids give Cú Chulainn and Emer a brew of forgetfulness. They forget the whole incident, and Manannán shakes his cape between Cú Chulainn and Fand so they will not meet again.¹⁵ I have used the Cross and Slover translation for most references. Where I differ, I have used Myles Dillon’s 1953 edition for my own translation.

ONSET AND ORDEAL STAGES OF INITIATORY CRISIS

MIS

Mis’s illness begins in trauma, when she goes to seek her father’s body on the battlefield. “After finding the body covered with a multitude of bloody wounds, she proceeded to suck the blood from the wounds.” (*...iar bhfaghāil an [51] chuirp go n-iomad créachta di, gabhus ag súgha 7 ag ól na fola as na crēachtuibh.*)

BLOOD-DRINKING AND PARTICIPATION IN DEATH

Her actions have numerous precedents in Gaelic culture. Ragnall

15 Cross and Slover, 1969, Dillon, 1953a, 1953b

MacilleDhuibh has gathered various examples, from which I draw the references below.¹⁶ Deirdre drinks Naoise's blood at his death.¹⁷ Emer drinks Cú Chulainn's from his mouth at his death.¹⁸ *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* says, "Your blood flowed in streams; / and I did not wait to clean it / But drank it with my palms."¹⁹

Edmund Spenser, in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, written between 1580 and 1599, says that the Gauls and ancient Irish used to drink their enemies' blood. He goes on to say that he had personally seen the Irish do this only with friends. He describes Murrough O' Brien's foster-mother drinking all the blood from his mouth while his executioners quartered him, saying that "the earth was not worthy to drink it" while tearing her hair and shrieking.²⁰

A thorough investigation into this theme is beyond my scope here, but it is certainly of interest for future work.²¹ On the surface, it seems to be an immediate emotional response to a loved one's violent death. It's hard to say whether the practice has its origins in ritual, or began with an emotional reaction that was in the process of becoming ritualised when the stories were composed or written down.

Perhaps it represents participation in the death. The loved one has blood in their mouth due to their violent death. The blood drinker also has blood in his or her mouth, putting him or herself in a symbolically similar position.

One scene in *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* may relate to this idea. When Cét contests for the champion's portion with Conall, he admits that Conall is the better man. However, he says, if Anluan his brother was there, Anluan would be a match for Conall. Conall responds that Anluan *is* there, produces his severed head, and throws it on Cét's chest, "so that a gush of blood broke over his lips."²²

The original Irish, like the translation, is ambiguous. It could mean that blood from the head splashed across Cét's mouth, or that blood came to Cét's mouth spontaneously in some way in response to the trauma, or most simply, that Conall simply bashed him very hard with the head.

16 MacilleDhuibh, 2000

17 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 2, pp. 144-145. For more on the theme of blood-drinking and mourning see Partridge, 1980-1981, pp. 25-37

18 Van Hamel, 1956, p. 123

19 O'Tuama, 1961, p. 35

20 Renwick, 1970, p. 62

21 Ó Cuiv, 1952-1954, p. 327, ff.2

22 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 206

Whatever the case, blood comes into contact with his mouth, and Cét immediately admits defeat. He symbolically shares both his brother's death and his defeat at Conall's hands. This seems to point towards blood-drinking as participation in the loved one's suffering.

If blood drinking is a ritual death for the drinker, the act ties in with the omnipresent theme of initiation: that of a ritual death and rebirth.²³ I will have occasion to return to this theme repeatedly in the upcoming chapters, because shamans are often seen as people who are "already dead," who live in a perpetual initiatory state due to their ongoing contact with the Otherworld. As we shall see in Mis's case in particular, there is a clear sense of her dying to her old state of being, and entering a realm of primordial chaos.

BLOOD-DRINKING AND TAKING IN POWER

In the stories and folklore, blood is often drunk from the loved one's mouth. Various texts and folklore speak of the soul departing the body through the mouth, sometimes as a moth or butterfly.²⁴ Perhaps drinking the blood from the mouth may be taking in a part of the soul, keeping the person alive in some sense within the drinker. The Jívaro believe that there is a vital soul that resides in the blood, and the Scythians drank their enemies' blood ritually to possess their enemies' valour.²⁵

In other cultures, blood drinking can be associated with assuming ancestral power. The ancestors are also often instrumental in calling a person to become a shaman.²⁶ In other cultures, people honour their the ancestors, and keep their power "within the family," by eating them after death. For example, the Yanomamö mix the ashes of dead relatives with water and drink them.²⁷

Blood drinking may also be associated with trance possession, a point to which I will return in chapter five. However, there is one account from the Isle of Man that is relevant here because it identifies symptoms similar to Mis's with possession, albeit of an unwilling variety.

23 Eliade, 1958a, pp. 12-14, 30-39

24 Carmichael, 1900-1971, v. 2, pp. 361-362

25 Harner, 1984, p. 149, Rice, 1957, p. 54

26 Eliade, 1964, p. 67

27 Chagnon, 1983, p. 106

Evans-Wentz gathered this account from James Caugherty, a farmer and fisherman on the Isle of Man concerning a boy who he had played with as a child. According to Caugherty, fairies chased this boy and when he returned home he could not speak, his hands and feet had turned awry, and his nails had grown. Finally, when he “came to himself” he described being “taken away” by his pursuers but could not remember where. His parents considered him a “changeling” or *possessed by a fairy spirit*.²⁸

Carney acknowledges the possibility of possession in cases of *geltacht*. He notes that the person “developed great bodily agility—a result of possession by a spirit?”²⁹

FLIGHT AND FEATHERS

After she falls ill, Mis runs off into the mountains, and her hair and nails grow. She can run like the wind and levitate. She grows a *clúmh*; a coat of what may be feathers or fur.³⁰ However, the word is derived from the Latin *pluma*, so its primary meaning is feathers, and *The Dictionary of the Irish Language* has more examples of this word used as feathers than fur.³¹ Feathers are more shamanically significant because the shaman’s power of spirit flight make avian imagery a dominant feature in shamanic costuming.³²

Suibhne has a similar sort of experience, fleeing a battlefield, sprouting feathers and acquiring powers of levitation. It may of course be that the later written story of Mis borrowed this component from Suibhne.³³ Some sources also say that *gelta* wore “feather dress.”³⁴

Another possible influence is the Biblical tale of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness. In it, Daniel explains a dream that has troubled Nebuchadnezzar with the still more troubling prophecy that he will be driven into the wilderness in madness. A year later, Nebuchadnezzar hears a voice from heaven, telling him that his

28 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 132-133. (Italics mine.)

29 Carney, 1955, pp. 146-147

30 Ó Cuiv, 1952-1954, p. 328, line 19

31 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 124, headword *clúm*

32 Eliade, 1964, pp. 156-158

33 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 377

34 Sailer, 1997, p. 150

kingdom is “departed from” him and he is to live as a beast of the field. “The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: that he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagle’s feathers, and his nails like bird’s claws.”³⁵ He remained in madness until he recognised Daniel’s God as *the* God, who gives human kingdoms as He chooses.

We cannot discount the influences of Nebuchadnezzar and Suibhne’s tales, but there are initiatory elements in Mis’s story not present in the above accounts. These include a possibly ritual bath and sexual union as elements of the protagonist’s return to civilisation, as discussed below.

One must also remember, as I noted in my introduction, that many parallel behaviours and experiences arise quite naturally between unconnected shamanic cultures due to near universals in human experience and brain function. People “flying” to the Otherworld may be said to “grow feathers,” and may costume themselves in feathers. We find parallels to Mis’s tale in shamanic cultures that obviously could not have influenced the story.

One is in the initiation of Wurajeri Australian shamans. Baiami, the creator, appears in the physical form of a shaman. *Kali*, holy water, flows from his mouth over the students. The water flows into their bodies, penetrating their skin, without a drop being lost, and this causes them to “soon sprout feathers from their arms, which later grow into wings.”³⁶ Like Mis, the Wurajeri shamans take in a special fluid from a person of power. Mis drinks her father’s blood, the Wurajeri absorb *kali*, which they see as liquid quartz crystals, from the Creator himself, embodied as a shaman. In both cases, feathers sprout afterwards.

In Mis’s case, she could run like the wind, overtaking anyone or anything, and would then consume all she wanted of the flesh and blood of her kills. Mis caused the Barony of Clan Maurice to become like a desert.³⁷

35 Daniel, 5 : 31-33. King James version

36 Kalweit, 1992. pp. 22-23

37 Ó Cuiv, 1952-1954, p. 333

CÚ CHULAINN

Cú Chulainn also suffers a trauma. In his case, it relates to his self-image. He misses his cast at the enchanted birds in the tale—something that has never happened to him before. This puts him in a bad frame of mind, and he goes to sit with his back to a particular standing stone.³⁸ This sequence of events *may* imply that he is deliberately seeking Otherworld contact, though the text does not say that he is.

After sitting by the stone for a time, two fairy women appear with horsewhips, and beat him until he is nearly dead. Some of the Ulstermen want to try to wake him, but Fergus tells them not to, for he is seeing a vision.³⁹ When he awakes, he asks his friends to carry him to a sick-bed in Tête Brecc. There he remains, in what psychologists might describe as a catatonic schizophrenic or immobile state for a year; a state often described as a feature of initiatory illness.⁴⁰

Cú Chulainn's friends and wife attend him. Fergus is by the side wall; Conall at his head, Lugaid at his pillow and his wife is at his feet.⁴¹ This image of calls to my mind an image of a young Bushman being called back from a spirit journey.⁴² Deep in trance, *ntum* masters, masters of supernatural power, surrounded him, blowing on him, holding his head and calling to him.

One Bushman described the experience this way: "They take hold of your head and blow about the sides of your face. This is how you manage to be alive again. Friends, if they don't do that to you, you die."⁴³

After Cú Chulainn had been in the catatonic state for some time, one of the *Áes Síde*, Óengus, comes to speak with him. Cú Chulainn's companions ask him why he is not afraid to come into the midst of all these great warriors. He responds that Cú Chulainn is more the guarantor of Ulster in his current state than he has ever been, and he fears nothing because he has come to speak with Cú Chulainn.⁴⁴ This is physically inexplicable, because Cú Chulainn is incapacitated. However, it

38 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 178-179

39 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 179

40 Davison and Neale, 1994, pp. 393-394, 397, Eliade, 1964, p.36

41 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 179-180

42 Campbell, Joseph, 1987

43 Campbell, Joseph, 1988, pp. 108-109

44 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 180

is spiritually explicable, as I shall explain in chapter six. The point here is that his illness is in the process of increasing his power.

Lí Bán, a fairy woman who comes to seek his aid in battle against her husband's enemies, says something that affirms this. He complains he is not in a fit state to contend with men that day. Lí Bán responds that his debility will last but a little while and promises, "thou shalt be whole, and all that thou hast lost of thy strength shall be increased to thee."⁴⁵

In one version of the *Serglige*, Cú Chulainn sends word to Emer that "the women of the *Síd* have come to me, and injured me; and tell her that I am getting better and better."⁴⁶ In initiatory illness, the person is not just healed, but brought to a higher spiritual and psychological state than ever before.

This is also true of what psychologists have termed "temporary psychotic disorders." Menninger notes that some patients "have a mental illness and they get well and then they get weller! I mean they get better than they ever were...This is an extraordinary and little-realised truth."⁴⁷

ÓENGUS

Cú Chulainn's catatonic state is similar to Óengus' suffering in the *Aislinge*. Óengus sees Caer one night in his room, but when he tries to draw her to him she vanishes. The nature of this "seeing" is not made explicit. The tale doesn't mention him dreaming, it just says that he saw Caer. *Aisling* may be a vision or a dream, but the only time the world occurs is in the title.

Having seen Caer, he starts to pine for her. He does not eat, or speak to anyone about what is troubling him. Finally, Conchobar's physician Fergne discovers the problem—*sercc écmaise*, literally, the "love of an absent one."⁴⁸ He says it has been destined for Óengus to love her.

As the story moves on, the term used to describe his illness is interesting. The Dagda says: "It reflects poorly on us that we cannot deal with your stupor." (*Ní*

45 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 180-181

46 Carey, 1999a, p. 192

47 Menninger cited in Silverman, 1967, p. 63

48 Shaw, 1934, p. 46, par. 3, line 3, author's translation

ségdae dúinn ná cumcem do socht.)⁴⁹

Socht has been described by Watkins as a particular sort of stupor, a *pathological state imposed from outside the self*.⁵⁰ (Italics mine) Shamanistic cultures see initiatory illness as a form of illness imposed from outside the self by the spirits.

However, the word is not only used to describe what may be a spiritually induced crisis. It also occurs in *Scéla Mucc Meic Dathó* when Ailill, Medb, and Conchobar all want Mac Dathó's dog. His dilemma puts him into *socht*.⁵¹ Where Óengus may be described as catatonic, Mac Dathó tosses and turns and cannot sleep. The distinguishing feature of *socht* therefore seems not to be symptoms but source, that is, it is a state of distress with differing symptoms brought about by an outside force.

The distress thus imposed brings about a sense of extreme powerlessness. Mac Dathó cannot give the dog to *both* Conchobar and Ailill and Medb, but the consequences of insulting any of these parties would be terrible. Óengus does not know where the girl is or how to find her. At this stage no solution presents itself.

OVERVIEW OF THE ORDEAL STAGE OF INITIATORY ILLNESS

As noted above, shamanic cultures do not recognise everyone who has unusual experiences as a shaman—the person may simply be crazy. Early Irish tradition describes various kinds of mental incapacity. A person could be an idiot, (*mér*), a fool, (*drúth*), a lunatic, (*dásachtach*), or an unreasoning person, (*éconn*).⁵² These illnesses do not seem to have a clear spiritual component, or convey spiritual gifts to the sufferer.

By contrast, the terms used in the above cases seem to refer to a different kind of state or states. Cú Chulainn's *serglige* may mean either a “wasting sickness” or a “love sickness.” Óengus has a *serc écmaise*, love of an absent one. The usage here implies a state of longing. This may relate to the longing for union with the sacred that mystics describe. Óengus also has *socht*, a catatonic state

49 Shaw, 1934, p. 56, par. 9, lines 9-10, author's translation

50 Watkins, 1976, p. 24

51 Thurneysen, 1946, p. 3, par.3, line 1, author's translation

52 Clarke, 1975, p. 31

imposed by pressure from outside. Mis, has another kind of state that seems to arise from outside pressures: she is *geilt*.

In her case, as in Suibhne's more famous one, the state arises when she suffers trauma relating to a battle. In both cases, becoming *geilt* leads to acquiring supernatural powers and creative gifts, putting it more in the class of initiatory illness than insanity.

Mis story says, "Moreover, the flightiness of her madness gave her such an impetus that she would run like the wind, so that she would overtake anything she wanted to in the world." (*Do chuir fós foluamhain a gealtachais an seoladh siubhail sin fūithe go ritheach mar an ngaoith ionas go sáruigheadh a rith, nídh ar bith budh mhian lē...*)⁵³

One incident in Suibhne's tale seems to indicate that Mis and Suibhne are not alone in their experiences of *geilt*, indeed, it seems almost an institution. Suibhne arrives at the "ever delightful" Glen Bolcain. "It is there the madmen (*gealta*) of Ireland used to go when their year in madness was complete, that glen being ever a place of great delight for madmen."⁵⁴

Giraldus Cambrensis speaks of a place in his *Topographia Hiberniæ* that Stewart feels must be Glen Bolcáin, later known as Gleann na nGealt. It is a magical refuge for hunted beasts and birds as well as madmen.⁵⁵ The term *geilt* sometimes denoted animals.⁵⁶ Indeed, one point of *geilt* is that animal and human distinctions are blurred in this liminal state.⁵⁷

A sense of powerlessness and sometimes fear is prominent in Mis and Suibhne's tales. In general, in the stories above, Mis, Óengus and Cú Chulainn are all in situations in which they feel powerless. Óengus desperately wants to find Caer, but initially does not have the power to attain her; a point emphasised throughout the text. As one example, on the first night he sees her, "He had no idea where she had vanished from him." (*Nicon fitir cia arluid huad.*)⁵⁸

Cú Chulainn is helpless against the fairy women's assault. Mis is unable to

53 Ó Cuiv, 1952-1954, p. 328, lines 24-26, author's translation

54 O'Keefe, 1913, p. 23, par. 17

55 Stewart, 1985

56 Carey, 1984, p. 98

57 Nagy, 1982, p. 47

58 Shaw, 1934, p. 43, par. 1, lines 6-7, author's translation

deal with her father's death. Thus, all of them are in a state of powerlessness. Spiritual growth and appeals to the supernatural often occur when a person faces a situation they cannot deal with. There are no atheists on a sinking ship.

It also makes sense from a psychological perspective as some scholars have viewed the shamanic vocation as compensatory mechanism for a felt state of powerlessness or lack of social prestige. The shaman may also use their vocation as an excuse to fulfil socially unacceptable desires, including, for lack of a better term, "Dionysian" ones.⁵⁹ As we can see in Mis's case, she behaves well outside the norm, both violently and sexually, especially for a woman of the time in which her story is set.

CULTURALLY SUPPORTED SCHIZOPHRENIA?

The origin and significance of the shaman's crisis has been a source of ongoing controversy amongst anthropologists and psychologists. Psychologist Julian Silverman essentially views the shaman as a culturally supported schizophrenic.⁶⁰ He quotes Sullivan, speaking of the shaman's "schizophrenic process." He says, "What we discover in the self system of a person undergoing schizophrenic change or schizophrenic processes is...an attempt to cope with what is essentially a failure at being human—a failure at being anything one could respect as worth being."⁶¹

In this assessment, the pre-shaman, or pre-schizophrenic, is engaged in a desperate coping mechanism while in the first throes of initiatory illness. They are attempting to replace a bad self-image with a divine, archetypal one. They are trying to replace a desperate sense of unworthiness, felt as a consequence of their "failure at being human," with a sense of extreme worthiness, religious mission, divine election, etc.

Some psychologists say that it is due to this mental shift, from inadequacy to ego inflation, that the person concerned experiences an eruption of archaic and uncanny imagery.⁶² In my three examples, an experience of the supernatural

59 Spiro, 1978, pp. 219-222

60 Silverman, 1967, p. 29

61 Silverman, 1967, pp. 28-29

62 Silverman, 1967, p. 28

follows a sense of powerlessness. Of course, Óengus initial vision occurs before the sense of powerlessness sets in.

Comparative experiences can be found in later Lowland Scottish society within the religious revival movement known as the Covenanters.⁶³ At the initial stage of conversion, the Covenanter felt an intense and painful awareness of sinfulness and separation from God.⁶⁴ Visions of attack by demons and deep despair were common themes.

Covenanting families at the beginning of the 18th century considered all this quite ordinary and proper. So much so that when a servant, mourning and weeping, awaked Mr. Wodrow, the minister, and his wife, they thought it was just a normal part of the trauma that attends spiritual rebirth. The poor woman was actually pregnant because of rape.⁶⁵

Bessie Clarkson, another Covenanter, had three years of crisis during which she says she would have been burnt alive to assure her salvation.⁶⁶ A perceptual shift followed this stage of crisis, where the minister led the sufferer to perceive himself or herself as one of the saved, and have experiences of blissful union with God.⁶⁷

So, in one of my examples, Cú Chulainn might have replaced a sense of inadequacy borne of his poor marksmanship with the realisation that he is good enough to be desired by the wife of a god.

THE UNION THAT FOLLOWS THE CRISIS

Another feature common to this stage of shamanic initiatory illness is a call of some sort issued by a spirit-mate. Both Óengus and Cú Chulainn have a precipitating encounter with Otherworld women. Each of them fall into a state of illness during the time it takes them to achieve union with the spirit woman.

The *nat kadaws* or “*nat wives*” give us a Burmese example of spirit-

63 Here I am not arguing that the Covenanters were “Celtic,” or were continuing ancient shamanic practices, I am simply using them to provide another comparison, in the same way that as I used Aborigine examples earlier.

64 Yeoman, 1991, p.24

65 Yeoman, 1991, p.25

66 Yeoman, 1991, p.24

67 Yeoman, 1991, pp. 33-34

marriage. In Burma, the shaman is chosen by a spirit desiring them as mate. Refusal to marry the *nat*, as these spirits are called, can result in misfortune, illness, madness and even death.

Daw Pya, a female shaman, delayed her *nat* marriage, and took a human husband. At thirty-seven, her spirit-mate insisted she divorce her husband. During this time, she lost all her property and became ill. Her symptoms included seizures, palpitations, vomiting, and, as with Óengus, an apparent inability or unwillingness to digest solid foods. The inability to eat certain, or any, foods is a feature of initiatory illness in various cultures, among them the Zulu and the Korean.⁶⁸ Daw Pya married her *nat* and returned to full health, regaining her property.⁶⁹

If the divine marriage resolves psychological and spiritual polarities, one can see how resisting the archetypal figures that have arisen in the psyche could be met aggressively by the subconscious.⁷⁰ Time is also required to assimilate these figures.

Cú Chulainn's beating reminds me of the way in which wrathful Tibetan deities can be experienced as bliss if there is no ego resistance to their will.⁷¹ When Cú Chulainn returns later to the stone where the women first whipped him, Lí Bán, the fairy woman, emphasises that the women did not seek to do him injury, but, rather, sought his friendship.⁷² He then experiences a blissful union with Fand.

Experiences of dismemberment, or physical assault, such as the beating Cú Chulainn received, are also common to shamanic initiation.⁷³ The wife of one Siberian shaman said that while her husband was ill he had dreams: "He was beaten up several times, sometimes he was taken to strange places."⁷⁴

Many traditions also describe the catatonic state. The body may become cold and rigid, frozen in the position it was in when this state first occurred.⁷⁵

There are a number of comparisons to Mis's situation. Pripuzov describes how the potential Yakut shaman becomes frenzied, then suddenly loses

68 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 82, 85

69 Spiro, 1978, pp. 208, 210

70 Jung, 1993, p. 37

71 Campbell, Joseph, 1988, p.279

72 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 181

73 Eliade, 1964, pp. 53-60

74 Kalweit, 1988, p. 76

75 Underhill, 1990, p. 360. Underhills' translation from St. Teresa's writings in Spanish. (Italics mine.)

consciousness, withdraws to the forest, and feeds on tree bark.⁷⁶

The closest comparison I have found to Mis, however, is that of the Kwakiutl *hamatsa*, or cannibal dancer. Both Mis and the *hamatsa* become crazed and voracious, living out in the woods. Both will consume human and animal flesh. Both are said to gain supernatural powers by this experience. All the forms of onset and ordeal described in these Celtic tales occur in anthropological accounts of shamanic initiatory illness.⁷⁷

Shamanic initiation's purpose is to re-make the individual. Upon his ceremonial return to society, the *hamatsa* acts as if he has lost his memory. His tribe has to teach him to eat, dress, and walk again.⁷⁸ Mis loses her memory as well. Remembering her past life, and civilised ways of eating, drinking, and bathing are important features of her recovery.

Sometimes initiates even forget how to speak after initiations. This calls to mind an example from Welsh tradition. Warriors restored to life by Bran's magical cauldron of regeneration cannot speak after this "rebirth."⁷⁹ In this tale, however, there is no suggestion that the death is initiatory rather than actual.

A last point to note is that Mis, Cú Chulainn and Óengus are all from noble families. As I pointed out in the introduction, many cultures think that spiritual gifts like the second sight can go in family lines, and these families may be considered to be of high status because of their spiritual powers. For example, amongst the Kwakiutl the *hamatsa* must be a chief or the son of a chief.⁸⁰ All chiefs are also considered shamans in some respects.⁸¹

RECOVERY FROM INITIATORY CRISIS

MIS

In Mis's case, sexual union with Dubh Ruis, as well as his harping, restores her to sanity. The simplest Freudian reading of her recovery would say that she

76 Eliade, 1964, p. 16

77 Eliade, 1964, pp. 34-66

78 Walens, 1981, p. 161

79 Rhys, 1892, p. 256

80 Goldman, 1981, p. 112

81 Goldman, 1981, p. 4

calms down after her sexual desires are gratified. By this interpretation Dubh Ruis also restores a sense of pleasure to her life. He helps her remember that the civilised world that she has abandoned has some enjoyable aspects.

However, I think that the Freudian reading explains only part of the story. It does not explain the community's interest in Mis's recovery, or some of the possibly ritual aspects of the tale, particularly those that correspond to recognised practice in other shamanistic cultures.

Additionally, Dubh Ruis is presented as a person of unusual abilities. She does not attack him like everyone else because his music has the power to soothe her and restore her to awareness of her prior life. His music *literally* has consciousness-altering properties which suggests that its maker may have had shamanic abilities. I believe that there is good reason to see Dubh Ruis as a shamanic figure, making the whole process initiatory as well as cathartic in a psychological sense.

As I have discussed earlier, and will explore much further in later chapters, there are a several types of Irish figures that may be seen to have cultural roles that can include shamanic features. These include warriors, kings, and musicians and poets, especially the *filid*. All of these roles required specialised training which in many cases seems distinctly shamanistic. To be a sage or poet in particular required spiritual training. Kings like Cormac Mac Airt seem to have strong connections to spiritual practice as divine king, married to the goddess of the land. Musicians and music, particularly that of the harp, often have magical associations.⁸²

The possibly older poetic component of the tale describes Dubh Ruis as a warrior, sage, poet, and prince and Mac Cana has suggested that he may have been the son of a king in earlier tales.⁸³ This collection of associations, first, the associations of Dubh Ruis with a set of roles, second those roles' association with shamanic practice, provides evidence, albeit somewhat circumstantial, that Dubh Ruis may be a shamanic figure.

If Dubh Ruis is such a spiritually powerful figure, his ability to restore Mis to sanity might be that of an initiated shaman training a newly called shaman. He

82 Rees, 1961, pp. 35, 137, Ralls-McLeod, 2000

83 Markale, 1994, pp. 145-148, Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, p. 3. Mac Cana, 1955-56, pp. 376-377

would have shown her how to handle her new level of spiritual power.

Some traditions, like Tantra, associate spiritual power, specifically the “mystical heat” of shamanism, with sexual energy.⁸⁴ Thus, Dubh Ruis having intercourse with her might represent a use of this energy. Mis seems to be overloaded with power and out of control. Therefore, the sexual act might have been a channel for all her excess energy. In the text, the banter between them is also quite bawdy, and the humorous exchange serves to distract her from mourning her father.⁸⁵

Initially Dubh Ruis’ harp music attracts her. It has a soothing effect. There is, of course, a strong relationship between shamanic practice and the use of music to alter consciousness.⁸⁶

Interestingly, there is also a connection here again to the method of return of the Wurajeri medicine men I spoke of earlier. Having sprouted feathers and learnt to fly, he subsequently “sang off his wings” and returned to this world.⁸⁷

RITUALS OF RETURN

After Mis and Dubh Ruis sleep together, Dubh Ruis is hungry, so she catches a deer. Dubh Ruis kills, skins, and cooks the deer, using a cooking pit dug in the earth filled with water and hot stones. Dubh Ruis has also brought bread with him. She says that she remembers bread, and associates it with memories of her father.⁸⁸ The Kwakiutl make the *hamatsa* eat food in a civilised manner as part of his return.⁸⁹

After the food, Dubh Ruis puts her into the pit with the broth of the deer and bathes her.⁹⁰ This ritual bath seems particularly significant for several reasons. First, an immersion in fluid in the form of a bath or baptism rite is significant in many spiritual traditions. It represents a rebirth. For example, the Kwakiutl bathe the *hamatsa* as part of his return to society. They infuse the water with special

84 Eliade, 1964, p. 437

85 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 330, lines 64-70, and p. 327

86 Eliade, 1964, pp. 175, 179-180

87 Harner, 1980, p. 59

88 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 330, lines 79-80, p. 333

89 Walens, 1981, p. 161

90 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 333

herbs and heat it with stones. The Brazilian Macumba priestess, Maria-José, says that ritual bathing is “death by instalments,” washing away the initiate’s personality bit by bit until the initiate becomes a *yao*, a consort of the gods.⁹¹

Giraldus Cambrensis describes an Irish king inaugurated, in part, by a bath in the broth of a sacrificed white mare, also after a sexual encounter.⁹² There are also references to people such as Ceithern being put in a tub of the marrow of cattle to rejuvenate them.⁹³

COOKING AND COOLING

One of Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds gives another example of a people using a bath to return an individual to society. After killing his first men, Cú Chulainn arrives back at Emain Macha with their heads, as well as live swans and stags, tied to his chariot. As he comes, Conchobar says, “if measures be not taken to receive him prudently, the best of the Ulstermen must fall by his hand.”⁹⁴

Here we have the idea that the spiritual power, and its physical manifestation in Cú Chulainn’s battle prowess, must be moderated in some way. Like, Mis, Cú Chulainn is overloaded with power, and a danger to friend and foe.

All of Emain Macha’s women go out with bared bosoms. Cú Chulainn turns away in modesty. The Ulstermen then seize Cú Chulainn and dump him in a vat of cold water. The first vat bursts the second boils over, and the third is still hot, but by then, he has returned to his normal state.⁹⁵

This bears a relationship with the *hamatsa* ceremony, which I have been comparing to the story of Mis. When the *hamatsa* comes back from the wilderness crazed with a desire for human flesh, a naked singing woman holding a corpse lures him into the long house.⁹⁶ This woman must dance in a lascivious manner and must be a relative of the *hamatsa*. Since Cú Chulainn is Conchobar’s nephew, it is probable that some of the women of Ulster are relatives. So we have both the sexual component, although the young Cú Chulainn is depicted as embarrassed

91 Kalweit, 1992, p. 76

92 Markale, 1994, p. 153

93 Jackson, 1971, p. 41

94 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp.150-151

95 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 150

96 Walens, 1981, p. 145

rather than aroused, and the bathing to cool down his potentially destructive power.

Both Eliade and Dumézil have noted the comparison between this event in Cú Chulainn's career and the *hamatsa's* initiation. Eliade concluded that Cú Chulainn's *ferg*, or magical heat, means that he has gained possession of sacred power.⁹⁷ Though *ferg* simply means "anger, wrath or ferocity," its supernatural nature is quite clear from the way it's used in context.

I will discuss *ferg* in detail in chapter three, but one particular point to note is that the *Táin* repeatedly depicts *ferg* as a skill *unique* to the Ulster warriors as a group. Warriors, as described in Irish literature, all seem to have the capacity to become enraged so *ferg* must be something a bit different from normal rage. Additionally, Fergus claims that the Ulster warriors are invincible because of their *ferg*.⁹⁸ This is clearly not normal rage or ferocity, which as we all know, does not guarantee victory in anything.

Comparing Cú Chulainn to the *hamatsa*, Eliade says that like the heat of the cannibal "the wrath of the young warrior, which manifests itself in extreme heat, is a magico-religious experience; there is nothing profane or natural in it—it is the syndrome of gaining possession of a sacrality."⁹⁹ (Italics mine.)

By contrast with Cú Chulainn, Mis and the *hamatsa* have warm baths.¹⁰⁰ This seems to be about making the power useful to the community, rather than "cooling" it. Perhaps "cooking" rather than "cooling" the power. Levi-Strauss writes in detail about cooking as a metaphor for civilising.¹⁰¹ For example, various Californian tribes put pubescent girls into ovens, hollowed into the ground. "After being covered with mats and hot stones, they were conscientiously 'cooked.'"¹⁰²

...the individuals who are 'cooked' are those deeply involved in a physiological process: the new-born child, the woman who has just given birth, or the pubescent girl. The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediated through the intervention of cooking fire, whose normal function is to mediate the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and

97 Eliade, 1958a, pp. 84-87

98 O'Rahilly, 1967, pp. 116-117, 120, 4224-7, 4362-5, trans. pp. 252, 256

99 Eliade, 1958a, p. 85

100 Walens, 1981, p. 160

101 Levi-Strauss, 1970

102 Levi-Strauss, 1970, pp. 335-336

whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time cooked and socialised...¹⁰³

Besides this “cooking,” Dubh Ruis also scrubs Mis with great vigour.

He took a piece of deer hide and rubbed (violently) the joints of her body and bones all over, and he proceeded to scrape and scratch her, and to buff her smooth with the tallow of the deer and with the broth until he cleaned her for the most part, and until he brought rivulets of sweat out of her in that manner ... He was in that way in her company for a span of two months on the mountain, and at the end of that time the feathers fell from her completely, as a result of her protracted scraping and cleaning as we have described and moreover (until) her sense and memory returned...¹⁰⁴

...gabhas cuige sgraith an fhiadh gur chimil 7 gur chómhshuaith snadhmannanna a cuirp 7 a cnámha go huile, 7 gabhas agā sgríos, agā sgrabh, 7 agā sleamhuinslíobadh le geir an fhiadh 7 leis an anbhrúigh nó gur ghlan mórán í, 7 gur bhain srotháin allais aiste amhlaidh san...¹⁰⁵ Do bhí amhlaidh san iona fochair air an sliabh^b [^bsliadhbh] air feadh dhá mhíos, 7 a g[c]eann na haimsire sin do thuit an clúmh go hiomshlán di, óna síorsgríos 7 óna glana amhuil adubhramair, 7 fós go ttáinig a ciall 7 a cuimhne...

This violent scrubbing may be a way to bring Mis back to a sense of physical reality, as the *ntum* masters blow and rub on Bushmen in trance to return them to this world. In addition, shamanic initiatory crisis strips away the old self. This may manifest quite graphically in dismemberment experiences.¹⁰⁶ In Mis’s case, she is not ripped limb from limb, but the text stresses her being scrubbed. This occurs in an opening in the earth, often an entry point in the shamanic journey, and in a broth made of a sacred animal. Dubh Ruis then builds a hut for them, and they stay there for two months, until he has helped her fully restore her sense and memory.¹⁰⁷ In a sense, like many shamans, Mis is both dis-membered and re-

103 Levi-Strauss, 1970, p. 336

104 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 332, lines 134-137, author’s translation

105 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 331, lines 115-119, author’s translation

106 Eliade, 1964, pp. 108, 130

107 Harner, 1980, pp. 25-29

membered in her shamanic crisis.

In Mis's story, the community support often expressed for the shaman's initiation is not present at this stage. Rather, the earlier fact that the king did not want her killed, but rather, restored to reason and returned to them, reflects community support for the process.

CÚ CHULAINN

Cú Chulainn's healing begins when Óengus (a different one from our protagonist in the other tale) tells him Fand's love is the cause of his illness, and the cure is union with her in the Otherworld.¹⁰⁸

Both Conchobar and Lóeg, Cú Chulainn's charioteer, take on the role of expert advisor, or "senior shaman." Cú Chulainn asks Conchobar's advice. He tells Cú Chulainn to return to where the fairy women beat him. He does so and speaks to the fairy woman, Lí Bán, who seeks his aid in battle. First, he sends Lóeg, his charioteer, into the Otherworld. When Lóeg comes back with good tidings, Cú Chulainn feels strengthened in mind by what he has heard.¹⁰⁹

It should be noted here that there are some textual problems with these plot points. The heroine's name changes at one point, for example, so we are obviously dealing, as usual, with various versions or possibly different tales that are cobbled together with imperfect attention to detail. For example, after Lóeg returns, the text takes off on an apparent tangent, where Cú Chulainn delivers instructions on kingship to his foster-son, a point I will return to below. However, although the seams are visible, I believe the garment holds together as a whole. Whoever assembled the version we have obviously saw it as a whole story, rather than fragments, and I do not feel the meaning has been impaired by what I believe are errors of detail.

Emer then chides Cú Chulainn for lying in bed over the love of a woman, at which point he arises and goes to speak with Lí Bán.¹¹⁰ So here, he acts on his own behalf for the first time since the precipitating incident occurred. After some more

108 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 180-181

109 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 184

110 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 187

discussion with Lóeg, he goes into the Otherworld, and does battle for the fairy man, Labraid.

We then have a recapitulation of his boyhood return from battle, where people place Cú Chulainn in vats of water to cool his battle frenzy. Fand meets him after that.¹¹¹ They spend a month together. At the end of this time, he arranges to meet her at a yew tree later. Shamans have often used sacred trees as entry points to the Otherworld.¹¹² In later folklore, Thomas the Rhymer also goes to meet his spirit-mate, the Queen of the Fairies, at a particular tree.¹¹³

Cú Chulainn seems to be in full fettle again. In some respect, these incidents seem to reflect a greater level of mastery of the forces he encountered when he was younger and in his first battle fury. Cú Chulainn, who was then embarrassed by the nakedness of the Ulsterwomen, now happily cohabits with Fand. Of course, this is far from his first sexual experience.

The stages in the “return” process are less clear in Cú Chulainn’s case than they are in that of Mis. It is possible that the druids’ magical brew of forgetfulness created a final stage of return or readjustment to human life.¹¹⁴

There is strong community support for Cú Chulainn’s recovery, an essential feature in most shamanic initiations.¹¹⁵ Members of the community surround Cú Chulainn in the bedside scene. Emer plays a pivotal role in stirring him to action, and Lóeg acts as his intermediary with the Otherworld.

Community support is also present in Óengus’ story.

ÓENGUS

During Óengus’ illness, supernatural or supernaturally gifted beings such as Fergne, the Boann, the Dagda and Bodb gradually gather to help him. Similarly, the shaman gathers the help of tutelary spirits in his quest for power.¹¹⁶

Fergne seems to take the role of “senior shaman.” His magical diagnostic powers enable him to see what is wrong with Óengus and what should be done next

111 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 191-193

112 Eliade, 1964, p. 120

113 Murray, 1875, pp. 2-3

114 See Clarke, 1975, p. 27

115 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 88-89

116 Eliade, 1964, pp. 88-110

about it. He also sees that Óengus is destined to be with Caer.¹¹⁷

Assorted forces are called in to help, the pattern being that another helper is called as each one fails to find the girl. First Fingen diagnoses Óengus, then asks that the Boann be summoned. Boann fails to have the girl found, and so summons the Dagda. The Dagda suggests that they speak with Bodb, who finally locates her.¹¹⁸ The same sort of thing occurs when Bodb, then Medb and Ailill, and then even Ethal, the girl's father, say they don't have enough power to give the girl to Óengus.

Ó Cathasaigh has commented on the way the passive and impersonal constructions that are such a striking feature of the text mirror the fact that "Óengus' love for Caer is visited upon him."¹¹⁹ This is also emphasised by one possible translation of Óengus' name, the "One of Choice," or the "Chosen One." This would be derived from *gustus*, "choice," in turn derived from *do-go-a*, "to choose."¹²⁰

A constant feature of shamanic initiatory illness is that it comes unsought. Traditional cultures generally see shamans who actively sought the role, and were not "called" to it by initiatory illness, as less powerful.¹²¹ Additionally, passivity is a necessary stage in the mystic process, where the soul releases all resistance to divine will.

The end of this stage occurs for Óengus when, fully empowered, supported by the community, and at the auspicious and potent time of Samhain, he goes to the lake to meet Caer. When he goes to the lake, he takes the first ritual action on his own behalf in the story. At this point, the tale does not refer to him as Óengus, which means "Chosen One," but rather, as *in Macc Óc*, or "*the Young Son*."¹²²

As I shall discuss in chapter five, the fact that Óengus is given a title may mean he has gained the power to oracle the "Young Son" in a divine family headed by Boann and the Dagda. Having consummated his love with Caer, he is then ready to move onto the next stage.

117 Ó Cathasaigh, 1997, pp. 434-435

118 Jackson, 1971, p. 94

119 Ó Cathasaigh, 1997, p. 434

120 It could also be translated as "the One Force."

121 Eliade, 1964, p. 13

122 Shaw, 1934, p. 62, par. 13, line 9, author's translation. (Italics mine.)

OVERVIEW OF THE RECOVERY STAGE OF INITIATORY CRISIS

In these stories, sexual union of some sort, with a spirit-mate or with another shamanically powerful being, seems to be an essential feature of the return to sanity. In many cultures, the experience of divine union, a merging with the feared powers that bring about the crisis, is what resolves the crisis. Cú Chulainn's case is perhaps the most explicit this way: assaulted by fairy women, taking one as a lover heals him.

Later Celtic folklore has much to say about the *leannan sith*, or fairy sweetheart.¹²³ The fairy mate often comes bringing gifts of poetic and musical inspiration, even actual instruments. For example, tradition says that a fairy sweetheart gave the black chanter of Clan Chattan to a famous Macpherson piper.¹²⁴

Experiencing union with the sacred as marriage—whether that sacred is perceived as a spirit or a deity or God Itself—is to join with the sacred in one of the most intimate and emotional ways possible. As I noted earlier, the experience of spirit-marriage in pantheistic and monotheistic cultures may differ amongst individuals, but may feel equally profound in either context.

A pagan shaman married to a spirit he believes to be his personal manifestation of the goddess may have as awesome an experience as a Christian nun who feels herself married to Christ. Later mystics, like St. Gertrude the Great, of Helfta, speak of their marriage to Christ as being the most perfect and transformative union; a union in which the person is fully united with the sacred to which he or she aspires.¹²⁵

Mystics often describe the *unio mystica* in marital or sexual terms. Underhill says that it was natural that “the imagery of human love and marriage should have seemed to the mystic the best of all images of his own ‘fulfilment of life’; his soul’s surrender, first to the call, finally to the embrace of Perfect Love.”¹²⁶ Therefore, the spirit-mate often features in both the initiation and consummation of the mystic or shamanic call.

123 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 135

124 Carmichael, 1900-1972, v. 2, p. 354

125 St. Gertrude, 1985, pp.166-169

126 Underhill, . 1990, p. 136

It is important to note that these stories have various other parallels in Irish literature, where the theme of a person becoming wild and crazed occurs with some frequency. Ó Riain sees *geltacht* as an intermediate stage in a kind of initiatory process.¹²⁷ This process begins with a curse, sometimes from a priest or saint, a battle trauma, the loss of a lover or consuming contaminated food. *Geltacht* is the intermediate stage, where the afflicted person perches in trees, flies, hallucinates, is hairy, feathered, naked or in rags. Finally, restoration occurs through the intervention of a religious figure, consuming blessed food or drink, or having sex.¹²⁸

Healing is a crucial stage—the healing we see in the three tales above is the most important way to distinguish the shaman from the simple sufferer. An Inuit does not become a shaman because he is epileptic, but because he can control his epilepsy.¹²⁹

THE TRANSMISSION OF GIFTS

Each of the protagonists of these tales clearly went through a psychospiritual crisis bearing strong resemblance to shamanic initiatory illness, or “spiritual emergency” as Grof has termed it in modern, non-shamanic contexts. In a narrative sense, they each fit the pattern of shamanic initiatory illness very well as a whole and perfectly in some respects, as the diagrams to follow will show.

One question to be addressed, however, is to what extent these characters acted shamanically after their crisis? Do they fulfill a shamanistic role in these or other narratives about them, acting as intermediaries between this world and the other in some way in transmitting gifts to their community?

Mis “surpassed the lovely, many-talented women of Munster during her time.” (*7 go raibh air mhnáibh áille ilbhéasacha na Múmhan le a linn.*)¹³⁰ She certainly fulfilled the criteria of recovery from “temporary psychotic disorders” mentioned earlier, that is, she got well and then she got better than she ever was.¹³¹

127 Ó Riain, 1972, pp. 180, 204-206

128 Ó Riain, 1972, pp. 182-184

129 Eliade, 1964, p.29

130 Ó Cuív, 1952-1954, p. 332, lines 143-144, author's translation

131 Menninger cited in Silverman, 1967, p. 63

As discussed earlier, these kinds of disorders can be seen as analogues to spiritual crisis in general and shamanic initiatory illness in particular. However, there is a problem with identifying Mis as a shaman rather than a recovered sufferer. While an eminent and gifted figure in the community would benefit it, we have to look hard for evidence of shamanistic service to the community.

There are two points, both of which will be detailed in later chapters. First, Mac Cana has suggested that she was a queen figure. If true, she would clearly have been of service—particularly in a shamanistic sense. As I will argue in chapter five, I believe that these Irish queen figures may well have been not just *symbolic* of the goddess, as Mac Cana and others have asserted, but might actually have been shamanic oracles for the goddess. An oracle serves in part by simply *existing* as a bridge between the worlds, a living *axis mundi*.

Second, as I discuss in chapter six, the potential shaman's illness *itself* is seen as one of their most important services to their communities in some cultures like the Kwakiutl. Symbolising creation's emergence from chaos, the shaman's illness and recovery acts as a guarantee that the process still works. The worse off the candidate is, the greater the guarantee.

In this way, Mis's illness would have been a service in and of itself. As noted earlier, the fact that the king does not seek her death despite her behaviour stresses that her community must see her as important. This implies that she ultimately serves her community in either her being or her actions.

Cú Chulainn performs a very clear service in the story, though scholars have generally felt it was an awkward interpolation.¹³² Druids conduct a *tarbfeis* to see who the next king should be. The ritual reveals that he is a young man with "two red bands around him" by the sickbed of a man in Emain Macha. It is Lugaid Reóderg, Cú Chulainn's foster-son. Cú Chulainn instructs Lugaid on sovereignty in the text that follows, the *Briathartheosc Con Culainn*.

It has been suggested that Cú Chulainn is acting, in this case, in an oracular role, possessed by his father, the God Lugh.¹³³ I shall return to this point in chapter five. Whether or not this is the case, and whether or not the *Briathartheosc* is an

¹³² Carey, 1999, p. 8, Carey, 1994, p.

¹³³ Carey, 1999, p. 196

interpolation, it is interesting that the scribe felt that this was an appropriate place to put Cú Chulainn's instructions to his foster-son on sovereignty.

The idea that sovereignty must have supernatural support in one way or another is well attested in Irish and Welsh literature. One example is Pwyll's exchange of rule with Arawn, king of the Otherworld, in the *Mabinogion*. It is therefore significant that Cú Chulainn gives instructions in sovereignty at the height of his sickness, as opposed to, say, at a feast, or on any other occasion.¹³⁴

When we look at this incident through a shamanic lens, it becomes clear that it is far from an awkward digression. It is highly appropriate that Cú Chulainn give this kind of instruction when he is in the deep contact with the Otherworld that initiatory illness brings.

Instructing Lugaid is only one of many examples of Cú Chulainn serving his community in the tales about him. He uses supernatural power as a warrior shaman would. Cú Chulainn's father, the God Lugh, fights for him on behalf of Ulster while he rests.¹³⁵ This shows that he has a supernatural ally, as shamans do, and possibly acts as oracle to that supernatural ally.¹³⁶ He defeats the Mórrígan, and only he can heal her, thus showing he has healing powers as well.¹³⁷ In short, we see Cú Chulainn transmitting spiritual gifts both within this story and throughout his career.

Óengus transmits spiritual gifts in the most obvious and narratively tidy way at the end of the story itself. Besides his change of title, he and his mate become swans, an animal with strong supernatural associations.¹³⁸ He and Caer sing so that all around his home go into trance, thus transmitting their experience of the Otherworld to the community.¹³⁹

DIAGRAMS ILLUSTRATING THE PATTERNS OF INITIATORY ILLNESS

The following diagrams compare the protagonists' experiences in the tales above with those of shamans in other cultures. There is quite a bit of variety in

134 Carey, 1999a, p. 193

135 O'Rahilly, C., 1976, pp. 183-184

136 Eliade, 1964, pp. 88-94, Gray, 1989-1990, pp. 38-52

137 O'Rahilly, C., 1976, pp. 181-182

138 Ross, 1993, pp. 302-306

139 Jackson, 1971, p. 97

shamanic rites because of the individual nature of the spiritual experiences involved. In all these charts, most of the references are contained above, where I have covered the stages of crisis in more detail. Where that is not the case, I have included them here.

MIS AND THE HAMATSA

HAMATSA	MIS
Must be son of an important chief, or a chief himself. ¹⁴⁰	Daughter of Dáire Dóidgheal, a noble who attempted to conquer Ireland
Precipitating crisis hard to determine, in a story relating to the first <i>hamshamtse</i> s (an earlier version of the cannibal dance) it is precipitated by suicidal depression and an encounter with a spirit. ¹⁴¹	Precipitated by the death of her father in battle, when she sucked his blood from his wounds.
<i>Hamatsa</i> possessed by spirit of Man-Eater. ¹⁴²	It is not suggested in that Mis is possessed, however, there are various examples of the possessed drinking blood in other traditions, and at least one Manx example of possession by fairies producing similar symptoms.
Goes into the wilderness, gains mystical powers, power of flight suggested by <i>hamatsa</i> coming into lodge through smokehole during later ceremony. ¹⁴³	Goes into the wilderness and gains power of flight and swiftness
Gets uncontrollable craving for human flesh, which he will tear off people with his teeth. ¹⁴⁴	Kills and eats both humans and animals, rending them with her bare hands.
Community deeply involved in ceremony to return <i>hamatsa</i> to civilisation. ¹⁴⁵	Dubh Ruis brings Mis back himself. Community support indicated by the fact that the king has ordered she not be killed
Returned to society by stages, first by the singing and erotic dance of a woman relative. Display, distribution, and destruction of wealth is a feature of the ceremony. ¹⁴⁶	Mis returned by Dubh Ruis' music, the silver and gold he has laid out, and a sexual encounter with him. Dubh Ruis is not a relative.
He is bathed in special water, heated by hot stones immersed in it, with special herbs in it. ¹⁴⁷	Dubh Ruis bathes Mis in the hole he has cooked meat in, full of the broth of the stag, heated by hot stones.

140 Goldman, 1981, p. 112

141 Goldman, 1981, pp. 90-91

142 Goldman, 1981, p. 96

143 Walens, 1981, p. 142

144 Walens, 1981, p. 16

145 Walens, 1981, pp. 144-158

146 Walens, 1981, pp. 145, 148

147 Walens, 1981, p. 160

He eats a meal in a civilised manner. ¹⁴⁸	Dubh Ruis prevents her eating the deer raw, but cooks it and gives her bread.
The <i>hamatsa</i> is finally tamed when he is made to inhale smoke of burning menstrual blood. ¹⁴⁹ At this <i>hamatsa</i> is “reborn.”	No clear comparison to Mis’s story at this stage, other than blood drinking at start, which initiates rather than concludes the process.
There is a lengthy re-education process lasting from 1-3 years. ¹⁵⁰	Dubh Ruis stayed with her for two months until her reason was restored.
The <i>hamatsa</i> becomes one of the most highly regarded, powerful, and accomplished members of society. The <i>hamatsa</i> is regarded as a source of life, and fertility. ¹⁵¹	Mis becomes the most beautiful and accomplished woman of her time in Munster, and bears Dubh Ruis four children.

148 Walens, 1981, p. 161

149 Walens, 1981, p. 158

150 Goldman, 1981, p. 96

151 Walens, 1981, pp. 16, 159, 147-148

ÓENGUS AND THE BURMESE SHAMAN

BURMESE SHAMAN	ÓENGUS
The person seeing the spirit in Burma may be of any social class, but strongly tend to be lower class. They also tend to be women.	He is of an elevated social status.
He or she sees an attractive spirit in dreams.	He sees an attractive spirit woman in dreams.
The spirit may become the lover of the person they appear to, or may wait until a formal marriage ceremony is performed. ¹⁵²	She will not have intercourse with him.
People loved by <i>nats</i> typically fall ill until they marry the nat.	Óengus falls ill because of his love for the spirit.
Some people have difficulty eating or drinking when they are in the illness stage of the relationship with the <i>nat</i> . ¹⁵³	His illness includes being unable to eat.
Catatonic states are not mentioned in relation to Burmese shamans, but are mentioned in relation to shamans in other cultures like the Siberian.	His illness includes being in a catatonic state.
In most instances, a shaman identifies which <i>nat</i> is in love with the person and performs a ceremony to formalise the person's acceptance of the <i>nat's</i> proposal and minimise the amount they are "disturbed" by the <i>nat</i> .	He is initially helped by a person with supernatural powers (Fergne) to take the first steps in resolving his crisis.
The ceremony to marry the <i>nat</i> is large and expensive, involving many. ¹⁵⁴ However, the community perception of spirit marriage and shamans in general is not high, due to the fact that shamans dance wildly in public, have intercourse with their <i>nats</i> , and are thought to be promiscuous. ¹⁵⁵	A number of people assist Óengus in attaining union with Caer.

152 Spiro, 1978, p. 211

153 Spiro, 1978, p. 212

154 Spiro, 1978, p. 213

155 Spiro, 1978, p. 209

<p>When the person marries the <i>nat</i> they become full-fledged shamans and become an oracle for the <i>nat</i> they married.¹⁵⁶</p>	<p>Óengus finally attains Caer. He is referred to as “The Young Son” which may possibly indicate an oracular role and that he has gained a higher level of power. Óengus takes Caer’s swan form, but does not “become” Caer.</p>
<p>Marriage to the <i>nat</i> is a formal ceremony, in which the shaman makes promises to the <i>nat</i>.</p>	<p>There is a formal quality to Óengus’ union with Caer, where he calls to her, and formally promises that she may return to the water, etc.</p>
<p>The shaman, possessed by their <i>nat</i>, is consulted by people with problems of various sorts, and dances at the <i>nat</i> festivals, where they perform the central ritual function for hundreds of people.¹⁵⁷</p>	<p>Óengus and Caer together return to Óengus’ home and put all into trance with their song, thus transmitting the gift of their union to others.</p>

156 Spiro, 1978, pp. 212, 221

157 Spiro, 1978, p. 221

CÚ CHULAINN AND THE SIBERIAN SHAMAN

SIBERIAN SHAMAN	CÚ CHULAINN
Amongst the Buryat, shamanism often has a hereditary component. ¹⁵⁸	He is of an elevated social status.
There is no clear association of this sort of event to shamanic vocation in Siberia.	He has a blow to his sense of self-worth.
Beatings and dismemberment by spirits is a common feature of Siberian shamanism. ¹⁵⁹	He is severely beaten by two spirit women.
Buryat shamans are in a catatonic state as spirits in the Otherworld are torturing them. ¹⁶⁰	The beating puts him in a catatonic state.
Otherworld wives form an important, but not essential role to Siberian initiation.	He is told that this experience is due to an Otherworld woman being in love with him.
Buryat shamans are selected by the spirits but must also be taught by senior shamans. ¹⁶¹	He is advised by Conchobar to return to the place he was beaten.
Samoyed shamans may have elaborate Otherworld adventures and battles on the way to becoming a fully initiated shaman. ¹⁶² These may or may not include acquiring a spirit wife, although this is common.	He goes through various adventures and does battle to win Fand.
The human spouse may be jealous of the spirit, as the shaman sometimes considers that his human wife "is not fit to pour water" on her hands. ¹⁶³	Emer is jealous of Fand.
Nothing similar is typical in Siberia.	Fand departs, and after drinking a brew of forgetfulness, Cú Chulainn forgets all about her.
The shaman utilises his power for the community.	Cú Chulainn teaches his foster-son principles of sovereignty in this text. He acts for his community in numerous ways in other stories.

158 Eliade, 1964, p. 19, also see Carey, 1999

159 Kalweit, 1988, p. 76

160 Eliade, 1964, pp. 43-44

161 Eliade, 1964, p. 19

162 Eliade, 1964, pp. 38-42

163 Eliade, 1964, p. 77

CONCLUSIONS

I feel that there is a strong case for viewing the tales above as examples of shamanic initiatory illness and spirit-marriage. This is, of course, in addition to any other themes that may be present.

Additionally, Óengus fulfills a shamanic function to his community in the *Aislinge*. Mis may or may not have a clear shamanistic role, depending on whether or not she was a queen figure of the type Mac Cana suggests. Cú Chulainn, as I shall detail in later chapters, is perhaps the perfect shamanic figure of Irish literature, doing such things as chanting spells before going into combat, possessing magical objects, and using spiritual power to heal, kill and possibly, become possessed by a deity or spirit.

The relationship between the shaman and their community has puzzled some anthropologists. As noted earlier, some anthropologists see the shaman as a “culturally supported schizophrenic.”¹⁶⁴ The question is, why would a culture support a schizophrenic in the elaborate ways that they support their shamans?

SOME POSSIBLE REASONS CULTURES SUPPORT “SCHIZOPHRENIA”

We have seen, above, that some psychologists class shamans as schizophrenics, however, shamans’ use to their communities clearly distinguish them from those suffering psychosis or schizophrenia as these illnesses are clinically defined and experienced in modern western culture. The story in modern times is of course, far from straight forward—in ancient times it may have been even less so.

A few researchers, like Jaynes, feel that humanity, as a whole was schizophrenic until a few thousand years ago, in that humans regularly experienced visual and auditory hallucinations, often interpreted as divine transmissions.¹⁶⁵

However, some studies speculate that the biochemical and genetic changes that could have, in part, created schizophrenia, may also be responsible for making humanity into what it is today. In fact, the qualities schizophrenics and their families seem to possess may mean that they acted as forerunners, showing the way

¹⁶⁴ Silverman. 1967, p. 29

¹⁶⁵ See Jaynes. 1976

in art, religion, and creative thought.¹⁶⁶

In Iceland, one study carried out by Karlsson focussed on families in which schizophrenia occurred. Iceland is an especially good place for such a study because the relatively isolated population has kept excellent records. He could trace both the “insane” and creative over a span of centuries.

Horrobin notes that the thing which stands out most clearly in this study is that the families “where one or more members were schizophrenic were also the families in which almost all other psychiatric disorders were found. However, these families were also the ones that contained many of the high achieving Icelanders. Madness, badness, creativity and leadership all seemed to go together in the same family trees.”¹⁶⁷

Biochemical and genetic factors appear to play a strong role in both creativity and “madness.” This understanding may “help to provide a more positive perspective to what most people now see in almost wholly negative terms as the problem of schizophrenia.”¹⁶⁸ Scientists have increasingly noted the “mixed bag” of potentially positive and negative qualities schizophrenia and bi-polar disorders present.¹⁶⁹

An interesting point in relation to the Celtic sources is that, as the diagrams above show, shamanic, leadership and artistic abilities are held to run in families that have schizophrenic or shamanic figures in them. The tales also stress that these individuals have profoundly useful gifts.

THE PERENNIAL WISDOM

The content of shamans’ visionary experience is generally relevant to the human condition and often profound. For example, one shaman Rasmussen interviewed, Najagneq, received a message from the spirit called Sila, the upholder of the universe.

The inhabitant or soul of the universe is never seen, its voice alone is heard. All we know is that it has a gentle voice, like a woman, a voice so fine and

166 Horrobin, 1999, pp. 219-318

167 Horrobin, 1999, p. 305

168 Horrobin, 1999, p. 305. Chadwick, P.K., 1997.

169 Jaynes, 1976, pp. 426-427

gentle that even a child cannot be afraid. And this is what it says, *Sila ersinarsinivdluge*, ‘Be not afraid of the universe.’¹⁷⁰

This statement does not seem to stem from the “fear marked puzzlement” Silverman refers to as the state of the schizophrenic, rather, its opposite, a wisdom that corresponds to much of the perennial philosophy.¹⁷¹ It also contains a sense of peace that some mystics, such as Suso, St. Catherine of Sienna, and St. John of the Cross, describe attaining after the dark night of the soul.¹⁷² This peace is very different from the schizophrenic or psychotic who remains trapped by his own unmastered psychological energies.

As always, we must use the applicability of visionary experience to the life of the visionary, and to his community, to judge whether disease, intoxication alone, or spiritual inspiration is at work.

The Irish *literati* themselves express the need to draw such distinctions. One wrote that Suibhne Geilt was not important because of the tale of his madness, but because of “the stories and poems he left in Ireland after him...” that is, the product of his experience.¹⁷³

GUIDANCE

Producing a usable product from shamanic experience is not a straightforward affair, and depends in part on the social and cultural context in which the potential shaman finds himself.

The Ulaid’s support for Cú Chulainn and his experience is in marked contrast to the way mystic experience is devalued and often pathologised by modern western culture.

Joseph Campbell describes the difference between a purely psychotic or drug induced experience and mystical experience this way, “The plunges are all into the same deep inward sea; of that there can be no doubt. The symbolic figures encountered are in many instances identical...But there *is* an important difference. The difference—to put it sharply—is equivalent simply to that between a diver who

170 Campbell, Joseph, 1993, pp. 205-206

171 Silverman, 1967, pp. 28-29

172 Underhill, 1990, p. 412

173 Flower, 1949, p. 33

can swim and one who cannot.” The mystic swims in the same waters the schizophrenic drowns in.¹⁷⁴ The mystic also has the power to return to the shore.

Of course, most mystics and shamans in traditional cultures receive expert guidance on where the shore is and how to get back. Perhaps the most essential difference between the shaman and the schizophrenic is training.

174 Campbell, Joseph. 1993, p. 209

CHAPTER 2

**TRAINING, TRANCE
AND INITIATORY JOURNEYS**

*I am son of poetry,
Poetry son of scrutiny,
Scrutiny son of meditation,
Meditation son of lore,
Lore son of enquiry,
Enquiry son of investigation,
Investigation son of great knowledge,
Great knowledge son of great sense,
Great sense son of understanding,
Understanding son of wisdom,
Wisdom son of the triple gods of poetry.*

Néde. in *Imacallam in Dá Thuarad*¹

Shamanism demands control. However inflamed by Spirit a shaman is, he must sing straight and true from the heart of that fire, channelling the power of the experience to his community. Shamans typically demonstrate exquisite control of their state of consciousness, movements in deep trance, drumming, singing and ritual behaviours, one reason Eliade called them *technicians* of ecstasy.²

Control comes only with training. In the poem above, a metaphorical genealogy to establish Néde's authority as a poet, he invokes a variety of skills both intellectual and spiritual. The poem calls wisdom 'son' of the gods of poetry, implying that it is ultimately sourced in the Sacred. However, the poem describes many stages of skilled work between that original source and its manifestation in poetry and in "poetry's son," Néde.

Skilled work is also required of the shaman, if he is to harness the power of his initial violent contact with the Otherworld. After the shaman's unsought initiatory experience, he must learn to contact the spirits at will.

It has been said that a man with an uncontrolled mind is like a man on a

¹ Stokes, 1905, pp. 30-31, lines 129-139

² Eliade, 1964

mad horse—and a shaman’s horse is madder than most. I once heard a Lakota shaman advising a novice who had hysterics when she felt power, saying, “Honey, you gotta learn to ride that horse better.”

In most cultures, initiated shamans train the novice. Whether or not we are positive that Fergne and Dubh Ruis are initiated shamans, they certainly acted as guides to Óengus and Mis as initiated shamans would in a shamanic culture. Fergne in particular demonstrates clear knowledge of things he apparently has no physical way of knowing. For example, he knows the cause of Óengus’s distress without being told and the story also tells us that he can tell what ails people in a house by the chimney-smoke. Clearly, Fergne has some kind of supernatural power.

Dubh Ruis’s abilities are less overtly occult, but he does survive and benefit from his encounter with Mis—something scores of her victims failed to do. This, as noted in the last chapter, would imply some sort of power or skill. He also tamed her in part through music, and magical or quasi-magical powers are often attributed to music in Celtic tradition.³

These expert advisors are almost indispensable to the novice shaman. I say almost because, theoretically, the shaman can get all the information they need directly from the spirits.

In the Celtic context, it is evident that some shamanic training comes from the Otherworld as well. For example, the Druid Mog Roith is said to have trained for seven centuries with the Druidess Ban Buannan in Síð Cáirn Breactanan.⁴

While much training can come from the Otherworld, there is no need for each shaman to reinvent the wheel. Shamans approach spirit within their culture’s cosmological matrix.

Senior shamans pass on a huge body of traditional lore and techniques, including information on cosmology, what spirits or deities to approach for particular problems or questions and techniques of healing, spiritual combat and spirit travel.

I will further explore the evidence for specific shamanic skills and a shamanistic cosmology in chapters three and six. Here, I focus on methods of

³ For numerous examples see Ralls-Macleod, 2000

⁴ Sjoestedt, 1979, pp. 110-113. Matthews, 1994, p. 191

invoking alternate states of consciousness, making the spirit journey in those states, and evidence for other kinds of training.

THE NATURE OF SHAMANIC TRAINING

There is no pure “ur-shamanism,” wholly based on an individual shaman’s revelations.⁵ All shamanic traditions have cosmologies, codes of behaviour, and so on. As I said in my introduction, there is a continuum between shamans, focussed more on direct revelation and priests, focussed more on fulfilling social and religious functions.⁶ The further we go along the continuum from shaman to priest, the more codified training generally becomes.

Pagan Celtic tradition, as reflected in classical sources, archaeology and possible survivals in the literature was apparently somewhere along this continuum, but it is hard to say how far. We hear of plenty of direct shamanistic experience of the Sacred, and we have information that Druidic training took twenty-one years. Warrior training appears to include shamanic components, a point to which I will return in the next chapter since it relates to the shamanic warrior function. Unfortunately, we do not have a lot of information about Druidic training. For more detail on shamanistic training in Celtic culture, we need to look to those who inherited some of the Druids role, the *filid*.

POETIC TRAINING AS SHAMANIC TRAINING

The relationship between shamanism and poetry, particularly epic poetry, is well known and I will discuss it further in the next chapter.⁷ Bards and *filid* such as Taliesin, Ferchertne, Néde, Finn and Amergin, continually stress their skill. To emphasise mastery means that there is something to be mastered. Everyone could not do what they did. They certainly claimed mastery of the poetic metres and art as a part of their power.

For example, in the *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* or *Colloquy of the Two Sages*, Néde and Ferchertne claim what seem to be concrete poetic skills, such as

⁵ Klaniczay, 1990, p. 149

⁶ Walsh, 1990, pp. 15-16. Gilberg, 1984. Campbell, Joseph, 1991c, pp. 229-240

⁷ Van Deusen, 1997, Glosecki, 1989

making “polished tales, the delight of kings...arranging words in ranks, celebrating art...structure of mind, art of small poems, clear arrangement of words...”

Ferchertne speaks of possessing, “fury of inspiration,” (*barand immais*). The word *barann* is equated with *ferg*, supernatural heat and power, as discussed below.⁸ They say their tasks include going among the Fomoiré, among streams of knowledge and “into death’s hills, where I may find great honour.” They variously say that they come from the elf-mound of Nechtan’s wife, the nine hazels of poetic wisdom and the land “where there is no falsehood.” This last is the way Manannán describes the Otherworld to Cormac.⁹ In short, their mastery is not wholly of this world. Terms for poetic inspiration such as the Old Irish *dán* and *imbas* and the Welsh *awen*, create the sense that poetry does not originate wholly in the brains of poets but comes, at least in part, from a spiritual source.

Cormac’s Glossary mentions three skills that poets had to learn in ancient times. They are *teinm laida*, *díchetal di chennaib* and *imbas forosna*. I will return to these in the next chapter, because they relate to the shamanic function of revealing. For now, I will simply state that these techniques combine skills of extemporaneous recitation and poetic composition with shamanistic techniques of vision. The name *fili* itself, as I have noted, derives from a root related to vision, and could be interpreted as originally meaning “*seer* or *diviner*...and in earlier documents generally implies occult power or knowledge.”¹⁰ Obviously, if the *filid* say they go into the elf-mound of Nechtan’s wife, or to the hazels of wisdom, that which they see is the Otherworld.

Eliade calls the journey to the Otherworld the defining feature of shamanism.¹¹ This journey is also where the shaman or shamanic practitioner continues their training. Through the journey, the shaman learns directly from the spirits. Celtic and other sources make it clear that this mode of learning is possible.

When one folklore collector asked Donald Sinclair where he got his information from, this is how he described his response:

“Oh well,” says I, “seeing that you ask about it I’ll tell you that. In every

8 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, pp. 24-25, 55

9 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 503

10 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 306, headword *fili*

11 Eliade, 1964, p. 5

machaire,” says I, “there’s knolls, but there is a machaire over there and there’s a big, big knoll, and they call it ‘The Fairies Knoll.’ Well, I happened to be six months in that knoll along with the fairies. That’s where I got all my information.”¹²

Before the shaman can undertake this journey, however, he must master alternate states of consciousness. As I noted in the introduction, I prefer the term *alternate* to altered states of consciousness because I do not believe that any one state can really be considered standard.

TRANCE

As I mentioned in the introduction, a survey of 488 cultures found that ninety percent utilised alternate states of consciousness to facilitate people’s personal experience of the Sacred.¹³ The ability to enter the alternate state of trance is the prerequisite for any kind of shamanic work. Trance is required to journey in the Otherworld, prophesy, oracle, heal or hex.

Mystical experiences arise from trance. The word mystical comes from the Greek *muestes*, meaning someone initiated into mystic rites. It relates to words for keeping silent, and goes back to the Indo-European root word, **mu-*, which imitates inarticulate sounds. Unsurprisingly, one quality of mystical experience is the difficulty of expressing or studying it in concrete terms.¹⁴ It “defies expression,” and “no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.”¹⁵

Eliade distinguishes broadly between two kinds of alternate states of consciousness, shamanic *exstasis* and Yogic or Buddhist *enstasis*.¹⁶ *Enstasis* draws awareness within the self, cutting off external stimuli, until the practitioner loses awareness of self or other. Everything unites into a single, formless one. By contrast, *exstasis* expands the boundaries of self to the point where all equally appears to be one, but with many aspects. I will discuss some of this idea’s implications in chapter six.

12 School of Scottish Studies. 1975a. p. 47

13 Harner, 1980. Price-Williams and Hughes, June 1994. Bourguignon, E., 1973. See also Weil, 1972. Siegel, 1989

14 Lukoff, 1985, p. 158

15 James, 1961, p. 300

16 Eliade, 1958a, p. 77

Exstasis means “out of state.” The shaman goes out of his day to day state of consciousness. He connects with spirits and deities invisible to his physical sight.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF IN TRANCE

In a way, trance is distinguished more by what it is not than what it is. Freed from physicality, emotions or history the shaman can clearly receive spirits’ messages. The experience of the self freed of psychological limitations is what many mystics have considered the true self.

Trance is therefore a state that puts the practitioner in contact not only with the Otherworld, but also with the most free and sacred parts of his essential nature. In 1992 a scholar studying Yogis said that he was “convinced that yogis use meditation...to psychologically escape problems in life, as well as emotional distress and anxiety present in their primary personality...They thus escape from the suffering of their ordinary lives.”¹⁷ Trance has this healing and pain relieving effect in part because it draws the practitioner’s attention away from sensation, psychology and history.

This is exactly how the state of *súan* seems to function in the stories—as a healing state of alternate consciousness that transcends emotional polarities.

TRANCE, SLEEP AND DREAM

The story goes that long ago, the Goddess Boann, deity of the river Boyne, gave birth to three sons. Boann’s name contains elements that relate to cows and to whiteness, so possibly means something like “She of the White Cows.” She seems to represent the Mother Goddess in a benevolent, nurturing form. Her sons were named *Gentraige*, *Goltraige* and *Súantraige*, the same names as the “three strains” of music a skilled harper had to be able to play, giving one the sense that all three strains were seen as emanating from the divine.¹⁸

The word *súan* is most often translated as “sleep.” While it can be used this

17 Castillo. 1991, p. 4, Price-Williams and Hughes, 1994, p. 5

18 Emily Lyle has explored some of the other cosmological implications of this, discussing the way that these three may symbolise all of time, each associated with one of the three ancient Indo-European divisions of the year into spring, summer and winter. See Lyle. 1990, 1991

way, *cotlud* or *con-tuili* are more generally used for normal sleep, although there are a couple of occasions, referred to below, where the sleep described by these words may be of a more supernatural character.¹⁹ By contrast I believe that *súan*'s associations signify that its meaning is closer to “trance” than sleep in most cases.²⁰

The first and most crucially important point to note in relation to this argument is that many cultures blur the linguistic and cognitive lines between normal physical sleep, divinely inspired trance, and even death. Even in a modern English context, a tombstone may say “she went to sleep in Jesus.”

In Hebrew the word *rdm* may be interpreted as a deep sleep, a sleep sent by God that is not of a visionary character, a “revelatory sleep” in which dreams are sent by God, or finally it may be a trance state in which visions can occur while the individual is fully awake.²¹

Because words for sleep and dream often overlap in meaning with words for trance, one has to look at the context and content of the experience as well as its effect to discover which state is probably meant. For example, does a person go into a state of *súan* (or *cotlud* or *con-tuili*) in a context that is likely to induce—or at least allow—sleep? Does the person emerge from the state simply refreshed, as one would from sleep, or are there other effects? Crucially, does the person learn something they have no physical means of knowing while in this state, indicating that the information has a supernatural origin? What compounds are created with these words? Are the connotations of the compounds supernatural or more about rest? I will look at all these points below.

DREAM INCUBATION

In addition to the difficulty we may have in distinguishing sleep states from trance states in the literature, dreams and “waking dreams” present another layer of complexity. Again in English, we may say to someone, “you’re dreaming,” meaning that they are imagining something, usually overly optimistically, while fully awake.

19 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 154. headword *cotlud*

20 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 565. headword *súan*

21 McAlpine, Thomas H., 1987, pp. 57-59, 68

While some dreams are obviously nonsensical rehashes of the day's events and anxieties, most people are aware that they sometimes have what Jung called a "big dream," one that offers some sort of deeper insight into their life situations.²²

Many cultures practice dream incubation to cultivate this kind of dream, which they interpret as receiving messages from the spirits. For example, the Siberian Vasyugan seek dream visions, and foretell the future based on dreams.²³ In the Celtic context, the layout of a Romano-British temple site at Lydney, Gloucestershire has suggested that it may have incorporated dream incubation chambers like those found at the Asklepion at Epidaurus.²⁴ In later stories, like the Welsh *Dream of Rhonabwy*, the hero has a revelatory dream experience, in that case, of Arthur.²⁵

While all dreams are not "big dreams" or shamanistic dreams, the quality and content of many dreams in Celtic literature seem to have shamanistic features. First, the dream may be experienced as "real" in some way. The dream may also reveal information that the dreamer had know physical way of knowing. For example, when Óengus sees Caer, either in a dream or waking vision, he does not know that she actually exists. However, he and others act on the premise that the girl in the vision is real—a shamanistic way of viewing a vision.

Trance is a state of spiritual awareness in which the shaman can reach beyond human limitations, even to the point of transcending severe physical or emotional pain. Many examples can be given. One is the Hindu *Thaipusam* festival in Malaysia. There, devotees enter trance and conduct extreme ascetic practices. Some wear huge steel 'armatures' fixed into their flesh, others hang objects from their skin with hooks—all with little or no apparent pain or bleeding.²⁶ Lab experiments on yogis and other subjects have provided more controlled studies of this trance ability.²⁷ People's ability to transcend pain in trance makes the trinity of joy, sorrow and trance in the literature particularly interesting.

One example of *súantraige* relieving pain every bit as extreme as that of the

22 Jung, 1960, vol. 3, pp. 525,528,529

23 Wasson, 1968, p. 282

24 Wheeler, 1932

25 Guest, 1906, p. 137

26 Ward, 1984

27 Green and Green, 1977, pp. 197-218, 225-243

devotees at *Thaipusam* occurs in the *Accalam na Senorach*. Bodb Derg, king of the *Áes Síde* of Munster, gives a talented musician to king Lugaid's three sons.

“A gift from me to them,” said Bodb Derg, “a good minstrel that I have, Fer-tuinne mac Trogain is his name, and though saws were being plied where there were women in the sharpest pains of childbirth, and brave men that were wounded early in the day, nevertheless would such [people] sleep to the fitful melody that he makes.”²⁸

From the criteria discussed above, we can clearly see that this “sleep” cannot be the ordinary state we fall into each night. Women in “the sharpest pains of childbirth” with saws being plied in their proximity would not be likely and probably not even able, to fall into a normal sleep. This passage therefore must refer to some sort of trance state.

In the trance state the shamanic practitioner can experience joy without clinging and loss without despair. Life's polarities find their fulcrum in trance. Its balancing function diminishes trauma's impact, physically, mentally and spiritually. In fact, trance or spiritual awareness can be seen as a state that *holds* all polarities of experience. With practice, it becomes the ground and all experiences become transitory figures upon it, giving spiritual and psychological stability.

One indication that *súan* is trance is that it often has this kind of healing, psychologically stabilising function in the stories. Where the *Acallam*, above, yielded a fairly extreme example of trance's ability to relieve physical pain, *Echtrae Cormaic* gives an example of trance relieving emotional pain.

In the story, Cormac had promised to give a stranger whatever he wanted in exchange for a magical branch capable of playing *súantraige*. When the stranger took his son and daughter as part payment, the king used *súantraige* to induce *súan* and heal his court of the despair caused by the losses of his children.²⁹ While a good sleep can certainly help matters, the degree of the court's improvement *must* indicate that more was going on.

Lyle's work on the three strains of music and the seasons provides further

28 O'Grady, 1892, vol. 2, p. 191

29 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 503-504

evidence that *súan* has a supernatural healing function that ordinary sleep does not—certainly not to the same degree.³⁰

She takes a traditional ballad she terms the *Ballad of King Orpheus* as her starting point. It appears in various versions from the 16th to the 19th centuries, and has been published by Child, Stewart and Shuldham-Shaw.³¹ I recognise that as a text written in English, it might be seen as outside the purview of Celtic studies. However, despite this, elements within the ballad clearly hearken back to older Celtic traditions of the three strains of music, therefore I believe it has bearing on my investigation.

In the 19th century version of the ballad, Orpheus plays his pipes to the fairy people and as his reward, requests the return of his wife and queen, the Scottish Eurydice. He can play the traditional three strains, here described in English.

First he played the notes of noy, [grief]
 Then he played the notes of joy,
 And then he played the gaber reel,
 That might a made a sick heart heal.³²

The 16th century version has him play this healing music later in the story to comfort his host (the burgess).

He begouithe to weip with this
 That was the worthiest, I wis.
 Than Orphus took his hairp with this
 For to comfort the burgess
 And sa he did into that stound,
 The hairp it gaif sick ane sound.³³

In this version, the king plays a harp, the instrument with which the three strains of music are most often associated. Lyle goes on to discuss the association

30 Lyle, 1990, pp. 26-34

31 Lyle, 1990, p. 26, Child, 1882-1898, p. 19, Shuldham-Shaw, 1976, Stewart, 1973

32 Lyle, 1990, p. 27, Shuldham-Shaw, 1976. This passage is from the version recorded at Gloup in Orkney in 1865, and published by Shuldham-Shaw in 1976. The meaning of *gaber* is unknown. *Gabor* in Old Irish means light or bright, like the sun but determining if there is a relationship would require more research. (Royal Irish Academy, 1990, headword *3gabor*, p. 351)

33 Stewart, 1976, p. 6, lines 81-86

of healing music with sleep.

...the type of music which took its name from the power to send to sleep was also a healing music which brought relief from suffering by means of sleep, as in the description of the effect of the music emitted by the three gold apples on the fairy branch in *The Adventure of Cormac Mac Airt*: ‘at that melody the men of the world would sleep, and neither sorrow nor affliction would oppress the people who hearkened to that melody.’³⁴

She goes on to argue that the three strains may be associated the “three functions” Dumézil proposed as a model of the social order in Indo-European cultures. These functions are first, the sacred, domain of priests and priest kings, second, physical force, the domain of warriors, and third, prosperity/fertility, the domain of farmers and commoners.³⁵

It is impossible to *precis* her fascinating and complex argument here, so for greater detail I must refer the reader to *Archaic Cosmos*. However, she reached the conclusion that *goltraige* was best associated with the function of the farmers and commoners, *gentraige* was best associated with the exuberance and vigour of the warriors, and finally *súantraige*, which she terms “the music of healing” is best associated with the priests and priest kings and the function of the sacred.³⁶

The sacred function of *súan*, induced through music, seems quite clear in the *Aislinge*. As you will recall, when Óengus attains his full power and transforms into a swan with Caer, they put everyone in *súan* for three days and nights by the beauty of their singing (...*chechnatar cocetal ciuil co corastar inna dóini i súan tri láa ocus treora n’aidche*).³⁷ This comes as the culmination of Óengus’s epic quest and initiatory illness, as discussed in chapter one. The singers are no ordinary singers; therefore, one may suppose that the “sleep” is no ordinary state.

Additionally, from a narrative point of view, the only interpretation that makes sense is that everyone who hears their song enters an ecstatic alternate state of consciousness, sharing their bliss. This enables Óengus to fulfill the classic

34 Lyle, 1990, pp. 27-28, quoting *Echtra Cormaic Maic Airt* at the end from Hull, 1949, p. 877

35 Lyle, 1990, pp. 7, 33. For detail on Dumézil’s structure, see Dumézil, 1958

36 Lyle, 1990, p. 33

37 Jackson, 1971, p. 97. Shaw, 1934, p. 62

shamanic function of transmitting his experience and power to his community immediately after his initiatory crisis is completed. After all, to conclude the story by saying “at the end of Óengus’s great adventure, he and Caer sang a lullaby and everyone had a good sleep” would be anti-climactic to say the least.

Trance inducing music is also used to exert magical control in less friendly circumstances. In the *Cath Maige Tuired*, Lug, the Dagda and Ogma enter the Fomoiré camp to reclaim the Dagda’s harp and harper. When the Dagda calls his harp from the wall, it kills nine men on its way to his hand.

He then plays the three strains, beginning with *goltraige*, moving to *gentraige* and finally *súantraige*, so that they all slept. (*Sephainn súantraigi dóib contuilset ant slúagh*.)³⁸ The three then escape the Fomoiré unharmed although the Fomoiré wanted to kill them. The Fomoiré have just lost nine men, they have three of the greatest of the Tuatha Dé in their midst, and, quite naturally, they want to kill them. However the *súantraige* renders them helpless, again in a context where normal sleep is unlikely if not impossible.

Forbuis Droma Damhgaire gives us another example of *súan* used in warfare. At this point in the story, Mog Roith, fighting on Munster’s behalf against king Cormac, has put a spell (*breachta*) on Cormac’s troops so that they are incapacitated.³⁹

This last word is used in *Forbuis Droma Damhgaire* in the context of the battle between Cormac’s druids and the Munster druid Mog Roith when Cormac brings his army to Munster to fight against king Fiachra. I will discuss the clear shamanistic elements of this battle in chapter three. In this passage, Cormac is displeased with his druids, as they are getting the worst of it, and asks them what they are going to do about it. I give the excerpt in Irish, then in Sjoestedt’s French translation, and finally in English.

Ro ghabh omhon mor Cormac annsin, ar ba doigh lais gur ba turbrodh dia sloghadh 7 na toirsitis a muintir chuigi. Ocus do ghabh oc eiliugad na ndruidh batar aigi fein 7 atbert friu: “Caidhe ba tarbha-si damh-sa,” ar se,

38 Gray, 1983, pp. 70-71, line 809. Here the word used for the “sleep” induced by *súantraige* is *con-tuili*, rather than *súan*. However I think the context still makes it clear that this is a trance state.

39 Sjoestedt, 1926, pp. 36-37

“madh ro marbad mo muindter cin fis cin forcloisin damh 7 gin fortacht uaibhi-si dhoibh?” – “Ní ramarbhu iat idir,” ol siat, “acht suainbrect seachtmaine dorat in drai forro 7 doberam ne doridisiu ar culai.” Is ann-sin docuatar-san i forbha a bhfesa 7 an-eolusa 7 ro cursat a suainbriect dona sluagaibh 7 do roachtsad chuca i bhforba na seachtmaine.

Cormac fut alors frappé de terreur, car il pensait que quelque obstacle retenait son armée, et qu'elle ne lui reviendrait plus jamais. Et il se prit à accuser les druides qui étaient à son service, distant : “A quoi me servez-vous, si l'on met à mort mes gens sans que j'en sois informé ni prévenu sans que j'en sois informé ni prévenu sans que vous veniez à leur secours?” “Ils ne sont pas morts du tout,” dirent ils, “mais le druide les ensorcelés depuis une semaine, et nous les ramènerons chez eux.” Ils se recueillirent alors et rassemblèrent toute leur science et tout leur art et envoyèrent un charme vers les armées, qui revinrent vers eux au bout de la semaine.⁴⁰

Cormac was then stricken down with fear, because he thought that some obstacle was holding his army back, and that it would never return to him. And he started to accuse the druids that were in his service, saying, “What are you to me, if my people are being put to death without my being informed about it, or warned without your going to their help?” “They are not dead at all,” they said but the druid has bewitched them for a week, and we will bring them back home.” They prepared themselves and brought together all their science and their art and sent a charm towards the armies, who came back to them at the end of the week.⁴¹

Here the word *suainbrect* is used in the context of what I will show in chapter three is likely a shamanic battle. It is clearly not a normal sleep, and Sjoestedt herself translated the term not even as “place a sleep spell upon,” but as *ensorcelés*, “bewitched.”

In what I believe is one of the most persuasive examples, an excerpt from the *Passions and Homilies from the Leabhar Breac* appears to use *cotlud* and *súan*

40 Sjoestedt, 1926, pp. 36-37, par. 33

41 Thanks to Aude Le Bourgne for translating Sjoestedt's French to show how she read this passage.

very deliberately to refer to two different states within the same sentence.

Ro-fiugrad tra in esergi-sin Crist o marbaib is-in esergi atracht ar sen-athair .i. Adam as a chotlud iar tepe Eua as a thoeb, i fhiguir Crist atracht ó marbaib, iar tepe na noem eclaisi as a thoeb i suan chrochi

That resurrection of Christ from the dead was pre-figured in the resurrection of our fore-father Adam from his *sleep*, after Eve had been cut out of his side—a type of Christ who rose from the dead after the holy church had been cut out of his side in the *sleep* of the cross.⁴²

Atkinson translates two different words as sleep here. *Cotlud* is the “sleep” of Adam when God makes Eve from his rib. This is a supernatural sleep in that it is induced by God for a supernatural purpose, however, its effect is described as a general anaesthetic so that God can create Eve. It is God who is engaged in the supernatural activity—Adam, and then Eve, are the *objects* of that activity.

Súan is the “sleep” of Christ upon the cross. In this case, Christ is engaged in the supernatural activity of redeeming all of humanity through the process of His sacrifice. His resurrection from the dead is imminent. This is obviously *not* a normal sleep. One would be hard pressed to think of a more supernaturally charged event.

The scribe clearly distinguishes between Adam’s *cotlud* and Christ’s *súan*. The former is an anaesthetic sleep—induced by God, yes, but where the sleeper is not the active party in the supernatural creative process described. Adam is “done to,” he is not the “doer.” The latter, I would argue, is the “sleep” of trance squared.

Where a human shaman, as “wounded healer,” enters the “death” of trance and sacrifices for his people in order to creatively utilise supernatural power on their behalf, Christ, as “dying and resurrected God” enters the trance / actual death of the cross and sacrifices for all people in order to creatively use supernatural power on behalf of the entire world.⁴³ The scribe knows the difference and uses the most appropriate word in each case.

42 Atkinson, 1887. Irish p. 136. translation pp. 384-385. (Italics mine.)

43 As I shall discuss in detail in chapter six, shamanic cultures often see trance as a kind of death, and the shaman’s sacrificial role is central to maintaining cosmic order.

As I shall discuss in detail in chapter six, shamanic cultures often see trance as a kind of death, and the shaman's sacrificial role is central to maintaining cosmic order.

I have already shown the likely shamanic nature of Cú Chulainn's illness in the *Serglige*.⁴⁴ The word *súan* appears a number of times in relation to his trance. For example, in the phrase, "the warrior's torpor is great, lying in the trance of wasting sickness" (*mór espa do láech / laigi fri súan serglige*).⁴⁵ The *serglige* is clearly not a normal illness, but is of supernatural origin, so the way in which the words are paired here seems to make it clear that *súan* is not a normal sleep. The word's meaning is made still clearer in the phrase, "since fairy sleep had overtaken him." (*o ro gab súan síthbroga*).⁴⁶

Finally, Ralls-MacLeod states that *súan* is clearly supernatural in both origin and effect.

Music is often said to cause the listener(s) to 'fall asleep,' that is to enter an altered state of consciousness, often for a period of days. The literature of early medieval Ireland includes numerous references to the power of music to put the listener into a trance-like sleep state, which is portrayed as a supernatural effect. There is a distinct impression that the listener cannot help himself, in spite of his efforts to remain in a state of normal, waking consciousness.⁴⁷

One example she uses is the *Aislinge*. She makes the point that when Caer first appears to Óengus, she plays to him on a timpan until "he falls asleep."

Far from this being a simple lullaby or merely a relaxing tune...Óengus later becomes obsessively 'haunted' by this dream. It keeps repeating itself, with its powerful musical effects, again putting him in a trance-like sleep state.⁴⁸

This music, along with Caer's presence, is what begins Óengus's initiatory illness. Like the sound of the voice that presages the violent alternate state of consciousness that is initiatory illness for Tuvan shamans, *súantraige* can emanate

44 See also Carey, 1999a

45 Dillon, 1953a, p. 11, par. 28

46 Dillon, 1953a, p. 13, line 370

47 Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, pp. 81-82

48 Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, p. 82

from the Otherworld, and be the medium through which communication with the Otherworld can occur in the trance state of *súan*.⁴⁹

OTHER TERMS

While *súan* seems to be the primary term for a general trance state, many of the other trance terms relate to specific shamanistic functions, and so shall appear in the next chapter. For example, in the last chapter, we encountered the term *ferg* to describe Cú Chulainn warrior's ardour. Since this relates to the shamanistic warrior function of killing, I will discuss it further there, along with terms such as *ríastrad*.

In the last chapter, I discussed Óengus' *socht* as a catatonic state, imposed from outside the self, in Óengus' case as part of a spiritual process.⁵⁰ Suibhne and Mis are both *geilt*, a state bound up in the tales with spiritual and creative gifts such as the ability to fly.⁵¹

Aí is a state of inspiration.⁵² *Aislinge*, seems to refer to the vision itself, rather than the state in which it is attained.⁵³ Perhaps these two words relate. Though I do not want to go too far in the direction of the sometimes-fanciful etymologies of people like Cormac, it is tempting to see *aislinge* as a compound. Perhaps it could mean something like an inspired "leap" (*lingid*), with spirit journey connotations.⁵⁴

Both Óengus and Cú Chulainn suffer from *serc*—love, an alternate state of consciousness most people experience. However the way the word is used, from Óengus' *sercc écmaise*, literally, the "love of an absent one," to Cú Chulainn's *serglige*, love sickness or wasting sickness, seems to indicate this may not be ordinary love, but spiritual longing.⁵⁵ Longing is bound up with at least one spiritual term in Old Irish. *Dúthracht* means both devotional practices and longing.⁵⁶ To make prayers is to enact one's longing for the sacred.

49 Quoted in Van Deusen, 1997, p. 9

50 Watkins, 1976, p. 24

51 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 357, headword: *geilt*

52 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 11, headword *ái*

53 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 31, headword *aislinge*

54 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 31, headword *lingid*

55 Shaw, 1934, p. 46, par. 3, line 3, author's translation

56 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 257, headword: *dúthracht*

Awen is spiritual inspiration, and seems to be the dominant Welsh word associated with trance practices. This is made clear in many sources, particularly in Giraldus Cambrensis' account of the twelfth century *Awenyddion*, discussed in chapter six.⁵⁷ Through their *awen* they speak in an ecstatic state, probably as oracles for spirits, according to Cambrensis.

MODES OF ATTAINING ALTERNATE STATES

Trance is to some extent a physical phenomenon. Increasing research attention is being given to its physical causes and effects. For example, research on brain wave activity in Yogis experiencing *samadhi* showed increased amplitude of alpha waves.⁵⁸ Similar results were observed in studies of Zen meditators, with additional rhythmic beta waves. Transcendental meditators showed theta periods and some beta waves in advanced subjects. From all this we can see that while alternate states can produce physiological changes, they do not all produce the same changes, and therefore will not all result in the exact same sort of state, as mentioned above.

It is well known that vigorous physical activity promotes endorphin release, creating an euphoric, anaesthetised state. Shamanic rites often feature vigorous dance, drumming and the like, so there is no reason why they should not provoke the same sort of release.⁵⁹ Because of all the indications that trance produces chemical changes in the brain, an obvious approach to entering trance is through chemistry.

CONSCIOUSNESS ALTERING SUBSTANCES

The most obvious and indisputable consciousness altering substance the Celts made use of is alcohol. The lavish nature of feasting and drinking goods in burials like that of the Vix princess from around 450 BC, show the importance Celts placed on intoxicating beverages. The krater found in the Vix burial is the finest surviving example of classical Greek metalwork anywhere, including

⁵⁷ Tolstoy, 1985, p. 140

⁵⁸ Anand, Chhina and Singh 1961

⁵⁹ See Prince, 1982, pp. 412-414, Lex, 1976

Greece.

Arnold believes that the symbolic meaning of alcohol in Iron Age Europe can be partly reconstructed. Many cultures view alcoholic drinks as a way of communing with the Otherworld. Various shamanic cultures like the Siberian use alcohol shamanistically.⁶⁰ Including alcoholic drinks in chieftain's burials may imply the leader's right to rule in Otherworld.

She goes on to say that the "symbolic value of alcohol over food is underlined by the fact that while alcohol was interred in the Hochdorf grave, no traces of meat or other food were recovered."⁶¹ Edible grave goods are not simply symbols of abundance, or adequate nourishment. In Hochdorf, they are consumables that alter consciousness. Burials such as Hochdorf demonstrate the belief in an afterlife, where the person will live again. The substance that vivifies is that which affords the person access to alternate states of consciousness and so, the Otherworld. That which vivifies in life is thought to do so in death.

In later literature, the right to rule is bound up with the distribution of alcoholic beverages, such as the well known *derg flaith*, red ale or red sovereignty. *Báile in Scáil* and *Báile Chuinn Chétchathach* both feature this theme.⁶² Drinking equipment forms part of the king's, chief's, or, most prominently, queen's authority granting paraphernalia, implying that part of their authority derives from consciousness altering abilities.⁶³

Of course, distributing rich goods of any kind including food or adornment or livestock to followers would support the ruler's authority. Additionally, the alternate state alcohol induces does not automatically, or even frequently, lead to an "illuminating" effect. Other drugs are more persistently associated with consistent experiences of a religious or spiritual nature.

ENTHEOGENS

Various plants such as mushrooms, peyote, vines, herbs and seeds, have a long history of shamanic use. Terrence McKenna termed them "entheogens"

60 Eliade, 1964, p. 401

61 Arnold, February, 2001, p. 19

62 See Carey, 1996

63 Arnold, February, 2001, p. 19

because they can be used to cultivate a personal experience of the Sacred.⁶⁴ The nature of the experience, however, is determined not just by the substance, but also by the setting.

Eliade argued that the use of psychotropics implied degeneration in shamanic practice.⁶⁵ Michael Harner leans in this direction, theorising that the use of psychotropic “flying ointments” among European witches originated in the time of persecution, when drums would have attracted the authorities.⁶⁶ Of course, the fact that these ointments were applied to a person’s naked body, and their potent effects might leave them lying about in a stupor for a couple of days, did nothing for the reputation of witchcraft.⁶⁷

I am well aware that many modern discussions of witchcraft place it as a purely socio-political issue, largely based around the persecution of women and without any basis in the beliefs of the women thus persecuted. A full discussion of the arguments on either side is outside the scope of this work, but, as I will discuss in chapter five, I think there is good reason to believe that some witchcraft accounts reflect genuine continuities of shamanic practice.⁶⁸

The fact that the hallucinogenic mushroom, *amanita muscaria*, plays a central role in Siberian shamanic practice, cosmology and mythology stands against the view that use of entheogens marks a decay in shamanic practice. For example, the Vasyugan, a Siberian tribe, class *amanita* along with the drum and zither as the ‘great’ material means, “by which the Ugrian magician attempts to communicate with the spirits.”⁶⁹ The word shaman originates with the Tungus, and Siberian shamans are often used as the “type” of the shaman against which all others are compared. Since they use entheogens, I do not think that the argument that their use represents decay in shamanic practice can wholly be sustained.

Is there a possibility that the Celts used entheogens? We know that one group of people they came into contact with, the Scythians, were aware of the consciousness altering properties of cannabis. Herodotus says that the Scythians

64 McKenna, 1992, pp. 1-10

65 Eliade, 1958a, p. 338

66 Harner, *personal communication*, 1990

67 see Schrijver, 1999

68 See for example, Ginzburg, 1983, Favret-Saada, 1980

69 Wasson, 1968, p. 282

used cannabis, throwing the seeds on hot stones, inhaling the smoke, and falling about roaring with delight afterwards.⁷⁰ There is, however, no reference to its use by the Celts in the later stories.

Máelduin's tale gives us another example of intoxication after drinking, but *what* he is drinking is a bit mysterious. This mysterious substance gives us another possible candidate for an entheogen used by the Celts.

AMANITA MUSCARIA

The possible evidence for *amanita* use amongst Celtic peoples can be interpreted in many ways. It is *purely* circumstantial evidence, therefore any conclusions based upon it can only be highly speculative. It is certainly intriguing, however, so I include it in the interest of completeness, because I think *amanita* use is certainly conceivable, if not probable, amongst Celtic peoples. This strand of possible shamanistic activity would also be of interest for future research, so it seemed appropriate to relate some of what has been discovered in the materials, even if firm conclusions cannot be drawn at this stage of investigation.

Returning to the tale of Máelduin, he and his companions find “magical berries” the size of apples, but with a thick rind, growing on a tree on one island. Máelduin presses the juice from them and drinks it. He then foams at the mouth and lies in a deathly sleep for a full day. Upon awakening, he says that the fruit is excellent, and that his companions should gather all that they can.⁷¹

Compare this description to the process of preparing *amanita muscaria*, the red and white hallucinogenic mushroom and its subsequent effects. It is best prepared by drying it and then mixing it with water and pounding it into a beverage. Upon taking it nausea, salivating and sometimes foaming at the mouth and vomiting can ensue. The pulse slows, and the person falls into a deep sleep, “dead to the outside world.” During this sleep, the person may experience intense dreams, and upon waking, they become stimulated, voluble and eloquent.⁷²

A Polish soldier described an *amanita* experience reminiscent of some

70 Rice, 1957, p. 90

71 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 158-161, Laurie and White, 1997, p. 56

72 Wasson, 1968, pp. 75, 58, 262

Celtic Otherworld tales. Like Máelduin, he fell into a twenty-four hour sleep, and saw a beautiful realm, with women dressed in white who offered him great hospitality.⁷³

Another text yields a possible symptom of *amanita* in a visionary context. Amergin describes being the god who forms a head or mind of fire in his often quoted poem, where he proclaims his unity with all beings.⁷⁴ One symptom of *amanita* intoxication is a strong sense of heat in the head. The face “becomes red and bloated, and full of blood, and the intoxicated person begins to do and say many things involuntarily.”⁷⁵

There is a great deal more evidence in Celtic literature implying the use of *amanita*. I do not have the space to cite all of it here.⁷⁶ I will begin with possible earlier Indo-European use.

Wasson identifies *amanita* with the Vedic *soma*, and the *haoma* of the Zoroastrian *Avesta*. He makes a persuasive argument, and if he is correct it has been used by Indo-Iranian and Indo-European peoples for thousands of years.

The relationship between *amanita/soma* and poetic inspiration is well noted. One Vedic poet calls *soma* the “tongue of the way,” and says it is the source of eloquence. The ritual of *imbās forosnai*, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, provides an interesting comparison with techniques involving *amanita*.

In this ritual, according to Cormac’s glossary, the *fili* chews a piece of raw flesh from a pig, dog or cat, then offers it to his spirits, placing it behind the door. He invokes his spirits, and if they do not give him the answer immediately, he lies down, places his palms over his cheeks, and others watch to be sure he is not disturbed. He then receives the information he seeks.⁷⁷

I think it is likely that placing his palms over his cheeks is simply covering his eyes, since removing sight of the physical greatly helps visualisation. As I will discuss below, darkness is often a feature of Celtic vision seeking. The way in which chewing “red meat” is here combined with a period of lying in darkness and

73 Wasson, 1968, pp. 243-246

74 Macalister, 1938-1956, pp. 110-113

75 Laurie and White, 1997, pp. 58, 64, note 23, Wasson, 1968, p. 248

76 See Laurie and White, 1997, Wilson, 1999

77 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, pp. 98-99

revelatory experience, however, may suggest *amanita*.

Compare the way some Siberians believe *amanita* will reveal the future “if, before eating the mushroom, the man recites over it *certain definite formulas* stating his wish to see the future, the wish will come true in his dream.”⁷⁸ The Voguls, Ostyaks and others often practised their magic after *amanita* in the total dark of a yurt where the fire was put out at night.⁷⁹

Various Siberian tribes, including the Ostyak, Samoyed and Koryak, commonly use *amanita*, and there’s linguistic and folklore evidence to suggest that it was used in proto-history by the Hungarians and some Indo-Europeans.

Other evidence implying its use in Celtic culture includes the continual association of red and white with the Otherworld and the various red consciousness altering fruits and nuts. In *Immram Curaig Ua Corra*, the travellers reach an island with enormous red flowers dripping honey.⁸⁰ The Vedic soma may be called *máda*, “inebriation” or *mádhu*, “honey.”⁸¹ We also find birds, who are actually the souls of the holy, singing there. I will further explore the shamanistic associations of birds in chapters four and five.

Other examples of consciousness changing foods include the hazels of wisdom, and Otherworld apples. Even the golden apples described in some tales might relate to *amanita*, because some species turn a metallic tinged gold when dried.⁸²

The hazels of wisdom are particularly good candidates. Red or purple in colour, a Middle Irish gloss in the *Cauldron of Poesy* calls them *bolcc imba fuilngne*, possibly “bubbles that support *imbas*.” It says that the *fili* gains his poetic abilities in one way by consuming the hazelnuts.⁸³

Bolg can mean bag or bubble, but it can also mean a berry, bud or pod.⁸⁴ Specifically, it is used of mushrooms, in words such as *bolg losgainn*, literally, “frog’s pouch,” for a wild mushroom, or *bolg séidete*, “blown up bag,” meaning

78 Wasson, 1968, p. 264

79 Wasson, 1968, p. 284-285

80 Carey, 1994b, p. 18

81 Wasson, 1968, p. 63

82 Laurie and White, 1997, p. 57

83 Breatnach, pp. 66-67, note 7

84 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 78, headwords *bolg* and *Bolg*

puffball.⁸⁵ It can be used of a shield boss, which resembles a mushroom. Finally, it may mean lightning, associated with *amanita* in many cultures.⁸⁶ One word in Scottish Gaelic, *caochag* can mean either a nut without a kernel or a mushroom.⁸⁷

We could pass all this off as coincidence, because nowhere does anyone come out and say, "I am intoxicated on mushrooms." However, it is important to note that even in cultures where one can be reasonably sure or positive about *amanita* use, it is often referred to obliquely and symbolically, not directly.

TABOO AND RESTRICTED USAGE

This is in part due to its sanctity. It may also be because it may be used predominantly by an elite of priests or nobility who do not want to share it with the general population. This occurs in other shamanic cultures. For example, among the Siberian Ket and Selkup tribes, only shamans and shamans elect were held to be able to eat fly-agaric, all others were told they would die if they ate it.⁸⁸

In a highly speculative argument, Wasson says that *amanita* is associated with an organised priesthood in the Indus valley.

This priesthood may have characterised Indo-European society in its homeland, but are we safe in assuming so? May not a shamanistic religion have acquired an hieratic structure under the pressures of a tough war of conquest lasting centuries? In a world of enemies the shamans may have found it in their own interest to...organise a tribal priesthood, as a weapon of political power.⁸⁹

He further theorises that the Vedas as hymnbook may have developed around this time. Since the supply of mushroom in Himalayas and Hindu Kush was finite, and the Indo-Aryans spread out over all of India, it would have ultimately been insufficient. First, it would get watered down, then fall into disuse. Wasson feels it would then have been replaced by austerities and other methods to alter consciousness.⁹⁰ My feeling is that these methods would have *preceded* mushroom

85 Wasson, 1968, p. 93

86 Wasson, 1968, pp. 53-229

87 Laurie and White, 1997, p. 57

88 Wasson, 1968, p. 152

89 Wasson, 1968, p. 68

90 Wasson, 1968, pp. 68-70

use, and would never have really gone away, thought they might have receded into the background given the easy and spectacular effects of *amanita*.

The combination of taboo followed by more limited use, followed by disuse and prohibition under Christianity may be the case in the Celtic context. The ‘toadstool’ is of course fly-agaric. Wasson goes on to theorise that the ‘toadstool’ in it’s shamanic role had aroused such awe, fear and adoration that it came under a powerful taboo.” He supports his claim with the fact that truly lethal mushrooms are generally ignored by peasantry without any particular horror or revulsion. *Amanita*, however, has a greater reputation for fatality than the truly deadly ones.⁹¹ There must be some reason.

The idea that only a shamanic elite can partake of *amanita* may be reflected in a passage in the *Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne*. It refers to the idea, present in various legends, that the *Tuatha Dé* consume magical red rowanberries which give them gifts of immortality and healing. Diarmuid says that these berries have many virtues. Each berry is as exhilarating as wine and as satisfying as old mead, and whoever eats three berries, though he was a hundred, would become thirty again.⁹² Interestingly, a dosage of about three mushrooms produces an inebriation comparable to wine or beer.⁹³

A giant guards the rowan tree, and allows no mortals near, possibly a relic of a taboo against non-shamanic usage of *amanita*. From a practical standpoint, rowan trees generally grow in association with birch, and birch is a favoured host of *amanita*, so the red rowanberry makes a reasonable symbolic substitute in speech for *amanita*.⁹⁴

Amanita is also actually combined with berry juice in some places. The Siberian Koryak make a tonic of blueberries and *amanita* that they drink for longevity and health.⁹⁵ The Siberian Kamchadals also combine *amanita* with berry juice, particularly that of the bilberry, because this makes it stronger.⁹⁶ Bilberries, blueberries and rowanberries are all packed with anti-oxidants, though I cannot say

91 Wasson, 1968, pp. 191-192

92 Laurie and White, 1997, p. 56

93 Laurie and White, 1997 p. 57

94 Laurie and White, 1997 p. 57

95 Salzman, 1996

96 Wasson, 1968, p. 248

what precise effect this would have in combination with *amanita*.

The rowanberries in the story are guarded against “mortal” use, that is, use by one not of the Tuatha Dé. As I will discuss in chapter five, I believe a strong argument can be made that the *Tuatha Dé*, later the Fair Folk or Fairies, are actually shamans, in some cases acting as oracles for deities. In Vedic *soma* ritual, the priests evidently took on the roles of deities, particularly Indra.⁹⁷

I came across an interesting reference that may be of relevance in Hungarian tradition. Hungarians, like Celts, frequently offered milk to fairies. The *táltos*, or shaman, is also often considered one of the fairies him or herself, so if a *táltos* comes to the door, one must immediately give the *táltos* milk.⁹⁸ It so happens that milk is a potent detoxifier for *amanita*.⁹⁹ It is easy to picture shaman/fairies taking too much *amanita* of an evening and staggering out of the woods to get milk from whatever farm was closest. How much easier to encourage everyone to place it outside in a basin as a general offering to the spirits?

Cow and milk symbolism in general is linked to *amanita*.¹⁰⁰ It is impossible to detail all the instances here, but it does call to mind the white, red-eared cows of Celtic tales, and more broadly, the way in which white and red are so frequently associated with the Otherworld.

A last point of interest in relation to potential Celtic *amanita* references, is the frequency with which it is linked to one-legged, one-eyed beings like the Irish Fomoiré. The Vedas speak of *soma* as being one-eyed and one-legged. Among the Siberians, Vladimir Germanovich Bogoraz, writing in 1909, said Chukchee would imitate mushroom spirits who had no legs or necks, just “stout cylindrical bodies which move about swiftly...Mushrooms appear to intoxicated men in strange forms somewhat related to their real shapes. One, for example, will be a man with one hand and one foot; another will have a shapeless body.”¹⁰¹

Of course, as noted at the start, all of this is highly speculative. The Irish might have fantasised about fictional intoxicating berries as just one more of the

97 Wasson, 1968, pp. 55-56

98 See Dömötör, 1984

99 Wasson, 1968, pp. 31, 282

100 Wasson, 1968, pp. 31, 36-44, 45-46

101 Wasson, 1968, pp. 46-47, 60-67, 274-276, 281

many imaginative leaps in Irish literature. We also cannot believe that the Irish couldn't tell a berry from a mushroom, or meat from a mushroom, only that they might have substituted one for the other in narrative for reasons of taboo or secrecy. By the time the stories came to be written down the original symbolism, if there was any, might well have been forgotten. Clearly, much more study must be done if we are to draw any firmer conclusions from the tantalising possible evidence for *amanita* usage in the Celtic context.

OTHER POSSIBLE ENTHEOGENS

Moving on to other possible drugs, we come to a component of the “flying ointments” of European witchcraft, the plant henbane. Schrijver associates a Welsh word for the psychotropic henbane, *bele*, with the Celtic god Belenos, deriving his name from this plant rather than the more usual translation of it as “bright or shining.” Belenos is associated with Apollo, and therefore, with healing. Henbane's properties as opiate and anti-inflammatory were well known.¹⁰² Taking it further, he notes, in relation to Beltane, that there is a German custom of burning henbane at midsummer to protect cattle, in much the same way as is done in the Beltane fires.

He shows various words relating to hallucinating and fantasising that seem to derive from the word for henbane. Finally, a poem in praise of Áed Dubh, king-bishop of Kildare, mocks anyone who tries to emulate him. “What is the use of you competing with Áed unless you have drunk henbane?” (*Cia dú duit combag fri Áed / manip gaffand attibis*).¹⁰³

Henbane could produce an ecstatic, excited state, along with hallucinations of flying and transforming into animals. One theory states that it was used by the Apollo's oracle at Delphi. Schrijver goes on to speculate that it could be behind the *berserkir* frenzy, and some of the other activities of Celtic and Germanic *Mannerbunde*, or warrior bands. He notes that a tree-like image on the Gundestrup cauldron on the panel with the figure being immersed in a vat resembles

102 Schrijver, 1999, pp. 26, 35

103 Schrijver, 1999, p. 36

henbane.¹⁰⁴ This panel has already been interpreted as an initiatory rite by others, so the involvement of henbane would provide an interesting additional element.¹⁰⁵

Celtic stories provide a wealth of examples of gaining power by ingesting substances, from Finn and his salmon to Taliesin gaining his *awen* from the drops from Cerridwen's cauldron. Of course, this universal idea may be symbolic, representing receiving the sacred, and may not involve psychotropics at all. The wine and bread of the Eucharist is a case in point.

Symbolic and ritual action can alter consciousness on its own, without the addition of any chemical elements. All the substances discussed above work in part by effecting brain chemistry and activity. Another approach, and most likely the oldest shamanic approach, to producing the necessary changes in the brain is to induce the brain to produce these changes without drugs.

SOUND

Various kinds of sound, natural and man made have always been used to alter consciousness for shamanic work.¹⁰⁶ Finn's poem to Beltane speaks of natural music that brings peace. "Woodland music plays / melody provides perfect peace, / dust is blown from dwelling place, and haze from lake full of water."¹⁰⁷

Streams are often depicted as trance inducing. Streams like the waters of Assaroe in southwest Ireland are depicted in sources such as *Acallam na Senorach* as likely places to hear Otherworld music.¹⁰⁸ In this context, the phrase *sreb 'na suan*, translated in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* as "the slow moving stream," might better be translated as "the trance inducing stream."¹⁰⁹ In *The Cry of the Garb*, often attributed to Suibhne, he associates a river with prophecy. He says: "The substantial taídiu of prophecy / Melodious (is) its splendid, high torrent, / The angelic tacard(h)a, / What cascade is purer in cry?"¹¹⁰

104 Schrijver, 1999, pp. 38-39

105 Schrijver, 1999, p. 42, De Vries, 1961, pp. 47-48, McCone, 1987, 112-113

106 Eliade, 1964, pp. 453, 168-175, Harner, 1980

107 Murphy, 1962, p. 158

108 Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, p. 133

109 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 565, headword *súan*

110 Frykenberg, 1984, p. 106

MUSIC

One of the most common ways to induce trance is through trance inducing music, in Old Irish, I have argued above, *súantraige*.

There are many references to the sweetness and transformative powers of Otherworld music. In fact, as Ralls-MacLeod has shown in her definitive study, music and spiritual experience are closely bound in Celtic tradition, as they are in all shamanic cultures.¹¹¹

Texts refer to various kinds of sound being used for visionary purposes by the Celts. In later times, Protestant ministers placed special emphasis on the destruction of all musical instruments. This is generally thought to be solely due to music's association with dancing, drunkenness, pleasure and luxury, and occurred in Protestant countries throughout Europe, not just in Celtic lands. However, because music also has strong supernatural associations in Celtic culture in particular, I do not believe that one can rule out its consciousness altering properties as another reason to destroy instruments.

In the legends, the spirits give musical instruments and ability. The instruments include the Black Chanter of Clan Chattan, and the Silver Chanter of the MacCrimmons.¹¹² Harps, magical branches, and references to drumming and percussive sound all feature. I shall return to some of these instruments when I speak of shamanic equipment in chapter four.

SONG AND CHANT

Song and chant consistently appear as modes of altering consciousness in the tales. The role of the poet and singer was similar and at one time probably overlapped with that of the shaman. J.E.C. Williams, in *The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland* says "Every primitive poet was to some extent a Shaman or magician, in other words, he claimed the ability to exercise power over things." The poetry was designed for magical effect, as well as the visionary trance or ecstasy. Steven Glosecki has referred to this in his *Shamanism and Anglo-Saxon Poetry* as well, and I will have more to say on this in the next chapter.

111 Ralls-Macleod, 2000, pp. 78-115, 42, 94, 146

112 Carmichael, 1900-1971, v. 2, p. 354

There are indications that much Old Irish and Gaelic poetry was sung or chanted rather than simply recited. According to one source, the later prayers and invocations of *Carmina Gadelica* were either “sung to the type of music Mrs. Kennedy Fraser published, intoned, or recited in a curiously rhythmic monotone.”¹¹³ Of course, whether Mrs. Kennedy Fraser got her music from informants or made it up is open to debate, however, the “rhythmic monotone” can be a feature of shamanistic chant.

Earlier, the *Altus Prosator*, attributed to St. Columba, states clearly that it was composed in rhythm. In the body of the poem, we find “By chanting of hymns continually ringing out, by thousands of angels rejoicing in holy dances...the Trinity is praised with eternal threefold repetition.”¹¹⁴ Shamanistic trance music typically has a monotonous quality, to facilitate trance rather than distract from it.

Giraldus Cambrensis says that Irish holy men used to carry harps and play them frequently, due to music’s ability to arouse the spirits and promote religious fervour. There were also specialists in chant at some monasteries, who apparently did nothing else, underscoring its importance.¹¹⁵

There are also interesting references to chant and its effects in some hagiography. In St. Fiacc’s hymn to St. Patrick, the clerics of Ireland gather to watch over St. Patrick as he is dying. Then, “the sound of singing prostrated them, each one of them fell asleep on the road.” (*son in cetail fo-s-rolaich, contuil cach úadib for sét.*)¹¹⁶ While *con-tuili* does not have the clear associations with trance that the word *súan* does, the context may indicate a trance rather than sleep state.

Shamanistic music frequently imitates animals’ sounds, to call and honour helping spirits.¹¹⁷ Many Scottish Gaelic songs imitate animal sounds, and like shamanic music in general, may also use vocables in no known language. These fulfil two functions, the rhythm aids trance, and the language is held to be “sacred language,” the language of the spirits. In another context, *In Tenga Bithnua*, “The Evernew Tongue” features “angelic language,” that is not any known language.¹¹⁸

113 Macleod, 1911-12b, p. 127

114 Bernard and Atkinson, 1898, vol. 1, p. . vol. 2, pp. 27, 153, lines 128-129, 133

115 Fleischmann, 1947, pp. 48, 45

116 Bernard and Atkinson, 1898, vol. 1, p. 103, line 62, vol. 2, p. 35

117 Van Deusen, 1997, p. 11

118 See Carey, 1994b, page 22, note 48

POSSIBLE REFERENCES TO OVERTONE CHANT

There are various references to singing styles called *sordán*, *dordán*, *dordfhiansa* and similar words associated with buzzing, humming, lowing or murmuring.¹¹⁹ This kind of singing is often depicted as supernatural in origin or effects. For example, the Donn of Cuailgne is described making a *cranndord* when he came home in the evenings to his cows. This supernatural sound was sufficient music and entertainment for the entire cantred of Cuailgne.¹²⁰

Finn and his Fianna performed a chant called the *dordfhiansa*, accompanied by the clashing of their spears. Its droning sound was said to scatter the enemy as effectively as a physical attack.¹²¹ While this chant is associated with the Fianna, it is not limited to them.

Donn Bó refused to perform on the eve of the Battle of Allen. The next day, Maeldúin, Donn Bó and many others fell to the Leinstermen. The sound of the *dordfhiansa* emanated from Donn Bó's head on the battlefield. The Leinstermen brought it back, put it on a post and asked it to perform. Donn Bó turned towards the wall "so that it should be dark for him," and moved the Leinstermen to tears with the *dordfhiansa*.¹²² It is highly significant that Donn Bó required darkness for this, associating the *dordfhiansa* with other shamanistic practices, in Celtic sources and elsewhere, that require darkness.

Other than these general ideas of humming or droning sound, can we have any idea of what these kinds of possibly shamanistic musical forms sounded like? There is one clue.

The Fianna are described singing the *dordfhiansa* with pursed lips. This calls to mind Tibetan and Tuvan overtone chanting, which also produces an unusual droning, buzzing, otherworldly sound. One might imagine that if a group of Fianna performed it, and their opponents did not know how they were making the sound, it could be alarming.

In overtone, as described of the *dordfhiansa* the lips are pursed to send

119 Buckley, 1995, p. 31

120 O'Curry, 1873, vol. 3, p. 376

121 Buckley, 1995, pp. 28, 32

122 Stokes and Strachan, 1903, pp. 55-57, 59

the sound back down the throat, reverberating the vocal chords again. It is possible to sing two or even three notes simultaneously in this way.

Overtone in Tibetan and Tuvan contexts is associated with meditative and shamanistic practice.¹²³ Overtone is powerfully consciousness altering to hear, or especially to perform, because of the vibration of the sound and the breathing techniques required.

There is another intriguing possible reference to overtone in the work of the much-derided Iolo Morgannwg, who said he had copied it from an ancient manuscript. Many scholars discount his work entirely because he was a drug addict and certainly made up some of what he says he copied. I include this for its interest in relation to the matter at hand with a big lump of salt.

His *Barddas* says that creation occurred when God spoke the *Awen*. This sound radiated down in the form of three bars of light (the Trinity) and three sounds, given in the *Barddas* as O-I-V. It goes on to say that the letters stand for God's love, knowledge and truth, and that, in harmony with this primal creative act, Welsh bards sang the three letters *simultaneously*, each note corresponding to a bar of light.

How was this done? There is a strong clue in the fact that the bardic writings say that while the notes can be sung, "*they cannot be pronounced.*"¹²⁴ What can be sung that cannot be pronounced? Overtone chants. A further point is that one of the easiest ways to get an overtone is to place the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth and move it from front to back while going from an O to an I to a bilabial V sound. There is even an interesting synchronicity with the "bars of light" in Tuvan tradition. One group is named *Huun-Huur-Tu* which means the light rays that come down through clouds. They chose the name because the "light rays on the steppe remind us of the separate lines of sound in throat singing, except that in throat singing you're working not with light rays but with sound rays."¹²⁵

There are some other Celtic references which may imply overtone chanting. In ancient times, Celts are described "roaring" into their shields, creating a

123 Van Deusen, 1997, p. 11

124 Reprinted in Spence, 1997, p. 95

125 Huun-Huur-Tu, 1993. from the insert to the CD

deafening reverberation. Singing with your mouth close to a reflective surface naturally begins to create overtones.

St. Columba is also described as singing psalms like thunder, or a melodious lion. He is said to have terrified the Pictish King, Brude, by singing the forty-fourth psalm in a voice that “rose in the air like a terrible thunderstorm.”¹²⁶

PERCUSSION

There is less reference to percussion and drums than to other kinds of music in the literature. I will have more to say about specific instruments, including a possible pseudonym for the drum in a shamanic context, in chapter four. Some scholars think the drum came late to Britain, but we must bear in mind that drums are made of perishable materials, and so, don't leave a lot of archaeological evidence for their existence.

There is, however, not a total dearth of references to percussive sound. One of the classical authors refers to their warriors beating on their leather shields, and I mentioned above that the *dordfhiansa* was accompanied by the clashing of their spears. Bells appear frequently, and there is mention of a *cnamfir*, or “bone-player,” someone that plays a kind of bone clapper.¹²⁷

In later folklore on Hogmanay in Scotland, a dancer would go around the village wearing a bull's hide that would be beaten with sticks, creating a tremendous booming, as a chant was sung.

There is also percussive use of a sieve noted in a divination rite. The informant, James Johnson of Skeld, Shetland, tells of the “siftin o' the siller.” Girls stand before a darkened window with three, six or nine bits of silver in a sieve, shaking them and saying “My siller I sift / My siller sift I / If I be to get a man / may he pass by.” Then she would see her future husband pass the window.¹²⁸ The Hungarian *táltos* also uses a sieve in similar fashion as an instrument of divination and trance induction. This has frequently been considered a trace of shamanism by

126 Buckley, 1995, p. 33. See also Purser, 1997, who theorises this may be a kind of overtone chanting, and consequently included overtone in his Kilmartin House Museum recording on ancient Scottish music.

127 Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, p. 61

128 School of Scottish Studies, 1971, p. 81, quoted from SA 1970/251/A

scholars.¹²⁹

The supernatural aura of the smith may also have something to do with the fact that smiths, even after the burning of instruments, still had the opportunity to make percussive sound.

Drums are simple instruments. Each baby invents the drum on its own, banging something against something else. Therefore, it is hard to imagine the Celts did not use them. We will now move on to other, less comfortable, methods of entering alternate states of consciousness.

ORDEAL

In many cultures, paradoxically, experiencing union with the sacred requires that the shaman cultivate a sense of loss and longing, declaring his vacuum so it could be filled. The Oglala Sioux speak of “becoming pitiful” before the spirits.

Whatever the spiritual principals behind ordeal, it is clear that it also works for a variety of physiological reasons. In many of the saints’ lives we see fasting, long hours of wakefulness and prayer, and more severe forms of mortification of the flesh being used consciously to draw the devotee closer to God.¹³⁰ The Celtic religious are no exception.

In *The Martyrology of Óengus*, Óengus is described as chanting his psalms “fifty in the river with a withe round his neck tied to a tree; fifty under the tree and fifty in his cell.”¹³¹ Praying in water comes up on a number of occasions, especially with the accompanying shamanistic ability to generate heat. The “future Manchurian or Eskimo shaman, like the Himalayan or Tantric yogin, must prove his shamanic power by resisting the most severe cold or drying wet sheets on his bare body.” Other rituals show power by the ability to handle fire, or tolerate intense heat. “Resistance to cold through ‘mystical heat’ denotes obtaining a superhuman state in the same measure as insensibility to fire.”¹³²

In one story, St. Patrick and one of his monks go into a freezing stream to

129 Klaniczay, 1990, p. 144

130 Underhill, 1990, pp. 201-202

131 Fleischmann, 1947, p. 47

132 Eliade, 1964, p. 476

pray. The monk is perishing with cold, and St. Patrick tells him to stand in front of him, downstream. The monk then grows too hot. Other austerities include the *triduan* or three day fast and the *crossfigil*, where the monk would stand and recite the Lord's prayer many times, arms extended. Being entombed or buried was another practice.

Ordeals of one kind and another are well known in shamanic cultures. One practice, and the reason behind it, was discussed by Igjugarjuk, a Caribou Eskimo shaman interviewed by Knud Rasmussen in the 1920s. He fasted for a thirty-day period in freezing cold. Eventually, he received a female helping spirit and returned home. He still fasted periodically, and told Rasmussen that "The only true wisdom lives far from mankind, out in the great loneliness, and can only be reached through suffering."¹³³

This relates in an interesting way to some recent research about how the brain may experience mystic states of consciousness. Arnold Mandell, in his article *Towards a Psychobiology of Transcendence: God in the Brain* discusses how severe stress may induce transcendent experience.¹³⁴ Mandell refers to the earlier research of Pavlov. When his dogs nearly drowned in a flood, he discovered that a curious thing occurred. Some of them seemed in a beatific state. Put under severe stress, (they were nearly up to their noses in water when they were rescued) the hippocampus in the brain had shut down all external stimuli and amplified the internal. This may have created the sort of grand unified experience described by mystics, sometimes after severe penance, fasting and so forth.

All the dogs did not react in this way to the stress, but the ones that did were much more receptive to learning, i.e., they functioned better, and more tranquilly, in their day to day reality. It had, however, *wiped out all their past conditioning*, an important finding. To wipe out past conditioning is to be reborn, and some accounts of ordeals in Celtic tradition, especially burial, seem to show the protagonists changed by the experience.

133 Campbell, Joseph. 1993. pp. 204-205

134 Collins. 1991. pp. 192-196

BURIAL AND SENSORY DEPRIVATION

Sensory deprivation is used in many cultures as a method to enter alternate states of consciousness. I have already mentioned above some methods that involve sensory deprivation, such as *imbas forosnai*. Later, Martin Martin shows the Scottish bards continuing these kinds of practices. He says that “they shut their doors and windows for a day’s time, and lie upon their backs, with a stone upon their belly, and plaids about their heads, and their eyes being covered, they pump their brains for rhetorical encomium or panegyric; and indeed they furnish such a style from this dark cell, as is understood by very few.”¹³⁵ The idea that this sort of thing was a common bardic practice is supported by one old story, that features a “call and response” that goes, “What shall we do with this man?” To which the reply is: “If bard, underground, underground, If harper, to the castle, to the castle. (*Ma’s bard, fo’n ùir, fo’n ùir, / Ma’s clarsair, do’n dùn, do’n dùn.*)¹³⁶

One step further than simply shutting the door of your stone chamber is entombment. Ritual burial is common to many shamanic traditions. It features in Nicobar Island shamanic initiations.¹³⁷ Among the Yakut, as a rule, a future shaman “dies” and lies in the dark yurt for three days with no food or water.¹³⁸ In Australia, the Euahlayi carry a young man chosen to become a shaman to the cemetery where he is bound and left for several nights.¹³⁹ Absolute darkness is essential to the process in all cases.¹⁴⁰

Like the Yakut example, the Celtic ritual burial often seems to be three days. This burial is the most extreme form of sensory deprivation we hear about in the tales. Probably the most famous example is that of St. Oran.

The story goes that St. Columba and St. Oran contended about the issues of heaven, hell and punishment. St. Oran volunteered to go for the space of three days down to the grave. They dug a hole as deep as he was tall and buried him. After three days and nights, they dug him up and he told them that heaven and hell were not as they were imagined and the good were not eternally happy and the bad were

135 Martin, 1934, p.177

136 Macleod, 1911-12, p. 343

137 Eliade, 1964, pp. 64, 84, 343

138 Eliade, 1964, p. 36

139 Eliade, 1964, p. 45

140 Eliade, 1958, p. 9

not eternally unhappy. At hearing this, St. Columba was appalled, and ordered him reburied for good¹⁴¹

Oran acts in a specifically shamanic way in this tale for three reasons. First, he deliberately practices a technique of sensory deprivation to alter consciousness. Second he does so to learn about heaven and hell, presumably making an Otherworld journey to do so. Third, he does it to return with information for others, as all shamans return to their tribe with boons from the Otherworld.

The incident shows an interesting conflict within St. Columba. At times he seemed sympathetic to older traditions. However, when shamanic perceptions came up against basic Christian tenets, or rather, threatened to, since poor Oran did not get much chance to speak, he nipped it in the bud. Where shamanic traditions can accept fresh revelation, established religions tend to hold to existing tradition. Michael Harner theorises that strict adherence to tradition comes when a culture loses its shamans. They hold to what the last one brought back from the Otherworld because they know it works.

St. Columba's ambivalence in these areas is illustrated by a second tale involving apparent ritual burial. St. Columba and his companion Baithín are in Armagh, where they awake, go to bless themselves at "the stones and cemeteries and crosses of Patrick," and see stark naked men with what was left of their winding sheets about them after their awakening. Baithín expressed disapproval at that, for he did not like it. He asked St. Columba what it was. St. Columba said, "If you had anything of Patrick's feeling for the clerics and psalm singing hermits in regard to their assistance you would not behave thus..." and St. Columba says he will fill a reliquary with the winding sheets and it will heal the men of Scotland and Ireland of every sickness and labor."¹⁴²

Is it a death and resurrection rite, like the three day burial we know of? The dead are clearly raised, yet this is a physical happening, not a vision, since St. Columba takes the sheets.¹⁴³ The reason for Baithín's disapproval is unclear. Is this some sort of Primal survival, and is St. Columba's response one of tolerance? The

141 Carmichael, 1900-1971, v. 2, pp. 338-340

142 Grosjean, 1931, 79

143 Grosjean, 1931, 78-79

winding sheets bring us to another mode of altering consciousness—techniques involving binding or wrapping the practitioner.

BINDING

Binding or wrapping in a hide to induce an alternate state of consciousness is an often-recurring theme in Celtic sources. Binding can combine elements of physical pain and ordeal with sensory deprivation where the seer is entirely wrapped in a hide.

The symbolism of binding, and specifically, that of the sacrificial noose, may also figure in the symbolism of the torc, a point to which I will return in chapter six. Binding also has many symbolic layers of meaning.¹⁴⁴

There are many examples of “bound shaman” rituals in other cultures. I have even encountered a Palaeolithic image from Sicily showing several people bound with their limbs tied behind their backs with bird-masked figures standing over them. It has been interpreted as a scene of sacrifice, yet the bird-masked figures are not doing anything obviously lethal to the bound figures.¹⁴⁵ The method of binding all limbs behind the back is used by Inuit shamans for trance possession and prophecy.¹⁴⁶ The exact same method is used by the Lakota in the *Yuwipi* ceremony for healing and manifesting spiritual power to the tribe. I am not suggesting that all these examples are connected, they are just interesting parallels given the psychobiology of trance, and the idea that similar practices may invoke similar states of consciousness.

The binding method described in some sources, *ceangal nan tri chaol*, or the “binding of the three smalls or narrows,” is intriguing. The origin of the term is obscure, but it occurs in various Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic sources.¹⁴⁷ Stern believes we should imagine the procedure “so that wrists, ankles and waist are tied with a *caol* each...and the 3 bits (*cinn*) are tied together on the back.”¹⁴⁸

I am not sure myself if the descriptions always make it clear that the waist

144 Eliade, 1964, pp. 419-420

145 Armstrong, 1958, plate opposite p. 33

146 Michael Harner, in lecture and demonstration at the East Coast Three Year Program, October 28th, 1990

147 See Stern, 1908, p. 189

148 Stern, 1908, p. 190

is the third *caol*. It is not very narrow. Rather the neck might be, obviously not drawn tight enough to make the person lose consciousness. The shaman in the Lakota Yuwipi ceremony is bound this way.

A modern account describes the procedure. First, the shaman, in this account, Plenty Wolf, stands and places his hands behind him. “Horn Cloud took a short thong and began to tie...Plenty Wolf’s hands together. He then placed the quilt over Plenty Wolf’s head so that one corner completely hooded his face...Horn Cloud took from his pocket a long leather thong, one end of which had already been fastened into a slipknot, and placed it over Plenty Wolf’s head, securing it tightly over his quilt covered neck...” The quilt was then secured around Plenty Wolf, the thong was wrapped round him, tied behind his back, and finally its end was tied around his ankles.¹⁴⁹ Later in the ceremony, Plenty Wolf spoke to his spirits in the darkness and invoked help for the boy the ceremony had been called for. Finally, when the lights were eventually turned on again, Plenty Wolf was found unbound.

This is seen as a particularly good omen, meaning that the spirits were motivated enough by the ceremony to take the physical action of releasing the shaman.¹⁵⁰ One idea behind the various kinds of “bound shaman” rituals is that the shaman’s pathetic state motivates his spirits to act.

Ceangal nan tri chaol is described as being painful and undignified. For example, “The king of Lochlan, the lucky (?), was thrown to the ground on the heath, in front of everybody and subjected to the tying up of the 3 thin sprouts (it was not an honour for a king!)” (*Leagaidh rìgh Lochlainn gun ágh / Am fiadhnuis chàich air an fraoch, / Dho-sa, ‘s cha b’ onair rìgh, / Chuirte’ air ceangal nan tri chaol.*)¹⁵¹

Perhaps the most famous and well-attested visionary practice involving binding or wrapping is the *tarbfeis*. First, archaeology confirms that the bull was revered, as evidenced by numerous carvings and sacrificial deposits, for example at Gournay-sur-Aronde.¹⁵² This reverence is also shown by the use of a bull’s hide in

149 Powers. 1984. p. 56

150 Powers. 1984, pp. 56-66

151 Stern. 1908, p. 190

152 Ellis. 1994, pp. 221-222

other ritual and visionary practices. Medb and Ailill's druid, MacRoth, in *The Táin Bó Cúailnge*, wears a bull's hide on his journey to survey the enemy troops. In later folklore on Hogmanay in Scotland, a dancer would go around the village wearing a bull's hide that was beaten with sticks, as noted above.

Rituals involving wrapping in a hide, particularly a bull's hide, occur in many time-periods and locations. In the *tarbfeis* a bull was sacrificed and a person was wrapped in the hide. As others chanted, he received the answer to his question. The *Serglige Con Culainn* describes the practice in a section relating to the election of kings.¹⁵³ In the *Dream of Rhonabwy*, mentioned above, the hero falls asleep on a yellow cow's hide and has a dream of Arthur.¹⁵⁴ It is also described in later folklore, for example, in Martin Martin's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*.

In Martin's 1703 account, a party of men goes to a solitary place. They single out one of their number, wrap him in a cow's hide except for his head. They left him in this posture "all night until his invisible friends relieved him by giving a proper answer to the question in hand, which he received...from several persons that he found about him all the time."¹⁵⁵ This seems to infer these are not just any spirits, but possibly totemic spirits of the particular person coming to relieve him of his distress. The extremely unpleasant variant on this theme which involves putting a cat on a spit, at which point a large cat comes to its rescue with the answer, seems to confirm this totemic connection.

He says that one person who had this experience, John Erach, experienced such visionary horrors that he could not relate them. At least in this one case, it did have an effect, albeit not the desired one.

This practice may have very archaic roots. The custom of burials where horns and hooves alone remain, such as found in Neolithic long barrows in Wessex, may indicate some kind of ceremonial use of the hide where the entire members, "head and feet, had been cut off while held together by the tendons, ligaments, hooves and probably skin."¹⁵⁶ Piggott cites Siberian parallels, and notes

153 Dillon, 1953a, p. 9, paragraph 23

154 Guest, 1906, p. 137

155 Martin, 1934, p. 173

156 Piggott, 1962, p. 118

that Danish burials in ox hide have been found, as well as probable hide-wrapped burials of Beaker and early Bronze age peoples from Scotland. He notes the connections with Celtic and Old Irish tradition, and its similarity to the Siberian.

...the bull's hide was employed in ritual divination, much as the Yakut shaman sat in ecstasy on his mare's skin invoking the 'mighty bull of the earth' and the horse of the steppe.'...Nor were such rites confined to medieval Ireland, for the 11th century Burchard of Worms enjoins the priest to enquire of the potentially sinful member of his flock whether, at the Kalends of January, he had sat on a bull's hide at a crossroad, thinking thereby to know the future. And in the Hebrides in the 18th century the powers of darkness could be consulted by wrapping a man in a cow hide so that only his head protrudes, and leaving him all night till his 'invisible friends relieved him by giving a proper answer to the question at hand.' Celtic seer and Siberian shaman had much in common.¹⁵⁷

Of course, there is no way of telling if there is any continuity beyond the practical. A bull's hide would be big enough to cover the practitioner fully and block out all light, making it easier to "see" spiritually. Totally unrelated groups might easily decide to use a bull's hide independently.

I mentioned earlier that the sound of running water can be consciousness altering. Thomas Pennant describes a 1772 *taghairm* ritual in Trotternish in Skye that combines both wrapping in hide and the sound of water. He describes the family, (probably the MacQueens) who practised it, as people who "pretended to oracular knowledge."¹⁵⁸ As we have seen before, shamanistic abilities are often held to go in families. In the ritual the practitioner was sewn into a hide and placed in a crevice behind the waterfall, before being asked the question. Given that there would have been many less stressful, (and less attested) ways to dupe the gullible, I doubt that this was pure pretence. One cannot help but be struck by the similarity of form over all the centuries.

Another way of consulting an "invisible oracle" involved four people swinging the seer against a bank with some force.¹⁵⁹ Putting the seer in physical

157 Piggott, 1962, p. 118

158 MacilleDhuibh, July 27th 2001

159 Martin, 1934, p. 172

distress reflects a common shamanic practice, as noted above.¹⁶⁰

An essential principal in the Yuwipi ceremony, described above, is becoming “pitiful before the spirits” so that they will help you. The shaman is tightly bound in the Yuwipi or “tent shaking” ceremony, so named because it often results in spectacular manifestations of the shaman’s power. If the ceremony is successful, the shaman’s spirits untie him, prophesying through him during this process. They may also perform healing on the people there, as well as creating physical effects, such as shaking the tent, or throwing prayer ties around.¹⁶¹

Now that I have discussed modes of altering consciousness, I will move on to the point of these procedures.

THE SPIRIT JOURNEY

I use the term “spirit journey” in preference to shamanic journey because this technique is used by non-shamans as well as shamans in traditional cultures. The shaman’s experience differs in general by its unusual and consistent intensity. The same Indo-European root that gives us the word ecstasy gives us one word for a spirit journey in Old Irish: *echtra*—literally an “outgoing.”¹⁶²

Other branches of Indo-European cultures show obvious examples of the spirit journey. They feature clearly in Old English works such as *The Seafarer*, and classical works such as the *Aeneid*.¹⁶³ I think we are safe in calling the Norse Odin a shamanic deity. I will speak of Odin as a possible shamanic oracle in chapter five, but he also exhibits many other shamanic characteristics, including the ability to journey.¹⁶⁴ Snorri says his “body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or beast, a fish or dragon, and went in an instant to far off lands.”¹⁶⁵

One is spoilt for choice when it comes to examples of the spirit journey in Celtic materials. I have already mentioned Cú Chulainn’s spirit journeys in the last chapter. There are whole classes of literature, such as the *echtrae* tales and the *immrama* that clearly follow the structure of the shamanic journey as it is manifest

160 Collins, 1991, pp.191-197

161 Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1980, pp. 184-185

162 Royal Irish Academy, p. 262, headword *echtra*

163 See Jacobs, 1999

164 Eliade, 1964, pp. 375, 380-382

165 Sturluson, 1932, p. 5

in other cultures. For example, a Hungarian *taltós* describes going “to the end of the world and enjoying there a great hospitality and then going to the bottom of the waters.”¹⁶⁶ The *bruidean* tales also demonstrate a wealth of shamanic features, as shown by Nagy.¹⁶⁷

Each story does not have all features, but many follow the classic shamanic pattern. The protagonists go forth into the Otherworld, they interact with supernatural beings, they gain spirit helpers and teachers, they learn things, they return with boons for their people. For example, King Cormac Mac Art learned about of truth, falsehood, and honour and gained ritual implements that helped his people in *The Otherworld Adventure of Cormac*, discussed further in chapter four.¹⁶⁸

While Cormac’s experience was, in part, visited on him, he did ask for the stranger’s magical branch, implying he wanted some kind of Otherworld contact. There are also examples of people being carried off unwillingly. If the *sluagh* comes by, they may carry the person miles away. Interestingly, the Chukchee describe a similar experience when on *amanita*. The mushroom spirits pick up a man under the arms and carry him off. “They delight in places where the dead live and may show the man round the entire world.”¹⁶⁹ Many journeys are more clearly intentional.

Medb and Ailill’s druid, was able to go “all around Ireland in a day,” and does so in the *Táin* to survey the enemy’s troops.¹⁷⁰ Ó Riain says that while Thomas O’Rahilly thought Mac Roth was sun god, he thinks that would be in the remote past if it is correct at all. Rather, he may be portrayed in the *Táin* with deliberate ambiguity. “Circuits were an integral part of abbatical practice...Furthermore, only one abbot, namely Patrick’s successor, could aspire to a circuit of all Ireland.”

Other ambiguous elements of Mac Roth’s description include words such “as *berrad* ‘hair,’ which may also denote tonsure, and *fethal* ‘dress’ which more commonly means insignia or sacred halidom.”¹⁷¹ Mac Roth is a religious figure

152 Klaniczay, 1990, pp. 138-139

167 Nagy, 1981a

168 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, pp. 183-222

169 Wasson, 1968, p. 276

170 O’ Rahilly, Thomas F., 1946a, p. 519. O’ Rahilly, Cecile, 1976, p. 159

171 Ó Riain, 1994, p. 36

who can traverse all Ireland with remarkable speed. Called a druid, Mac Roth seems a clear candidate for the label of shaman.

The *Serglige* implies that Cú Chulainn may be deliberately seeking Otherworld contact. First, he casts at Otherworld birds, despite Emer's warning. Some shamanic cultures hunt animals to gain their power as totems.¹⁷² This can be very dangerous, as in the Sami bear hunt, and the hunter's relatives may or may not be keen on him doing it, but he gains great power if he succeeds.

In Cú Chulainn's case, he fails, and troubled in mind, goes to sit with his back to a *particular* standing stone.¹⁷³ In another tale, he binds himself to this same stone as he is dying. The stone becomes the site of his final entry into the Otherworld.¹⁷⁴

Later folklore gives evidence that the pre-Celtic Neolithic megalithic sites continued to occupy a place in the Celtic populations' minds, hearts and ritual practices. Indeed, they still do. A researcher recently observed someone's ashes being poured out at Clava, a megalithic site in the north of Scotland, in a funerary ritual complete with piper.¹⁷⁵ The site had been used for cremations in the Early Bronze Age, and was later the site of a Pictish burial, so had evidently been in at least intermittent use since its creation.¹⁷⁶

There are examples of people using Neolithic burial mounds as well as natural hills as starting places for the spirit journey. For example, Pwyll is definitely seeking spiritual experience when he meets Rhiannon. He goes to sit on mound where he will either receive wounds and blows or see a wonder.¹⁷⁷ The twinned theme of wounding and seeing is interesting in light of shaman's initiatory experiences. Cú Chulainn also goes to a Neolithic site where he receives wounds and blows *and* later sees a wonder. Both experiences lead to the protagonist's union with Otherworld women.

Burial mounds are entry points to the Otherworld in many cultures. For example, one Sakha Siberian man gains his shamanic power when he camped the

172 Eliade, 1964, p. 104

173 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 178-179

174 Carey, 1999a

175 Bradley, R. 2000, p. 231, D. Trevarthen *pers com*.

176 Bradley, R. 2000, p. 89

177 Jones, 1993, p. 9

night on a Tungus shaman's grave.¹⁷⁸

In the later literature, one traditional Scottish story, *Cànain nan Eun*, the "Language of Birds," depicts both the journey and the knowledge gained upon it.¹⁷⁹ Birds, as I will discuss further in chapter four, are profoundly associated with the Otherworld and shamanic practice in most cultures, and the Celtic is no exception. The Island of Birds features in several voyage tales, including Máelduin's and Brendan's.

In the story, Alasdair's father wants to give his son the best possible education, so he sends him to the Isle of Birds to learn bird language. Each time the boy returns, his father asks what he has learned. After the first year he says, "I can see (a thing)." After year two he says, "I can see a thing and I can hear a thing." After year three he says, "I can see a thing and I can hear and I can understand a thing."¹⁸⁰

A chaffinch prophesies that the father will face humiliation at his son's hands. Alasdair's father orders the bird killed. Then there is a slightly strange episode where Alasdair returns to bird island for three more years. When he arrives the birds recognise him and flock around. He begins killing and eating them, "so that if he wished for any further acquaintance with bird language he got it during those three years."¹⁸¹ It may be something to do with gaining the power of an animal through consuming it. For example, the Andaman Islanders kill and eat turtle meat in their initiations, then dance the turtle to show they now have its power.¹⁸²

In one Egyptian funerary text, the deceased is depicted as a huntsman who devours the gods and the illuminated ones, gaining their power. After a gory description of killing, dismemberment, evisceration and cooking of the deities in cauldrons which would do any Siberian shaman proud, the deceased "devours their hearts and crowns and thereby gains their powers, so that their magic is in his body; he swallows the understanding of every god..."¹⁸³

178 Sieroszewski. 1901, p. 103

179 Mackay, J.G., 1931

180 Mackay, J.G., 1931, pp. 160-163

181 Mackay, J.G., 1931, p. 163

182 Lonsdale, 1981, p. 52-53

183 Erman, 1907, pp. 90-91

In this tale, Alasdair goes through a Mis-like episode, where his hair and nails grow out. Despite his grooming, he is adopted by a ship's captain. He solves a king's long-standing problem with some ravens, and marries a princess, however, his feral state returns.

He seeks help from a Prince of Spain to whom he had previously done a favour. The Prince hears a voice in his sleep saying that if he kills his three children his friend will be restored. He cuts their throats, washes Alasdair in their blood, and he's as beautiful as before. When he tells his Queen, she agrees that she would have given anything to heal Alasdair, even the deaths of her children. They go to mourn over the bodies but find the children are alive again. The story then notes that "the children were wearing their necklaces," though these necklaces are not mentioned before or after.¹⁸⁴ I think this may relate to symbolic, rather than actual, sacrifice, a point to which I will return in chapter six.

Ultimately, Alasdair is a king in his own land. The chaffinch's prophetic words are fulfilled when Alasdair's father sets his teeth to a knot in the king's shoelace and his mother stands with a basin. Alasdair's father says it would be just to slay him. He responds, "There is no knowing whether I should ever have been king had not everything happened as it has, but never again shall you need alms."

In this story, we can clearly see that Alasdair journeys into the Otherworld, where he learns to see, hear and understand—in short, he learns everything. Various traditional cultures express "magic" and "bird song," by similar or related terms. For example, the Germanic word for magical incantations is *galdr*, from the verb *galan*, to sing—a term especially applied to bird calls. Throughout the world bird language "is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature and hence to being able to prophesy."¹⁸⁵

Like Mis and Suibhne, Alasdair goes through a feral phase. Like Mis, he is deemed extremely valuable, so valuable that the Queen is willing to offer her children's lives for his restoration.

Máelduin provides us another example.¹⁸⁶ He begins his journey seeking

184 Mackay, J.G., 1931, p. 177

185 Eliade, 1964, p.98

186 Stokes, 1888, Oskamp, 1970

revenge for his father. The islands he visits have an assortment of fascinating figures and symbols that require a thesis of their own to explore from a shamanistic perspective. Of particular interest is the theme of his three foster-brothers, lost on his travels. I am confident that these are Máelduin's spiritual alter-egos.¹⁸⁷

At the start of his journey, a druid tells Máelduin that he must only go with a group of seventeen, and himself the eighteenth, for there to be a good result from his journey. Máelduin's foster brothers want to go along so badly that they swim out and nearly drown. Máelduin is very displeased and sulks.¹⁸⁸ Psychologically, it's like people treat unwanted aspects of the self—trying to get away from them and then finding they've tagged along. The thing is that at several later points in the tale, the text always refers to Máelduin and his seventeen men, not his twenty men. The foster brothers are *never counted in the equation*.

Still more revealing is the way these brothers leave the expedition. The first one takes a *torc* from an altar, and a cat leaps through him like a fiery arrow, reducing him to dust.¹⁸⁹ Since the golden *torc* is a symbol of power, one might say he was either guilty of greed or presumption, presuming to a spiritual or temporal status he had not earned. The next brother is lost to the island of sorrow, later in the story.¹⁹⁰ As all the great mystics state, sorrow and the dark night of the soul are great difficulties on the spiritual path.¹⁹¹ Finally, the last is lost on the island of joy, near his journey's end.¹⁹² Máelduin, however, returns. It is tempting to see this as Máelduin's "Boddhisattva moment." Like the Boddhisattva, he chooses to depart the total joy of the Otherworld and return to physical reality.

When he returns to his land and expresses forgiveness to his father's murderers, it is clear, as with Alasdair, above, that his ordeals have changed him for the better.¹⁹³ Everything he has been through has been necessary to his transformation—the classic shaman hero's journey.

187 It should be noted here that the motif of the three extra crewmen occurs in other Irish tales such as Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, and the *Navigatio Brendani*. While these figures "work" as Máelduin's alter egos in this tale, they don't necessarily in the others. I intend to research this theme further in future, in the meanwhile, thanks to Tom Clancy for this point.

188 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 101-109

189 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 120-123

190 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 128-131

191 Underhill, 1990, pp. 380-412

192 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 164-167

193 Oskamp, 1970, pp. 176-179

This is such an archetypal, universal journey that some scholars interpret Celtic myths of this kind as literary borrowings from other sources.¹⁹⁴ Eldevick, however, admits that the evidence for Virgilian influence is circumstantial.¹⁹⁵ First, there is a short quote from the *Aeneid*, which may or may not indicate that the Irish writer had a thorough knowledge of Virgil. Next, Máelduin's tale bears external similarities to the *Aeneid*. Finally, there is an apparent similarity between the spiritual development of Máelduin and Aeneas.

As I have stated above, however, both tales come from Indo-European roots and both are based on the mythic pattern so well documented by Campbell, that of the hero's journey.¹⁹⁶ Next, that theme in itself, with its Otherworld voyages, battles with monsters, and eventual triumph in a higher level of spirituality and adherence to a higher code than earthly heroism, vengeance or desire, is itself based upon the shaman, society's first transcendent hero. It is true that, as Eldevick says, the *immram* can be viewed as a "portrayal of the growth and maturation of the hero's soul." However, the Native Irish hardly needed to rely on Virgil as "precedent and model" for a tale or myth of this type. It exists everywhere, as Campbell has shown. Another universal is the shamanic cosmic structure.

THE THREE WORLDS

The cosmic structure the shaman journeys through is essentially simple, with three worlds: an upper, middle and lower. Towards the end of the *Táin*, Conchobar's men make a vow. They say, "We shall hold the spot where we now stand...unless the ground quakes beneath us or the heavens fall down on us, we shall not flee from here." (*Gébma-ne iarom i mbale i tám...acht mani maidi in talam found nó an ném anúas foraind, nícon memsam-ne de sund.*)¹⁹⁷

This formula is well attested throughout Celtic history and literature. While it may simply be a statement that Conchobar's men vow to stay unless the

194 Zimmer was the first to comment on the possible Vergilian influence on ICMD. (Ref: Zimmer, Heinrich. 1889. "Keltische Beiträge II." in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* vol. 33, the section dealing with Mael Dúin being pp. 325-338.) This was rebutted by W.F. Thrall in: Thrall, W.F., 1917, "Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Irish *Immrama*: Zimmer's Theory," in *Modern Philology*, vol. 15. pp. 449-474

195 Eldevick, 1984, p. 6

196 See Campbell, Joseph, 1963

197 Sayers, 1986, pp. 99-100, quoting O'Rahilly, Cecile, 1976, line 4043

impossible happens, the way it is used indicates that it has cosmological implications.¹⁹⁸ It may be a relic of the shamanic three-fold cosmic structure.

A discussion of Celtic cosmic structure as a whole is far beyond the scope of this work. The most basic facet of shamanic cosmologies that we can compare to the Celtic is that they have lower, middle and upper worlds usually connected by a world tree or pillar. The lower world is entered by going down into an opening in the earth or descending the roots of the world tree. The middle is the spiritual aspect of this world, and may include a spirit world entered by going over the sea. The upper is entered by climbing the world tree or flying up into the heavens and passing through a zone of transition, often clouds, and emerging into a landscape. The worlds are each multi-layered like a cake.¹⁹⁹

We see some evidence for all the above in Celtic tradition. First, journeys to a lower world, in the Celtic case, into *síd* mounds or below the ocean or lakes, are very well attested, and appear throughout this study. A middle world journey features in the *Táin* where Mac Roth flies out to survey enemy troops. The *immrama* can also be classed as middle world journeys.²⁰⁰

The upper world journey is a bit more difficult to show. It is implied by the fact that some Celtic shamanic figures display powers of spirit flight, and many wear bird costuming. Episodes where “mist descends” in stories such as *Echtrae Cormaic* may possibly represent an upper world journey, because the transition zone to the heavenly realm is so often represented as clouds in shamanistic cultures and the protagonists often encounter deities on these journeys.²⁰¹ However, mistiness can also simply be a feature of mysterious or supernatural encounters in literature as in film.

One problem is that native conceptions of an upper world would certainly have been incorporated into ideas of the Christian heaven. Stevenson and Carey have looked at some of the strands that have been woven into apocryphal literature such as the *Fís Adomnán*, but their origins remain murky.²⁰² They do share features

198 Sayers, 1986

199 Eliade, 1964, pp. 259-287

200 See also Nagy, 1981b, Rees, 1961, pp. 297-325, Carey, 1994b, 2000, Ó Cathasaigh, 1977-1979

201 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, pp. 183-184

202 Stevenson, Jane, 1983, Carey, 1994b

with shamanic journeys of ascent. For example, there are several levels, the journey may be arduous and even painful and supernatural figures help or hinder along the way, sometimes functioning as spirit teachers.²⁰³

The usual number of heaven worlds in the apocrypha is seven. It is interesting to note that the number of heavens, and corresponding branches of the world tree, may number seven or nine in a variety of Siberian traditions. Nine is a very important number in Celtic cosmology, appearing alternately with seven in various contexts, as it does in Siberia.²⁰⁴ Siberian sources also show other significant correspondences with the Celtic in the matter of cosmology.

THE DOWNWARD GROWING TREE

One Irish manuscript describes a tree with “its upper part above the firmament, its lower part in the Earth, and every harmony in its midst...It grew downward from a single root...There were nine branches, every branch more beautiful than that above. There were pure white birds on the forks of the branches, singing many melodies throughout the ages.”²⁰⁵ The inverted tree is Christ, and the birds on the branches are the souls of the righteous. While this is a Christian text, the idea of an inverted tree also appears in the *Rig Veda*, so we may have an archaic Indo-European motif here, with shamanic parallels.²⁰⁶

From the *ba* soul we see hovering above mummies in ancient Egyptian paintings to the white bird souls of the righteous perched in the downward growing tree, the idea of the soul as bird is an almost universal phenomenon.²⁰⁷

Of course, in traditional shamanic cultures, the shaman is considered to be the most “righteous” person there is. A Yakut myth on the origin of shamans that echoes a number of Celtic shamanic themes says that shamans are born in the North. A giant fir tree grows there with nests in its branches. Of course, North is where the Tuatha Dé hail from and the direction of magic in Celtic tradition.²⁰⁸

As in the Celtic tree, the “noblest orders” of birds or souls are at the top.

203 Eliade, 1964, pp. 193-197, Stevenson, Jane. 1983

204 Stevenson, Jane. 1983, Seymour, 1923, Eliade, 1964, pp. 274-276, Rees, 1961, p. 195

205 Thurneysen, 1923, Herbert and McNamara, 1989, p. 55, Low, 1996, pp. 102-103

206 Rees, 1961, p. 193

207 Rowland, 1978

208 Gray, 1983, p. 25

Great shamans are in the highest branches, lesser ones in the middle and garden variety at the bottom. Bird-of-Prey-Mother, a mythical, eagle-headed, iron-feathered being, lays the eggs that the shaman souls emerge from.²⁰⁹ When they hatch they are given to a devil-shamaness of distinct Fomoirian aspect who has one eye, one arm and one bone, to be trained.²¹⁰

Moving back to Celtic and Germanic sources, the seeress in the *Voluspá* says “Nine worlds I remember, nine in the tree...” which may relate to the shaman’s celestial ascent. Norse tradition has the world tree *Yggdrasil*, usually interpreted as “the Horse of Odin,” with the shamanic association that the world tree is the “horse” the shaman rides into the heavens.²¹¹ A Welsh source refers to the oak as *drwssawr*, “doorkeeper,” while one Old Irish source calls a tree *dor nime*, possibly meaning “door of heaven.”²¹² In a shamanic parallel, the Buriat call the sacred birch *udeshi burkhan*, the “guardian of the door,” for “it opens the door to heaven for the shaman.”²¹³ Watson claims that sacred trees were associated with poetry and kingship and were sources of wisdom.²¹⁴

Another factor that encourages the idea of a Celtic world tree is the overall religious significance of the tree in Celtic tradition. Sacred groves were central to the Celtic spiritual practices. Tacitus states “The grove is the centre of their whole religion.”²¹⁵

The oak was certainly an important tree, as evidenced by the connections to the etymology of the word druid mentioned earlier. The fact that oaks are often struck by lightning might have underscored their role in connecting the heavens and earth. The ash is also important. Some sacred trees mentioned in an Irish context are the Tree of Ross, The Tree of Mugna, The Ancient Tree of Dath-i, The Branching Tree of Uisnech, and The Ancient Tree of Tortu, of which three are ash and two are yew.²¹⁶

The diagram below shows points of comparison between the themes

209 Eliade, 1964, p. 37

210 Eliade, 1964, p. 37

211 Davidson, 1988, p. 171

212 Watson, A., 1981, p. 171

213 Eliade, 1958a, p. 93

214 Watson, A., 1981, p. 171

215 Mattingly, 1970, pp. 134

216 Davidson, 1988, p. 171

covered in this chapter and the practice of shamanism in more generally recognised shamanic cultures.

TRANCE, TRAINING AND THE OTHERWORLD JOURNEY

Shamans must be skilled and controlled.	The Irish <i>filid</i> and other shamanistic figures such as <i>Mog Roith</i> in Celtic literature, describe themselves as having skill and control over this world and the Otherworld.
Shamans are often trained by senior shamans.	The tales give us examples of “expert advisor” figures such as Fergne, Dubh Ruis and Fionn Éces helping people who seem to be at the start of a shamanistic path.
Shamans may also be epic poets in cultures such as the Tuvan.	The <i>filid</i> seem to act in some respects as shamans.
Shamans are inspired by outside forces.	Poets claim inspiration from outside sources, sometimes quite explicitly from Otherworld beings. Other people, such as Donald Sinclair, also claim traditional knowledge from supernatural sources.
Shamanic cultures have words for trance and trance practices.	Celtic culture has words for trance and trance practices.
Trance is a healing and anaesthetic state in shamanic cultures.	Trance is a healing and anaesthetic state Celtic culture.
Methods exist for entering alternate states of consciousness in shamanic cultures.	Methods exist for entering alternate states of consciousness in Celtic culture.
Alcohol is important to Siberian shamanic practice. Other cultures, like the Korean and the Hmong tribes of Vietnam use alcohol.	Alcohol appears in many contexts in Celtic culture that associate it with spiritual power.
Some shamanic cultures like the Jívaro or Shuar of South America use entheogens to enter alternate states.	There is some evidence that Celts may have used entheogens such as cannabis and henbane to enter alternate states.
The Siberians and some other cultures use <i>amanita</i> , which is also possibly the Vedic <i>soma</i> .	There is some evidence that the Celts may have used <i>amanita</i> .
Sensory deprivation in darkness is a feature of some people’s work with <i>amanita</i> .	In Celtic tradition, sensory deprivation sometimes occurs in conjunction with chewing “red flesh” which, along with other features, may suggest <i>amanita</i> use.
There may be taboos associated with <i>amanita</i> use in shamanic cultures.	There are taboos associated with berries and other comestibles that may represent <i>amanita</i> in Celtic culture.
Natural sound may be used to change consciousness.	Natural sound may be used to change consciousness.
Music is often used to change consciousness.	Music is often used to change consciousness.

Song and chant are used to change consciousness in Tuvan, Lakota and most other shamanistic cultures.	Song and chant are used to change consciousness.
Tuvans and Tibetans use overtone chant to enter alternate states of consciousness and it is bound up with spiritual symbolism.	There is some evidence for overtone chant used to enter alternate states of consciousness and bound up with spiritual symbolism.
Drumming and percussion are used to enter trance.	There is some mention of percussion in Celtic sources.
Shaking a sieve with coins or other objects in it is used by the Hungarian <i>táltos</i> in divination and to change consciousness.	Shaking a sieve with coins in it was used in divination and to change consciousness by girls in Shetland. A “talking tambourine” was used similarly by a diviner in Cornwall.
Shamans in many cultures go through ordeals to facilitate alternate states of consciousness.	Shamanic figures in Celtic culture go through ordeals to facilitate alternate states of consciousness.
Shamanic cultures such as the Inuit use fasting to enter alternate states of consciousness.	Celtic sources describe fasting to enter alternate states of consciousness. Myrddin and Lailoken fast, and the <i>tríduan</i> , or three-day fast, was part of later monastic practice.
Shamanic cultures use exposure to cold to enter alternate states of consciousness.	Celtic culture used exposure to cold to enter alternate states of consciousness.
Shamanic cultures use sensory deprivation to enter alternate states of consciousness.	Celtic culture used sensory deprivation to enter alternate states of consciousness.
Some shamanic cultures use ritual burial to enter alternate states of consciousness.	Celtic culture used ritual burial to enter alternate states of consciousness.
Some shamanic cultures have “bound shaman” rituals for healing and divination. They all involve the limbs being tied behind the body.	Celtic sources yield a good deal of evidence for ritual binding as a way to enter alternate states of consciousness and bring information from the Otherworld. Most references show the limbs being tied behind the body.
Shamanic cultures give many examples of the spirit journey.	Celtic sources yield many examples of the spirit journey.
In Siberian and other shamanistic cultures, journeys may begin at ancient sacred sites, such as burial mounds.	Journeys may begin at ancient sacred sites, such as burial mounds.
Shamanic cultures experience spirit flight.	Celtic tales such as <i>Forbuis Droma Damhgaire</i> give clear examples of spirit flight.
In the stories of spirit journeys that we find in shamanic cultures, the shamanic figure goes forth, learns things from spiritual beings, sometimes does battle with them and returns with boons for his people.	Many Celtic stories of spirit journeys follow the same trajectory.

As far as I am aware, all shamanic cultures have a three tiered cosmic structure, generally linked by an <i>axis mundi</i> , often, the world tree.	There is evidence that Celtic cultures may have had a three tiered cosmic structure, possibly linked by a world tree.
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CONCLUSIONS

I have only been able to give the slightest sampling above of the many examples of trance inducing practices, shamanic training and the spirit journey available to us in Celtic sources. In some ways, the journey, in particular, is one of the easiest facets of Celtic shamanism to demonstrate. However, the shaman's use to his community does not end with the ability to change consciousness and journey.

In shamanic cultures, power is only power to the extent that it is of practical use. Pwyll's power to enter the Otherworld would be insignificant to his community if he had not learned to be a better king through it.

The stories touched on above and in previous chapters give many examples of the utility of Otherworld contact. Máelduin learns to forgive his enemies and comes to internal peace. Cú Chulainn becomes a greater warrior. Óengus gets a wife and their joined powers benefit others. Cormac gains greater wisdom and magical implements that enhance his subjects' happiness. Mogh Roith does battle with Munster's enemies.

While there are various ways to determine that the shaman has had a "proper" or "real" trance, the most dominant one is the utility of what he brings back. Gaining power is only useful to the extent that the shaman uses it to perform his function for his community.

CHAPTER 3
THE USES OF POWER
KILLING, HEALING AND REVEALING

*I acclaim the cauldron of wisdom
 Where the law of each art is set out
 Which increases prosperity,
 Which magnifies each artist,
 Which exalts man through art.*

*The Cauldron of Poesy*¹

*Memory, prophecy and fantasy
 the past, the future and the dreaming moment between
 are all one country, living one immortal day.
 To know that is wisdom.
 To use it is the Art.*

*Clive Barker*²

The shaman has many cultural functions. They protect the community from malefic spiritual forces. They are often healers. They may also be killers, whether they use their powers in the hunt or against a human enemy. They look into the future and discern hidden truths in the present in their function as revealer or diviner. They also act as the spiritual guide for their community, teaching them how the universe works.³ These many functions are predicated on *one* function.

The core function of shamanism is to manifest Otherworld powers in this world, acting as co-creator with spiritual forces. For the shaman thoughts and action fuse. “For them, thinking is no mere symbolic expression that ekes out a pale existence in the form of language. Shamans carry thinking to the highest level of perfection, seeing in it a subtle quasi-material force that, like air, pervades the material world.”⁴

The co-creative power of thought and the spiritual power it marshals is neutral. The shaman decides how to apply it. We must return again to the bards and *filid* to find the widest range of applications of co-creative power that we could see as

1 Breatnach, 1981, pp. 62-63, my translation, based on Breatnach

2 Barker, 1989, p. 5

3 Nagy, 1981a, p. 303, Eliade, 1964

4 Kalweit, 1992, p. 177

shamanistic.

The Old Irish word *creth*, poetry and Welsh *prydydd*, have cognates in other languages which associate them with occult powers.⁵ The poetry was designed for magical effect, as well as the visionary trance or ecstasy.

Ifor Williams called the poet a seer who, whether seeing a warrior, a landscape, or society and customs, can “frame or shape his vision in fitting words...and further, there is that element of frenzy, of the supernatural or the demonic, which is akin to mania and madness, and may go with genius or charlatanism...It is from this obscure source that we may derive all that mass of early poetry which is grouped under the heading of *darogan* or vaticination.”⁶ My only argument is that I would prefer to call the poet’s inspiration *daemonic* rather than demonic.

Poetry and shamanic power go together in a wide range of cultures. Glosecki has shown how shamanism and poetry intertwined in Anglo-Saxon culture.⁷ In Tuvan culture, the shaman accompanies every stage of his *kamlanie*, or ritual activity, with *algysh* verses. These are created spontaneously and the Tuvans believe that both the sounds and imagery of the verses heal the patient.⁸

While poetic inspiration comes from spirit, these poets do not simply go along with what the spirits say, but creatively interact with them. The human, or the shaman, acts on and is acted upon by many forces. Therefore, creation is always co-creation.

DÁN

I think that the word *dán*, used in Néde’s poem at the start of the last chapter, and usually translated simply as “poetry,” or “art” may refer to such co-creative power.⁹ Néde spoke of “wisdom, son of the three gods of art,” (*ecna mac na trí ndea dána*), associating *dán* with pre-Christian deities, but it continues to be bound up with the sacred in the Christian context.¹⁰

The first meaning *the Dictionary of the Irish Language* gives for *dán* is that

5 Ward, 1973, p. 140

6 Williams, Ifor, 1944, pp. 7-10

7 Glosecki, 1989

8 Van Deusen, 1997, p. 9

9 Stokes, 1905, pp. 30-31, lines 129-130, 139

10 Stokes, 1905, p. 30, line 139

of “a gift,” for example, in the material sense of a gift of silver, (*dán airgid*.)¹¹ The most usual meaning of *dán* is a poetic, artistic, scientific, or professional skill, or the product of that skill, like a poem or song.¹² For example, when Lugh arrives at Tara in the *Cath Maige Tuired*, the doorkeeper asks, “What art do you practice? For no one without an art enters Tara.” (*Cia dán frisa ng[n]éie? Al séi, “ar ni téid nech cin dán i Temruid.*)¹³

The next meaning given is a “spiritual gift,” for example, from God to man. A “divine gift to man from God or the Holy Ghost, a Christian virtue looked upon as *an emanation from the Holy Ghost.*”¹⁴ (Italics mine.)

For example, the *Leabhar Breac* says that there are seven gifts of the holy spirit, (*uair is secht ndána airegda airmither don spirut noem*).¹⁵ Another source says that these seven gifts are “wisdom, intellect counsel, vigour, knowledge, piety and fear of God,” (*ecna intliucht comarle nert fis gaire gur omon Fiadat for bith ché secht ndána Dé dún*).¹⁶

Clearly these kinds of spiritual gifts take us beyond the idea of *dán* as a simple skill or poetic art. Here *dán* is more of a way of being derived from gifts received from the divine. But *dán* does not simply refer to gifts that God gives man, but also to gifts man gives to God.

The *Leabhar Breac* speaks of the “three gifts offered to Christ by the Church, i.e., virginity, penance and lawful marriage.” (*na trí dána édbras ind eclais do Chríst .i. óige 7 aithrigi 7 lánamnus dligthech*).¹⁷

The god Lugh possesses the epithet *Samildánach*, the “All-Skilled One,” because he told Tara’s doorkeeper that he possessed all skills, including supernatural ones. In fact, the first thing he does when he has entered to demonstrate his power is play the “three strains” of music, discussed in the last chapter. The first strain of these that he plays on the first night was *súantraige*. It may be significant that this is his first demonstration of the powers that he claims. From the discussion in the last chapter, it

11 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

12 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

13 Gray, 1982, pp. 38-39, par. 56, lines 243-244

14 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

15 Atkinson, 1887, line 8028

16 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

17 Atkinson, 1887, line 7082

would seem to imply that the most important form of *dán* to demonstrate is supernatural power.¹⁸

So—*dán* can mean a poetic, scientific, or professional skill, a poem or song, a gift from God to man, or a gift from man to God. Lastly, it is sometimes used to mean fate or destiny, as in the phrase *i ndán 7 i tairngire*, “was fated and foretold.”¹⁹ Taking all these meanings into account, I think that, at its deepest level, *dán* can mean co-creative power.

For example, the *Imacallam* says that landholders will become inhospitable, “*co mbat duba a n-dána.*”²⁰ Stokes translates, “so that their poems will be dark,” i.e., their songs and eulogies. In short, they will get a bad reputation. If *dán* can also mean co-creation, it could then possibly also be translated as, “so that their creations will be dark,” i.e., what they manifest in the world.

Dán can change a person’s essential nature—there is the saying that “the art of wisdom makes a king of a pauper” (*dán ecna dogní rí do bhocht*).²¹ Magical practitioners of different kinds are also numbered among the *Áes Dána*, including the *lucht cumachtai* or “people of power” include *corrguinig*, *tuathaig* or sorcerers, *ammaiti* or wizards. *Dán* appears in the compound word for diabolic arts (*diabul-dánachta*).²² This associates *dán* with a kind of practice that involves working with a kind of spirit (demonic) in a co-creative way.

Besides working with spirits, the *Áes Dána* seem to be considered to be as spirits themselves in certain accounts. *Echtra Cormaic* clearly associate the *Aes Dána*, with the *Aes Síde*, the fairy folk.²³ As we shall see in chapter five, both these classes of ‘folk’ have strong shamanic associations. Finally, the wonderfully strange text, the *Cauldron of Poesy*, gives us still more reasons to associate *dán* with some sort of supernatural co-creative power.²⁴

Other evidence that supports the idea of *dán* as co-creation as well as poetry, is the fact that poetry like *Amergin’s Rúin* and some works attributed to Taliesin, give

18 Gray, 1982, pp. 42-43, par. 73

19 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

20 Stokes, 1905, pp. 42-43, line 219

21 Atkinson, 1880, 346, column a, line 35

22 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 181, headword *dán*

23 Stokes, 1891, vol. 1, p. 216

24 Henry, 1979-1980, Breatnach, 1981

the sense that creation occurs through language. This poetry *is the very medium through which co-creative power is exercised*, making them one in at least these cases. In Irish sources *dán* may be both a poem and its magical effect.

In Welsh, *awen*, usually translated as “divine inspiration,” is in some cases both inspiration and effect. While the Biblical tale of creation via God’s utterance is certainly one source of this idea in Irish literature, but shamanic cultures also see words as potentially magically creative.

McKenna notes that from the shaman’s point of view, “the world appears to be...in the nature of an utterance or a tale.” He goes on to say that for the shaman, “the cosmos is a tale that becomes true as it is told and as it tells itself. This perspective implies that human imagination can seize the tiller of being in the world. A reverence for and an immersion in the powers of language and communication are the basis of the shamanic path.”²⁵

Taking all the evidence above into account, we can see that *dán* can mean a poetic, scientific, or professional skill, a poem or song, a gift from God to man, or a gift from man to God. Lastly, it is sometimes used to mean fate or destiny. Taking all these meanings into account, I think that, at its deepest level, *dán* means co-creative power.

POWER IS NEUTRAL

Shamanic power can be used in many ways. I showed in the last chapter how *súantraige* can be used to heal, but the Tuatha Dé also have the capacity to use music to bring sorrow or even kill. For example, Aillen mac Midhna destroyed Tara every year by first putting everyone to sleep, then emitting a blast of fire.²⁶ Here *súan* may simply be “sleep,” albeit a magically invoked sleep. It could also be the kind of deep trance that renders a person totally insensible to their surroundings or anything that may be happening to them.

In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” we have nine pipers who can kill with their music, but not be killed, because they are

25 McKenna, 1992, p. 7

26 Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, pp. 89-90

of the *Síd*.²⁷ Of course, the ability to kill magically is not limited to shamans, and may not necessarily be shamanic. This is the reason I have not included an exhaustive description of the evil eye, curse tablets and the like, here. However, shamans in many cultures do use their power to harm.²⁸

There are actually no rituals to heal or kill, only rituals to raise power, which the shaman can then use as he desires.²⁹ The power is neutral. Like shamanic power, the poets' *dán* can be used in any way.

When the poet uses *dán* to praise, he literally magnifies the object of his praise. The word used in Old Irish is *molaid*—magnify. *Dán* used to praise makes the person more than they are, bigger, better, braver and more noble.

For example, the following poem by an unknown author addressed to James (*Sémas*) son of Angus. He was one of Clann Domhnaill living in Islay and Kintyre around 1600, according to various historical references and Bergin's estimated date for the poem. The poet asks James to try to help free Ireland from English persecution. He praises James in the highest terms.

...Fragrant blossom of Clann Domhnaill,
comely stag of Inis Fáil,
fawn of the doe from the land of Mull,
sun of the school of Magh Máil...

...*A bhláth cumhra Chloinne Domhnaill,*
A dhamh dealbhach Innsi Fáil,
A láogh na hoighi ó iadh Muile,
*A ghrian sgoile Muighe Máil...*³⁰

Ultimately the chief or king is magnified out of the human realm altogether, and into the mythic, cosmological one.

...Hard is it indeed, though we are inciting thee,
for thy long arm that takes territory by storm,
O... rampart of Lugh's Plain,

27 Gantz, 1981, pp. 82-83

28 Kalweit, 1992, pp. 177-191

29 Kalweit, 1992, p. 191

30 Bergin, 1935, pp. 146-147, lines 33-34

To accomplish each man's counsel.

*...Deacair thrá, gé tám dod bhrosdach,
dod bhais leabhair lingios chrích,
a mhúr cliachda Chláir Logha,
briathra cáigh do chora a gcrích...*³¹

Here, James is associated with the god Lugh. When one reads this kind of poem, the kind that the *filid* and Welsh bards wrote for their lords, one would think that these were either the greatest rulers in the world or that the bards were the greatest toadies. I think that neither is likely to be true.

Rather, I think that the *filid* sought to magically amplify the qualities they praised in their lords. Invoking an archetypal figure, such as a great sheltering tree that links the worlds and supports the lives of all the forest creatures living in and around it, they bound the ruler to its archetypal qualities.³²

Of course this works on a purely practical level as well. If a bard has just finished singing of his lord's generosity, he would look very mean indeed if he failed to give a generous gift—especially to the bard. To fail to be generous is to invite the bard's curse.

SATIRISATION

To be satirised in an honour based culture robs one of the basic currency of all social interactions.³³ To be known as stingy, incompetent or uncouth can quickly, or even instantly, destroy personal power.

For example, when Coirpre mac Étaine the *fili* went to visit Bres, the half Fomoirian king of the Tuatha Dé, he might have been braced for a bad time. The story tells us that no matter how often the Tuatha Dé visited Bres, their knives were not greased, nor did their breaths smell of ale. His reception was even worse than he might have imagined, however. He was shown to a small dark outlying building with no fire or furnishings. They brought him three small cakes on a little dish—and they were dry.

31 Bergin, 1935, pp. 144-145, par. 26

32 See Newton, 1998

33 Ward, 1973, pp. 141-143. For greater detail on satire see Meroney, 1950

Upon leaving the following day, he was not pleased. He then made what some sources call the first satire in Ireland, saying “Without food quickly on a dish, without cow’s milk on which a calf grows, Without a man’s habitation after darkness remains, without paying a company of storytellers—let that be Bres’ condition.” He concluded simply “Bres’ prosperity no longer exists” (*Ni fil a main trá Bresi*), and it was so.³⁴

Ó Cathasaigh has compared this incident of native satire or *áer* with the *maldacht* or curse used by the clergy. In *Acallamh na Senórach* St. Patrick curses an unrighteous, ungenerous king. Like Coirpre’s curse, St. Patrick’s takes the form “of an incantatory verse wound round the name of the king.” This clearly suggests magic, as does the fact that both *maldacht* and *áer* were quite effective. In Coirpre’s case, the epic battle of Moytura, deposing Bres and destroying many of the Fomoiré, followed on from his *áer*. In St. Patrick’s case the king was also deposed.³⁵

The effect of satirisation in the form of the spell called the *glam dícend*, was considered worse than physical death.³⁶ The threat to unleash the singers aided tax collection. One King, Eochaid of Connacht, was one eyed but ripped his remaining eye out rather than be satirised.³⁷

The power of this invective should not be seen as a pure literary convention. The “ritual sanctions available to churchmen and *filid*” were still “recognised and invoked as instruments of public order in 16th century Ireland.”³⁸ For example, O’Donnel of Tyrconnel and O’Connor of Sligo made a treaty in 1539. Archbishop Tuan and other clerics appeared as guarantors, promising to excommunicate O’Connor if he broke the treaty and three members of the poetic families Ward and O’Clery undertook to satirise him at O’Donnel’s behest.³⁹

Incidents of satire both come forward in history to relatively recent times and go back to more ancient times. Close Indo-European parallels would seem to indicate that Coirpre’s satirisation of Bres has archaic parallels. In Vedic India people prayed that the singers spare them from their attacks. In Germanic as in Irish tradition the attacks could raise welts and rashes and lead to death.

34 Gray, 1983, pp. 34-35, par. 39. The story also exists as a single vignette, see Hull, V, 1930a

35 Ó Cathasaigh, 1986, pp. 10-15

36 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 288

37 Elliot, 1960, p. 30

38 Ó Cathasaigh, 1986, p. 15

39 Byrne, 1973, p. 15

The songs had magical power—not just by virtue of their content, but by their cadence, metre, rhythm, rhyme and most important, melody. This helps explain why some Germanic and Irish songs not containing satiric content, but sung with malicious intent, could harm. In fact, commonalities of metre between Vedic, Greek, Irish and Slavic verses suggest that singing invective songs derives from common Indo-European tradition.⁴⁰

Of course, Indo-European traditions are also heroic traditions, which brings us to the next use of power: duels to prove shamanic prowess.

SHAMANIC DUELS

Duelling is a frequent shamanic occupation. These duels may involve wars of words, magical incantation, spiritual battle, and spiritually enhanced physical battle. The *payé* of the South American Tukano tribe lie in trance while their spirits shoot each other with lightning, attack each other in the forms of serpents or jaguars, and build stone walls round each others heart's to make their world smaller and smaller. As a defence, one can become a fly to escape, but that shrinks his universe to the size of an orange, and the shaman is lost forever.⁴¹

This calls to mind the famous transformations of Cerridwen and Gwion Bach, later Taliesin, when he has drunk the potion she intended for her son. He becomes a bird, she a hawk, he a fish, she an otter and so on, until she eats him as a chicken eating a piece of grain and gives birth to him.⁴² One Chukchee shaman asked what form the other would fight him in. “Into a falcon.” He responded. The second became a great auk and the battle ensued.⁴³

Many of the poems attributed to Taliesin's later career as it is depicted the imply shamanistic duels, or challenge other poets, although he has no direct dialogue with them in the literature. (At least none where they get to respond, as in Néde and Ferchertne's poetic duel in the *Immacallam in dá Thuarad*.)⁴⁴

. Taliesin says of his rivals, “I do not love a poetic competitor; whosoever

40 Ward. 1973, p. 139-140, 143

41 Kalweit. 1992, p. 198

42 Guest. 1906, pp. 263-264

43 Kalweit. 1992, p. 200

44 Stokes and Windisch. 1880-1909, pp. 24-25, 55

casts a slur on the skilled one shall not have mead.” (*Nyt ef caraf amryssonat; Y geibyl keluyd ny meued med.*) He says “I am a leader, I am a sage in poetic contest.” (*Wyf llyw, wyf syw amrysson.*) His leadership is clearly based, at least in part, on shamanic gnosis. He says, “I know the gifts of inspiration when it flows, I know about payments to a skilled man, about propitious days, about a joyful life, about the customs of the fortress.” (*Gogwyn dedyf radeu / Awen pan deffreu / Am geluyd taleu, / Am detwyd dieu, / Am buched ara, / Am oesseu yscorua.*)⁴⁵ As I showed in the last chapter, the word *awen* probably denotes the ecstatic state of shamanic trance.

There are many other magical duels in Celtic tradition which mirror those in shamanic cultures. They can range from a “war of words” to hexing. In one example, Marbán shames the avaricious poets in *Tromdám Gúaire*, in revenge for the loss his probably totemic pig, discussed below.⁴⁶ Another example is the contest between the two *filid* in *Immacalam in dá Thuarad* or *Colloquy of the Two Sages* mentioned in the last chapter.⁴⁷

Here, Ferchertne is ollave of Emain Macha when the young Néde comes to contest for the role. The text describes him as “Néde, son of Adnae of Connaught, or he is of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”⁴⁸ After a lengthy and mythically fascinating war of words, Néde flings himself under Ferchertne’s feet and acknowledges him as senior, but Ferchertne tells him to keep the ollaveship.

A similarly friendly end is reached in other shamanic duels. For example, the Inuit shamans Titqatsaq and Muraq met on a spirit journey when they were both flying about in the sky like birds. Muraq came too near Titqatsaq and they collided, knocking Titqatsaq to the ice. Muraq went to help, calling his helping spirits to heal his friend. Upon Titqatsaq’s recovery, however, he rammed Muraq. With slight reluctance, Titqatsaq helped Muraq in turn, due to their friendship.⁴⁹

An interesting point to make here is that shamanic figures such as Cú Chulainn do not just use their powers against other humans. In fact, Cú Chulainn battles quite an assortment of spirits. In *Fled Bricrend* he fought the malicious female

45 Haycock. 1997. pp. 25-27

46 Nagy. 1997. pp. 307-317. edition, Joynt, 1931. partial translation. Carney. 1955. pp. 170-179

47 Stokes. 1905

48 Stokes. 1905. pp. 14-15

49 Kalweit. 1992. p. 197

spirits, the *geniti glinne*. He was almost defeated when his charioteer Lóeg, began to mock him. He said, “You pitiable weakling, you one eyed sprite, gone are you valour and prowess when phantoms destroy you.” (*‘a midlach thruag a siriti lethguill dochóid do gal 7 do gaisced in tan urtrochta not malartat.*)⁵⁰ Cú Chulainn then became enraged and hacked them up.

Later in the same tale, when Cú Chulainn, Lóegaire and Conall are contesting for the champion’s portion, Lóegaire and Conall refuse to abide by Medb and Ailill’s decision. Bude says that there is one who would dare to judge them, and it is implied, make that judgement stick. This is Úath mac Imoman. Úath means horror, Imoman combines the intensive *imb* with *omun*, fear.⁵¹ Thurneysen takes *úath* back to an archaic Irish root in **oth*, which can in turn be related to the Old Norse *ōðr*, meaning raving or possessed. The name Odin also derives from this root.⁵²

Úath has druidic powers, which should not surprise us, since judging was originally a druidic function. He is clearly a supernatural being, and, like Cú Chulainn, is called a *sirite*. He is called this because “of his capacity to form himself into a multitude of shapes.”⁵³ Therefore, although *sirite* is translated as “sprite,” above, a more appropriate translation might be “shapeshifter.”

As Sayers notes, “There is a permeability between hero and supernatural opponents that is doubtless traceable to archaic belief. The Norse *berserkir* and shape-shifters, and their tie to Óðinn invite comparison.” I will go deeper into this comparison in chapter five, because I think there is strong evidence that Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* may represent a form of trance possession.

In the later “beheading game” scenario of *Fled Bricrend*, Úath becomes a sort of spirit teacher to Cú Chulainn, and also reveals him as the true champion of Ulster. Though his duel for supremacy with Conall and Lóegaire begins over his personal status, ultimately, Cú Chulainn acts because Ulster will be dishonoured if no one take up Úath’s challenge. In this tale, and on many other occasions, he uses his power in the classically shamanic way of fighting for his community.

50 Sayers, 1991

51 Sayers, 1991, p. 52

52 Puhvel, 1987, p. 193

53 Sayers, 1991, p. 53

SHAMANIC BATTLES

I have already mentioned Mac Roth's use to Medb and Ailill in her war against Ulster, when he surveys the enemy troops on a spirit journey.⁵⁴ Another example of a shamanic figure fighting for their community is that of Mog Roith in *Forbuis Droma Damhgaire*, mentioned in the last chapter in relation to the word *súan*.

This tale provides classic examples of a shamanic séance and spirit flight.⁵⁵ While Mog Roith does fight for his community, he does not do it for free. His king, Fiacha, hires him at great expense on Munster's behalf to defeat King Cormac Mac Art's army. He is worth it. There are "no enchantments that he cannot accomplish...whether on this side or the other [of the worlds], because none other of all the inhabitants of Ireland, has ever been in flesh and bone to learn magic in the realm of the fairies save he."⁵⁶

During his combat with the opposing armies, he calls for his shamanic equipment, his *encennach*, his bull's hide cape, his trident and his *roth ramach* in which he can travel like a boat, items I'll discuss further in chapter four.

Munster's troops asked him to cast down a magic hill raised by Cormac's druids. Mog Roith "invoked his god and his power and grew so tall that he was scarcely less high than the hill, and his head broadened so that it was as large as the high hill crowned with oak woods, the sight of which brought terror to all those who looked upon him."⁵⁷ Compare this with the way the Yamana *yékamus* of Tierra del Fuego uses his shamanic power to "blow himself up to the size of a mountain ridge to shield his patients from the attacks of hostile shamans. If the hostile sorcerer proves the stronger, he pushes this 'spiritual mountain' aside; if he is unsuccessful at this, he must withdraw."⁵⁸

When in his giant state, Mog Roith also goes through a distortion which reminds one a bit of Cú Chulainn's. In Mog Roith's case, he became rough and

54 O' Rahilly, Thomas F., 1946a, p. 519. O' Rahilly, Cecile, 1976, p. 159

55 Sjoestedt, 1979, pp. 110-113. On spirit flight, see Eliade, 1964, p. 373

56 Sjoestedt, 1979, pp. 110-113, Matthews, 1994, p. 191

57 Sjoestedt, 1979, pp. 110-113, Matthews, 1994, pp. 192-193

58 Kalweit, 1992, p. 196

spiny like a pine, both his eyes bulge, and his knees turn backwards and heels forwards.⁵⁹ A similar process of disjuncting happens in Australian shamanism—a point I will return to in chapter five.⁶⁰

In another episode, Mog Roith “rose into the air and the heavens at the same time as the fires and he started to beat the air, so as to turn the fires to the North, [against the enemy] all the while chanting this spell, ‘I make the druid’s arrow...’”.⁶¹ Here he shows both shamanic power over fire and the power of spirit flight.⁶² The arrow reference is also of interest. Herodotus says, “For the tale of Abaris, who is reported to have been a Hyperborean, I do not vouch for: how the *arrow carried him* while fasting from all food about the earth.”⁶³

One reference to a purely magical battle occurs in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*. The one-legged, one eyed, Fomoirie battle Partholón. Some sources say that the Fomoirie were destroyed. This is obviously incorrect, since they arise to plague future Irish émigrés. Other sources, however, say that during the week-long battle “not a man was slain there, for it was a magic battle.”⁶⁴

European magical battles have been explored by Carlo Ginzburg in his often quoted work, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the 16th and 17th Centuries*. Klaniczay makes a point that even Eliade failed to note in his commentary on Ginzburg’s work—that the activities of the *benendante* bear a strong resemblance to classical shamanism and have parallels in Hungarian and other European cultures.⁶⁵

We find many similarities to the *benendante* and connections to many shamanic themes we have looked at in the Celtic context in the Slovenian and Istrian *kresniks*. Their election to their role was indicated by their having been born with a caul a caul. The caul in Celtic tradition is also often linked to shamanic abilities. For example, the great judge Morann was born with a caul which was ritually washed off by the ninth wave. When it was removed, Morann sang a

59 Sjoestedt. 1979, pp. 110-113, Matthews, 1994, pp. 193

60 Eliade, 1958a, p.98

61 Sjoestedt. 1979, pp. 110-113, Matthews, 1994, p. 197

62 Eliade, 1964, p. 373

63 Watson, 1911-12, p. 92

64 Rees, 1961, p. 31, Macalister, R.A.S., 1938-1956, vol. 3, p. 13

65 Klaniczay, 1990, pp. 129-150

religious chant that Chadwick associates with the technique of the *filid, díchetal*, discussed below.⁶⁶

The *kresnik* “fell asleep” and a big black fly called Parina went out of his mouth to fight the witches. This has parallels to a Scottish incident of spirit travel and soul loss, described below. The sleeping bodies of *kresniks* must not be turned while they slept or they would die. The importance of not moving a shaman in trance is stressed in Sámi tradition and exactly the same caution appears in Cormac’s glossary in relation to performing the *imbas forosnai* ritual, also discussed below.⁶⁷

As the benendante fought the witches, the *kresnik* fought the *kudlak* (a sorcerer) or the *strigos* (witches). The Hungarian *taltós* has a rivalry with malefic witches, and has been compared with the *kresniks* in other ways. It has been argued variously that the *taltós* is a descendant of the Siberian shamans or is specific to Hungarian culture.

Klaniczay suggests that the clashes that later developed into a good versus evil battle between shamans and “witches” were originally simply battles between the shamans of different clans or tribes—and this is where a particularly interesting Celtic comparison comes in.⁶⁸

The *zduhač*, male sorcerers in Serbia and Bosnia carried out spiritual combat against other tribes in favour of their own. The *zduhač* typically fought in the form of two animals, one light in colour, one dark, mostly goats, *bulls* or horses. The *taltós* also fought amongst themselves in the *shape of bulls of opposing colours*, i.e., black-white, red-blue, light-dark. (Italics mine.) Although the *taltós* sometimes fought as stallions, goats, pigs, blue and red fire balls, fire wheels, metal wheels or birds, the Hungarian scholar Dioszegi devoted a whole article to the “*taltós* bulls,” because there were so many examples that they seemed to be the *taltós*’s favorite shape to fight in.⁶⁹

One cannot fail to see the comparison with the battle of the bulls in the *Táin*. The Reeses have already noted that their fight “has some points of similarity

66 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 109

67 Klaniczay, 1990, pp. 134-135

68 Klaniczay, 1990, p. 136

69 Klaniczay, 1990, pp. 134-141

with accounts of shaman contests.”⁷⁰

The combatants were originally the wizard swineherds of Ochoill king of the síd of Connacht and Bodb king of the síd of Munster respectively, so like the some of the shamanic combatants above, they were from different tribes. They were first friends then rivals. They appeared first as ravens who prophesied the slaughter they would cause, then fought as water beasts, and when they fought “fiery swords darted out of each other’s jaws and reached the sky.” They then became human champions again, then demons, then water worms again. When taken out of the water one tells Medb to marry Ailill. Fiachna mac Dáiri takes the other from a river in Cuailnge and prophesies the fight with Connacht’s bull. Both are swallowed by cows and reborn as bulls, one dark, one light, like the *taltós* bulls.⁷¹

The Battle of Findchorad gives a highly ritualised picture of the bulls’ battle, supporting the argument that it is a shamanic conflict.⁷² When the troops are gathered, Medb, Ailill and Eochaid mac Luchta ask their druids to prophecy how it will go. The druids perform a ceremony that sounds related to both *tarbfeis* and *imbas forosnai*. They sacrifice dogs, pigs and cats to the gods, and then lie on a bull hide over rowan hurdles with their heads facing north, the direction traditionally associated with magic. Their gods tell them to bring the two bulls together and the side whose champion won would win. Here the druids clearly act as shamans, sacrificing and engaging in visionary practices to answer questions for their tribe.

Eochaid asks what form the bulls have. Mac Roth says that the white bull is “White and red, a lad of the herd of *Aí*” (*Macáomh bhúar n-Áoi*).⁷³ White and red are of course the classical Otherworldly colours, and *aí* means poetic inspiration. The Donn of Cuailnge is described as singing, and called “the greatest ox of Dil, guardian bull of the world,” (*Moamh damh nDile[nn] Diond damh ndomhan*).⁷⁴ Guardian of the world, of the cosmic order, is perhaps the central shamanic role, as I will discuss in chapter six.

The shamanistic features multiply as the battle commences. Supernatural

70 Rees, 1961, p. 366, note 70

71 Rees, 1961, p. 59

72 Dobbs, 1923, ZCP 14, pp. 395-420

73 Dobbs, 1923, ZCP 14, pp. 398-399

74 Dobbs, 1923, ZCP 14, pp. 402-403, Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 11, headword *aí* 2

beings appear from the *Síd* of Bodb to comment. The druids see and converse with these spectres, proclaiming that one of their poems is beautiful. Here again the druids act in a clearly shamanic role, seeing other world beings and describing their doings to their people.

The way the poet described the bulls gave Dobbs some confusion in his translation. He says that one section of the poem relating to the Donn is probably an interpolation, in part because these lines “clearly have nothing to do with a bull.”⁷⁵ However, I would argue that this is due to the fact that the lines are about a shapeshifting human shaman, battling with the shaman of a rival tribe in bull form. Of course, as in the *Táin*, battle may be to the death

KILLING

Killing is one of the most straight-forward uses of shamanic power. Whether the shaman uses his power to become possessed by a lethal spirit, like the Norse *berserkirs* or “points the bone,” as in Aboriginal shamanism, killing is an unequivocal manifestation of power. It can also seem one of the most divine powers, the most impressive, the most mysterious. On a visceral level, the power to kill may seem more God-like and mysterious than the power to heal. It is certainly more frightening.

Some traditions would define using spiritual power to kill as “black” magic, although there is a great deal of variation of belief here. Like physical killing, it may be considered justifiable or even desirable in certain contexts. If a tribe is attacked by another tribe they might use magic to kill in self-defense. Warrior shamans, just like warriors of the physical realm, can see their activities as killing rather than murder. A moral examination of the use of sorcery to kill is beyond my scope here, so in a nutshell, I will define “black” magic as magic intended to harm another being or manipulate their free will.

One reason black magic is so deeply feared in traditional cultures is that it is notoriously hard to defend against. No amount of temporal power makes one proof against sorcery. Even the great King Cormac was said to have been murdered by the magic of druids.⁷⁶ In some versions, he is killed because he refuses to worship their

⁷⁵ Dobbs, 1923, p. 417

⁷⁶ MacRitchie, 1908-9, pp. 263-4

gods, in others, because he refuses to worship *them* as gods, a point I will return to in chapter five.⁷⁷

While the druids' spell above worked without any physical contact with Cormac, another way to use shamanic power lethally is to use it to enhance physical abilities in combat.

ARTS OF WAR

Spiritual and physical combat are always paired to one degree or another in shamanic cultures. In some cultures, the warrior role is by far the most important for the shaman, out weighing that of healer. There are plenty of accounts of this sort of shamanic activity amongst South American tribes.⁷⁸

Warriors want all the help they can get. No member of a shamanic culture would go into combat without the advantage given by invoking totemic animals and other guardian spirits. These forces may be marshalled against other tribes from the same culture, or against foreign invaders.

The results can be impressive. When the Romans confronted the chanting Druids and black robed Druidesses carrying flaming torches at Anglesea, they were momentarily, though not permanently, unmanned.⁷⁹ The Zulus famously fared better against the British in one decisive battle. It has been asserted that they used trance practices including drug use to induce a state of "battle fury" and defeat the British.⁸⁰

Like the Zulus, the Ulstermen apparently used shamanistic techniques in combat. Cú Chulainn appears on several occasions in his *ferg*, or magical heat, and has to be cooled with vats of water. As mentioned in chapter one, Eliade concluded that Cú Chulainn's *ferg* meant that he had gained possession of sacred power.⁸¹ This state is not special to Cú Chulainn, however.

The *Táin* repeatedly depicts *ferg* as a skill that renders warriors invincible.⁸² The more experienced warriors are particularly good at it.⁸³ *Ferg* means "anger,

77 MacRitchie, 1908-9, p. 261, Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, also mentions cryptic variants of this account, pp. 70-72.

78 Harner, 1973, pp. 140-142, 118-121

79 Green, 1997a, pp. 53, 73

80 Knight and Greaves, 2000

81 Eliade, 1958a, pp. 84-87

82 O'Rahilly, 1967, pp. 116-117, 120, 4224-7, 4362-5, trans. pp. 252, 256

83 Sadowska, 1997, p. 35

wrath or ferocity,” yet there is good reason for seeing *ferg* as a specific skill rather than emotional state as I noted on in the introduction.

For one thing, while *ferg* is described as *unique* to the Ulster warriors as a group, warriors as described in Irish literature all have the capacity to become enraged. Therefore, *ferg* *must* be different from normal rage. Sadowska discusses this skill in detail in relation to the *Táin*.

On two occasions prior to the battle Fergus specifically alerts Medb to the fact that once *ferg* came upon an Ulster warrior, there would be no match for him (*TBC* II 4225-7, 4362-5). This mysterious martial condition was apparently unique to the Ulstermen, and made them invincible to armies both in Ireland and Albu (Scotland) (*TBC* II 4362-5). According to Mac Roth, it was fighting in *ferg* that increased the effectiveness and strength of the Ulster army so much that it offset even significant numerical superiority of the enemy (*TBC* II 4221-3). Medb, however, failed to understand that unique martial quality, which her troops could not avail of. She counted on her own “goodly warriors and goodly soldiers,” *daglaích 7 degóic*, many of whom were undoubtedly present among the Connachta, and dismissed Fergus’s warning with a sneering remark: “*Ní dénam robrig de,*” *bar Medb*. “We make little account of it,” said Medb (*TBC* II 4224). Medb’s contempt for *ferg* may show that her warriors, “good” as they were, were nonetheless unfamiliar with some peculiar fighting method which utilised extreme emotional arousal. The question then arises whether *ferg*-based combative skills were the hidden asset that stood behind Conchobar’s bold declaration about his likely victory, *búaid*, in the forthcoming battle.⁸⁴

Ferg is consciously invoked as a martial tactic on various occasions. For example, in *Foghlaim Con Culainn*, the hero applies *ferg* tactically in his combat with Cuar, Scáthach’s son. He lets Cuar wear himself out with repeated attacks. Then when Cuar is exhausted, Cú Chulainn induces *ferg* and defeats Cuar.⁸⁵ *Ferg* induces great physical strength, enabling Cú Chulainn to pull a pillar stone out of

84 Sadowska, 1997, pp. 35-36. Her references here to *TBC* II are to Cecile O’Rahilly’s edition and translation of the *Táin Bo Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, O’Rahilly, 1967 in my Bibliography.

85 Stokes, 1908, pp. 130-131, line 32

the earth on one occasion, and right an entire house on another.⁸⁶

While Cú Chulainn's prowess in combat is well known, his lesser known powers as a healer are revealed by another incident in the *Táin*. In an encounter with the Mórrígan, mentioned earlier, she tricks him into healing her from wounds he has inflicted, because he is the only one who can.⁸⁷

Finn is likewise both healer and killer. Renowned as a warrior, he has the power to heal anyone who drinks water from his hands, a power he famously withholds from the mortally wounded Diarmuid.⁸⁸

Saints, as well as pagan heroes, are described as having powers to both heal and kill. St. Columba heals in various accounts, but also curses. Anyone who disturbed a certain bell's sanctuary would die within a year by his curse, and he also cursed a man who would not give him land.⁸⁹

St. Patrick magically murdered some of King Loegaire's druids in the famous account of him starting a "rival" fire to Loegaire's at Tara to spread the fire of Christianity throughout Ireland. However, he heals other people.

I think these examples relate to a root idea that having power has to do with having the ability to hold polarities, a point I'll return to in chapter six. Deities like Lugh, who are described as having great power in Celtic tradition, are also ambivalent in that they are never purely "good." For example, Lugh defeats the Fomoiré, the forces of chaos, yet he is half Fomoiré himself. He uses a one-eyed, one-legged trance posture that mimics the Fomoiré in the process of killing his own grandfather. He is good *and* bad, a hero *and* a kinslayer.

Needless to say, the implications of this theory may be profound in terms of our understanding of the nature of deity, heroism and what constitutes "goodness" itself in Celtic tradition. I do not have the space to do full justice to these ideas here, but they certainly constitute an area for future research. For now, I will move on to shamanic healing.

86 O'Rahilly, Cecile, 1967, p. 47, lines 1733-7, Henderson, G., 1899, p. 33, par. 27. Cú Chulainn enters another kind of battle fury of apparently supernatural origin. Unlike *ferg*, the *ríastrad* is particular to him, but since I believe it is most likely to be a form of trance possession, I will discuss it in chapter five.

87 O'Rahilly, Cecile, 1976, pp. 131-132

88 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 414-415

89 Ralls-Macleod, 2000, p. 110

HEALING

In some ways, even in shamanic cultures, many kinds of “shamanic healing” are only shamanic because they are done by shamans and based on information they received from the spirits. This makes it difficult to be clear about what is shamanic and what is not.

For example, Davis and others have commented on the incredibly precise knowledge of medicinal and hallucinogenic plants that South American shamans possess. While healing with herbs is not the exclusive province of the shaman, these shamans attribute their knowledge to their shamanic experience.⁹⁰

This sort of knowledge is mentioned in a vignette in the *Cath Maige Tuiread*. Miach magically heals Nuadu by replacing his lost hand first with a silver one, then with one made of flesh. His father, Dían Cécht, is jealous of Miach’s healing abilities and kills him. Three hundred and sixty five healing plants grow from his grave. His sister arranges them according to their properties, but Dían Cécht’s jealousy overcomes his goodwill to humanity again, and he mixes them up so that no one knows what they are good for, “unless Spirit showed them later.”⁹¹

The *Tuatha Dé’s* physicians combine a herbal bath with magical chant to restore the dead to life.⁹² In the same way that some shamanic qualities of the druids seem to have come down in the *filid*, others may have come down in the families of hereditary physicians.

One term used to describe druidic doctors in ancient texts is *fáithliaig*, which seems to combine root words for “seer” and “leech.” These druid doctors were said to have knowledge of medicinal herbs and other sorts of treatment. As Mary Beith points out in her book *The Healing Threads*, it is well nigh impossible to untangle the physical elements in Scottish traditional cures from the metaphysical.⁹³

One method of determining if the healing is shamanic is if it seems likely it was done by a shaman. Therefore, if someone gains power via shamanic means, one might call the healings they perform shamanic. Some of these ways of gaining power fall more under initiatory illness, already discussed.

90 See Davis, 1995, Shepard, 1998

91 Gray, 1983, pp. 32-33, par. 35

92 Gray, 1983, pp. 54-55, par. 123

93 Beith, 1995, pp. 1-2

There are references in the later folklore, particularly in some of the witch trial accounts, of a person acquiring the power to heal by being supernaturally healed of the same illness herself.⁹⁴ For example, in 1597 in Lothian, Jonet Steill was accused of witchcraft. She had been healed of the plague, and thus gained the power to heal, by being cured by a strange man. Bessie Dunlop claimed to know the Queen of the Fairies and received all her healing knowledge from Thomas Reid, who had died in 1547. She was tried and burned in 1576.⁹⁵ These healer figures are sometimes referred to as being from the land of the Fairies, particularly in the earlier Scottish cases, and of course are later classed as diabolical.⁹⁶

One 1720 account of a female *taltós*, Mrs. Antal, said she lay dead for nine days, and visited God in heaven, and was only sent back to heal. God even affixed a certificate to that effect between her shoulder blades. The *taltós*, like the *benendante* and Scottish healers, frequently refused, even under torture, to say that their practices were diabolical.⁹⁷

I will look at two facets of shamanic healing below. One is the removal of power that is there and should not be, like a spiritual parasite and the second is bringing back power that should be there and is not, like a soul part.

EXTRACTION

Power that is there and should not be may be a parasitical or possessing entity, or a sort of spiritual poisoning, or “fairy dart.” It may manifest as a definable physical disease, or general lethargy and debility. This is treated by extraction, that is, removing the offending thing.

The “power intrusion” may be seen in many ways, it commonly appears as an insect, voracious serpent or reptile.⁹⁸ One Celtic example may be when Miach and his brother Ormiach discover a chafer gnawing Núadu from within his silver arm. They

94 Yeoman, 1991, p. 24

95 Land, in Kirk, 1893, p. xxiii

96 Though these examples are from the Lowlands, which some do not consider “Celtic.” I include them for comparative example. I also do not believe that we can draw a crystal clear genetic or cultural divide between “Celtic” Highlands and “non-Celtic” Lowlands with the data we currently have, particularly not as early as the 16th Century.

97 Klaniczay, 1990, pp. 138-139

98 Harner, 1980, 115-118

remove the chafer, and replace his silver arm with a flesh one.⁹⁹

The intrusion may be seen as a spiritual poisoning. On Lewis, they have a wealth of charms against “adder bite.” Interestingly, there are no adders on the island, which leads one to suppose that this is not a physical poisoning.

Treatments for the evil eye bear some resemblance to classical shamanic extraction healing. Prayers to remove the evil eye speak of taking a malign power out of the sufferer and putting that power on or in other things. In shamanism it is common to put the malign power, sometimes referred to as a “power intrusion” in water.¹⁰⁰ Because fire and physical heat are associated with power, placing the intrusion in water is believed to disempower it, to cool it down. One Scottish spell to remove the evil eye treats it much as a shaman would treat a power intrusion. I mentioned the part of this ‘exorcism’ in the introduction where the practitioner invokes elemental powers over the evil eye. They then go on to remove the evil eye and place it elsewhere.

A portion of it upon the grey stones,
 A portion of it upon the steep hills,
 A portion of it upon the fast falls,
 A portion of it upon the fair meads,
 and a portion upon the great salt sea,
 she is the best instrument to carry it...

Train air na clacha glasa dheth,

Train air na beanna casa dheth,

Train air na h-easa brasa dheth,

Train air na liana maiseach dheth,

‘S trian air a mhuir mhoir shalach,

‘S i fein is fearr gu ghiulan...¹⁰¹

A similar *modus operandi* seems to be required to heal *áesán*, a word which can mean a “fairy stroke” or can be used to refer to the fairies themselves.¹⁰² An

99 Gray, 1982, p. 129, headword *Miach*.

100 Harner, 1980, 115-118

101 Carmichael, 1900-1971, vol. 2, p. 47

102 Ní Shéaghda, 1967-1968

Elizabethan source says that fairies are suspected of causing an illness if it began with a fall or mishap in an open place. If a man falls sick after such a mishap, they call on a “woman skilful in that kind,” and she goes to the place where it happened to determine the cause. It seems likely that the trip is to see if there are any fairies about the place. If she diagnoses *áesán*, she treats it by speaking “an odd prayer” in the ear of the afflicted person, and dumping hot coals in a bucket of water.¹⁰³

One healer also seemed to display a typically shamanic response during and after various kinds of healing work. She used the “charm of the thread” to cure evil eye, and often felt ill afterwards and took to bed for days. Many shamans feel ill after extraction. She was also a midwife, and said that “when called to attend” she felt herself “helpless in the grasp—the friendly grasp” of a power that controlled her, and attributed her success in that line to this power.¹⁰⁴

RESTORING POWER: SOUL RETRIEVAL

Another healing method is that of restoring power that should be there and is not. This could be a totem animal or other guardian spirit, or a part of the person’s soul. In most shamanic cultures there is the view that souls can be fragmented in times of trauma, as a defence mechanism, so all of the person’s soul is not injured.¹⁰⁵ It may also be stolen. The shaman must then return the soul parts to the person.

There may be a subconscious reference to this kind of idea in how people refer to trauma. They may say, “I was never the same after I fell out of the boat and nearly drowned.” Or, they may say, “When my wife left she took a piece of me with her.”

I have not found explicit references to soul retrieval as a healing method in the later folklore—although references *do* exist to soul loss as a form of spiritual illness.

One reference to a possible soul retrieval that failed is the story of Thomas Kirk, the famous minister who researched fairies.¹⁰⁶ He “died” on a fairy hill, but told a relative in a vision that he was not dead, but imprisoned in the Otherworld.

103 Quinn, 1966, p. 87

104 Mackinnon, 1908-9, pp. 343-344

105 Ingerman, 1993, pp. 1-5

106 See Kirk, 1893

He told his relative that he would appear at his own son's christening. When he appeared, his relative was to throw an iron knife over his head, and he would be freed. He appeared as promised, but the relative was too stunned to remember to do as asked, so Kirk was lost forever.

From the references to transmigration, there is evidence that a view existed that the soul was immortal.¹⁰⁷ There are also references to an external soul, kept in an egg, for example, showing that the soul could be separated from the body. These stories also make the point that destroying the egg or other object can damage or destroy the soul. Therefore we see that a soul can be thought to exist outside the body and can be damaged or destroyed.

One of the most interesting soul loss references is of a man whose soul "wandered through the regions of time and space." Upon its return, it "alighted on the face of the man in the form of a bee or butterfly," and was about to enter its home in the body through the pathway of the mouth when a neighbour killed it. One version of the story says the body of the man died when his soul was killed; another version says that the man's body "*lingered long in the land after the soul was dead*, busying itself up and down the earth." (Italics mine.)¹⁰⁸

Although in this circumstance the soul was felt to have been killed rather than simply lost, there seems to be a connection to the idea of soul loss here, whatever the precise method. When the Chukchee perform soul-retrieval, they capture the soul in the form of a fly or bee and may re-introduce it through the mouth.¹⁰⁹

There are also references to rescuing hostages held in the Otherworld. After defeating a Connacht prince, he gives Cú Chulainn a "destiny" that he shall not know peace until he discovers what has taken the three sons of Dóel Dermait out of their country.¹¹⁰ Ultimately he sets off in a boat belonging to the king of Alban's son. This prince replaces him at court.

An *immram* of sorts follows, as Cú Chulainn goes to various magical islands with his friends Lugaid and Lóeg, in search of Dóel Dermait's sons. Finally they reach the island where they are held and Cú Chulainn does magical battle with the

107 Piggott, 1994, pp. 113-115

108 Carmichael, 1900-1971, pp. 361-362

109 Eliade, 1964, p. 256, note 124

110 Rhys, 1892, pp. 343-347

giants there. He reaches peace with one, and kills the other, Echaid Glas. When he does, Dóel Dermait's three sons and all Echaid's other prisoners flock out to bathe in the giant's blood. They were all healed of their ailments (the ailments are not specified) and returned home, as does Cú Chulainn, loaded with treasures from the other giant.

The *Preiddeu Annwn*, attributed to Taliesin, gives us a famous example of a perilous journey to retrieve things from the Otherworld.¹¹¹ Haycock calls it “the most valuable source we have for the dark underside of the early tradition, for the oracular, pseudo-learned facets of early poetic activity in Wales.”¹¹² She notes the shamanistic parallels to this journey, where Taliesin and Arthur's company go to seize a magical cauldron, and quite possibly to rescue the prisoner Gwair.¹¹³

Gwair is chained in a dungeon that he alone has entered.¹¹⁴ This may be of some significance, because shamans doing soul retrieval often find the lost soul part in a prison of the person's own making. The traumatised soul part is “stuck” in the moment of trauma, re-living it repeatedly as ghosts are said to re-enact the moment of their death. The shaman frees them when he returns the soul part to the person who has lost it.¹¹⁵ Gwair's dungeon may represent this kind of personal hell in the poem.

. The expedition to retrieve Gwair and the cauldron is made overseas in a boat. The fortress they plunder is on an island, making it likely that the dungeon Gwair inhabits would be under the sea. The undersea Otherworld is of course well known in Celtic tradition, but it also appears in the traditions of various shamanistic cultures, including in soul retrieval accounts.

Inuit shamans retrieve souls either from the heavenly realm or from under the sea. The ordeals the shaman goes through to retrieve the soul may be depicted as dramatic and dangerous. Nootka shamans attribute soul-theft to marine spirits, and the shaman must journey to the bottom of the sea and fight ghosts to get the soul. When they return, they are often wet and bleeding at the nose and temples. They also show their bloodied club at the end of the process. The Twana of Washington state also

111 See Haycock, 1983-1984

112 Haycock, 1983-1984, p. 52

113 Haycock, 1983-1984, p. 58, note 22

114 Haycock, 1983-1984, p. 62, lines 3-10

115 See Ingerman, 1993, for various examples.

make the process dramatic. They may create a physical opening into the ground and imitate crossing a stream, miming their struggle with the spirits.¹¹⁶

Emphasising the hardship and danger of the process emphasises the *reality* of the process, its great value, and of course, the value of the shaman. Only the shaman knows the Otherworld landscape, and therefore, only the shaman can know where to find the lost soul. Taliesin emphasises his knowledge of Otherworld beings and landscapes throughout the poem. He mocks the Christian monks who do not possess such knowledge. Indeed, to a shaman, one who claims to act as a guide to the Otherworld without basic knowledge of its territory would be considered laughable.

One of the shaman's functions to his culture is revealing selected aspects of his Otherworld knowledge to his community.

REVEALING

Shamans of all cultures act as revealers because they can step outside the limitations of time, space and physical perception. They may see into the future, discover who is magically causing an illness in the present, or reveal a breach of taboo in the past responsible for a misfortune. They act as mythographers, building the cosmology of their communities through their spirit journeys. Obviously no person was physically present at the creation of humanity by the gods, so these kinds of stories come from shamans who can go back through time to recover information.

One well known example from Old Irish sources is the story of the *Táin's* recovery by *filid* in *Tromdám Gúaire*.¹¹⁷ The *filid* are one of the two classes of people we can most readily see as shamanic in Celtic culture, the other being the druids. Eliade himself identified *filid* with shamanistic prophets, and as the scholar who wrote the first definitive work on shamanism, his opinion is invaluable.¹¹⁸

In *Tromdám Gúaire*, a group of *filid* led by chief poet Senchán Torpéist pay an unwelcome visit to the generous king of Connacht, Gúaire mac Colmáin. These *filid* extort Marbán's pet pig. This was a bad move not only because Marbán was the king's brother, but because he and his pig are both supernaturally powerful figures.

116 Eliade, 1964, pp. 289, 309

117 Nagy, 1997, pp. 307-317

118 Eliade, 1964, p. 179

The pig was described as being a herdsman, musician, physician and messenger. Marbán was described as chief seer of heaven and earth.¹¹⁹ Swineherds often take on an otherworldly roles in Celtic myths, as at the beginning of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and from Marbán's description of his boar in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, he clearly fulfils functions beyond those of a "pet."

When I return from the swine at night, and the skin is torn off my feet by the briars at Glen-a-Scail, he comes to me and rubs his tongue over my foot, and he goes after the swine...He is musician to me, for when I am anxious to sleep I give him a stroke with my foot, and he lies on his back with his belly uppermost and sings me a humming tune, and his music is more grateful to me than that of a sweet toned harp in the hands of an accomplished minstrel.¹²⁰

From the above it seems that this pig fulfils a totemic function, and when the poets destroy him, Marbán is understandably vengeful.¹²¹ He enters into verbal combat with them. Marbán, like Mongán, has questionable poetic pedigree but "overwhelmingly convincing" authority.¹²² In both cases I would suggest that the reason for this authority is their contact with the Otherworld.

Marbán proves his power by revealing the other poets' ignorance of the origins and proper performance of their art.¹²³ The final straw is when the poets confess they do not remember the *Táin*. Marbán forbids them to practice their art until they recover it. Tellingly, the *only way* they can fulfil their proper function as *filid* is through shamanic means—by communicating with Fergus' spirit and receiving the tale afresh.

This is done by "fasting against God" and asking that Fergus be brought back to life to tell the story. In the last chapter I showed that fasting is a well known means of changing consciousness. In this chapter, above, I have also shown that shamans do not shrink from battling even the gods to accomplish their will. They write the *Táin* down on the hide of Ciarán of Clonmacnois' cow.¹²⁴ Elsewhere it says that anyone

119 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

120 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

121 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

122 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

123 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

124 Nagy, 1997, p. 308. p. 311

who lies upon it goes “straight to heaven,” echoing the *tarbfeis* and related journeying methods discussed in the last chapter. All in all, this incident yields a potent combination of shamanic themes.

As we have seen, in combat and at other times, Cú Chulainn exhibits an assortment of supernatural abilities. Another example occurs when he leaves a withe thrown on a pillar stone inscribed with an *ogham* message to Connacht’s army. The *Táin* says he will know if it has been disturbed, but there is no indication how. The means are therefore likely to be magical, meaning that he, like a typical shaman, can be aware of what is happening beyond the range of his physical sight.¹²⁵

While the revealing function, like spiritual healing, is not the exclusive province of shamans, it tends to be predicated on a shamanistic world view.

For example, the shaman-oracle, Maria-José, a Brazilian Macumba priestess said, “Everything can serve prophecy, You only have to pay attention. The universe is full of signs...The shape of clouds, the way birds fly, the sounds of nature, an unexpected meeting—all these transmit a message that expresses the will of the gods. The universe is a whole that fits together logically and maintains itself and develops in a meaningful way.”¹²⁶

Therefore, although techniques such as *néladóracht*, divination from the shapes of clouds, or divination based on the movements of ravens and wrens are not explicitly shamanic, they’re based on a shamanistic idea of the immanence of the divine in all things and their interconnection.¹²⁷ Some of these ideas can be found to make purely practical sense. For example, birds hear infrasounds, below the range of human hearing, and so can hear noise from storm fronts hundreds of miles away, so watching birds’ behaviour can enable one to know something about the weather, just as many ancient cultures professed.¹²⁸ So, for practical and spiritual reasons, there are no inanimate objects in shamanic cultures. They can all “speak.”

In a Celtic example, Niall of the Nine Hostage’s grandson, Breccan, was trading between Scotland and Ireland with a number of coracles. They were wrecked in the Coire Breccan whirlpool (presumably later named for the event). No one knew

125 Bergin, 1921, p. 159

126 Kalweit, 1992, p. 77

127 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 476, headword *nél(l)adóiracht*

128 Temple, February 17th 2002

their fate, however, until people brought a dog skull found on the strand to Lugaid, a blind *fili*. Lugaid asked that they place the end of his wand upon it. Through the technique of *díchetal di chennaib*, he saw that this was Breccan's dog, and they had all drowned.¹²⁹ This account brings us to three terms that loom large in any study of Celtic metaphysics.

TEINM LAIDA, IMBAS FOROSNAI AND DÍCHETAL DI CHENNAIB

Cormac and others mention three techniques that had to be learned by *filid* in ancient times, *teinm laida*, *díchetal di chennaib* and *imbas forosnai*. These techniques combine skills of extemporaneous recitation and poetic composition with shamanic techniques of vision.

Chadwick has discussed these practices in detail, so here I will restrict myself to those aspects of these techniques that seem specifically shamanic.¹³⁰ As discussed in the last chapter the *fili* chews a piece of raw flesh from a pig, dog or cat, then offers it to his spirits in the *imbas forosnai* ritual. He invokes his spirits, and if they do not give him the answer immediately, he lies down, covers his eyes and others make sure he is not disturbed. He then receives the information, although it may take as long as three days.¹³¹

This ritual has many shamanic analogues. Spirit journeys in many cultures involve sacrifice, and all involve invoking the shaman's helping spirits in one way or another. Lying down in darkness is a very usual form for the shamanic journey to take. Some cultures also place great importance on not moving the shaman when he is away on a journey. For example, the Sámi shaman was not allowed to be touched when he was journeying. If his body was moved, he could not return.¹³² Three days is also a ritually significant period in shamanic cultures.

Imbas forosnai is used to see many things not physically visible. In one account Finn uses it to track an enemy at a distance.¹³³ In *Finn and the Man in the Tree*, Finn receives *imbas* directly through Otherworld contact of the most violent sort

129 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a

130 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a

131 O'Donovan, 1868, pp. 94-95, Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, pp. 98-99

132 Pentikäinen, 1984, p. 126

133 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 113

when his thumb is slammed in the door of a *síd* mound.¹³⁴ He put his thumb in his mouth and tasted the liquid the fairy woman spilt on it and was enlightened and began to chant a *díchetal*.¹³⁵ The combination of references show that *imbasc forosnai* gives both the ability to see the unseen spiritual dimension and to hear the spirits and communicate with them.¹³⁶ In short, the ritual gives him shamanic powers.

Meyer translates *díchetal di chennaib* as “extempore incantation.”¹³⁷ The words used to describe this technique vary. I think that the key form may be *díchetal di chennaib na tuaithe*, extemporaneous chant from the heads of the tribe. This form occurs in the second of the *Metrical Tractates* Thurneysen published from the books of *Ballymote* and *Leinster*. It appears in the context of describing the three techniques the *filid* had to learn in their eighth year of training, those being *imbasc forosnai*, *teinm laida* and *díchetal do chennaib na tuaithe*.¹³⁸

Cenn can mean “head,” but can also mean “chief” or “leader” of a natural or supernatural realm. Heads in Celtic tradition have well known supernatural connotations, and the corresponding word in Welsh, *penn*, does as well. For example, Pwyll becomes *Penn Annwn*, “Head of Annwn,” after an oracular exchange with Arawn, lord of Annwn, and I think it is here that we may look for the deepest reading of this term.

Amergin’s *Rún* is also called a *cetal do chendaib*.¹³⁹ Towards its end, he says “I am the god who forms a mind of fire.”¹⁴⁰ I think it is very likely that this term refers to oracling. The “heads” being the gods of the tribe, who transmit messages through their oracle. Chadwick also associates this term with the singing done by severed heads in the tales. These heads are dead, yet not dead. This puts them in a similar position to the shaman who, by virtue of his initiatory death is neither fully dead nor alive. I will return to this point in chapter six.¹⁴¹

I will discuss the evidence for Celtic oracular practice in detail in chapter five. For now, I will just make the point that I think that it is possible that St.

134 Meyer, 1904a, pp. 344-349

135 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 112

136 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 115

137 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 120

138 Thurneysen, in Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 3, p. 117. Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 103

139 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 107

140 Macalister, 1938-1956, pp. 110-113

141 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 125

Patrick is said to have allowed *díchetal di chennaib* to continue in a Christian context precisely because it was an oracular practice.¹⁴² An oracle can switch allegiance from one deity to another. Since this ritual, unlike *imbas forosnai*, involves no specifically pagan elements such as animal sacrifice, there was no reason to stop it. An oracle can be “inspired” by the Holy Spirit as easily as by a pagan deity.

The final term mentioned is *teinm laida*, which Meyer translates as the “illumination of song.”¹⁴³ This method seems to overlap with the other techniques in some respects. Finn and others use the technique to identify bodies. The incantation is also associated with severed heads in ways that suggest magical practices.

It is generally regarded that the word *tenm* comes from the root **tep-*, meaning “heat.”¹⁴⁴ This is, of course, the same root that gives us the Sanskrit *tapas*, meaning mystically generated heat and spiritual power. This mystical heat results in the kind of manifesting power we hear of in relation to yogis and shamans. In India, *tapas* was obtained by breath control and meditating in close proximity to a fire.¹⁴⁵ It is intriguing that in the story of Finn’s death, his severed head is placed close to the fire, and Chadwick theorises from this and other examples that this was a custom with heads. In the stories, such heads often chant *teinm laida*. Therefore, I would suggest that the term may mean something like the “fiery power of song,” in that generating spiritual fire both illuminates the hidden, and gives the shaman manifesting power.

142 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, pp. 109-110

143 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 119

144 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, pp. 119-122

145 Eliade, 1964, pp. 412-414

SHAMANIC FUNCTIONS

SHAMANIC CULTURES	CELTIC CULTURE
Shamans protect the community from malefic spiritual forces.	Shamanic figures like Cú Chulainn protect the community from malefic spiritual forces.
Shamans are often healers.	Shamanic figures like Miach and the Tuatha Dé physicians act as healers. Miach uses extraction, the Tuatha Dé healers use chant in one story.
Shamans may do battle spiritually and physically on behalf of their tribe.	Shamanic figures like Mog Roith, Cú Chulainn and Finn do spiritual and physical battle on behalf of their tribe.
Shamans look into the future.	Many Celtic shamanic figures prophesy.
Shamans discern hidden truths in the present in their function as revealer. They also show things about cosmic order.	Shamanic figures like Taliesin act in this way and express great pride that they have this knowledge.
Co-creation is the basic shamanic function.	The word <i>dán</i> may refer to this kind of co-creative power.
Shamans may use their power to curse.	Many Celtic shamanic figures use their power to curse.
Shamans may duel with each other.	There are many instances of metaphysical duels in Celtic tradition.
Shamans may engage in spiritual combat on the battlefield on behalf of their communities.	There are many accounts of druids and other shamanic figures doing battle on behalf of their communities.
The Yamana <i>yékamus</i> of Tierra del Fuego blows himself up to the size of a mountain ridge to protect his patient.	Mog Roith, “invoked his god and his power and grew so tall that he was scarcely less high than the hill” to protect the Munster army
Several shamanic cultures are careful not to move the shaman in trance.	Irish sources say the one performing <i>imbas forosnai</i> must not be moved.
The Hungarian <i>taltós</i> may fight in the form of bulls, one light, one dark.	The bulls of the <i>Táin</i> are transformed wizard swineherds, one light one dark.
Shamanic cultures may combine physical and spiritual combat.	The Ulstermen practice <i>ferg</i> , combining spiritual and physical combat.
Shamans may be both healers and killers.	Celtic shamanic figures can be both healers and killers.
Shamans receive healing power and knowledge from spirits.	Celtic healers receive healing power and knowledge from spirits.
Shamans treat a “power intrusion” with extraction, that is, removing it.	Celtic healers sometimes extract things from a patient.
Extraction process may be symbolised by putting something in water.	Extraction process may be symbolised by putting something in water.
There are references to soul loss in shamanic cultures.	There are references to soul loss in Celtic culture.

Shamans perform soul retrieval.	There are no clear references to soul retrieval per se, but some references to rescuing captives from the Otherworld.
Shamans cannot fulfil their function without communicating with Otherworld beings.	In <i>Tromdám Gúaire</i> the <i>filids</i> cannot fulfil their function without communicating with Otherworld beings.
Shamans fight supernatural beings.	Cú Chulainn and others fight supernatural beings.
Shamans can see at a distance.	Cú Chulainn, Finn and others can see at a distance.
Shamans practice techniques to bring them in contact with spirits and deities who can answer their questions.	Many Celtic figures, including druids and <i>filid</i> practice techniques such as <i>teinm laida</i> , <i>dichetal di chennaib</i> and <i>imbais forosnai</i> , that enable them to communicate with spirits and deities.
Shamans use sacred, obscure language, from time to time	<i>Filid</i> use obscure sacred language from time to time
At the same time, shamans must also be clear enough to fulfil their role as communicators between this world and the other.	Conchobar's judgement against the <i>filid</i> would seem to indicate that they were expected to be clear communicator's at least some of the time.
Shamans must communicate with spirits, bringing information from the Otherworld, to fulfil their function.	The <i>filid</i> in <i>Tromdám Gúaire</i> can only fulfil their proper function as poets through shamanic means—by communicating with Fergus' spirit and recovering the Táin. Other sources, such as Taliesin's poems, also suggest that poetic function is predicated on Otherworld contact.
If shamans lose the ability to connect with the Otherworld, they cease to be useful to their communities and lose their power.	There is evidence that the <i>filid</i> lost their power because they lost their abilities to receive and transmit clear information from the Otherworld.

I have shown various examples of shamanic functions above. While all of these functions are not limited to shamans, their collective presence indicates the same range of functions shamans possess in other cultures. This is especially true in the case of the *filid*. Perhaps the most persuasive argument that the power they held in Celtic culture derived at least in part from their shamanic role is that they lost much of their power over others when they ceased to perform shamanic functions.

CONCLUSIONS: THE DECLINE OF BARDIC POWER

One of the shaman's most important functions is being a clear conduit for the spirits' messages, an ability Taliesin may refer to when he says, "I am a poet, I am a clear singer." (*Wyf kerdolyat, wyf keinyat claer.*)¹⁴⁶ The word *kerd* like *creth* relates to forming and shaping, likely in a magical or semi-magical sense, as noted in the introduction.¹⁴⁷

The bards and *filid* obviously had many roles in Celtic culture. They made praise poems, told stories and fulfilled other functions such as maintaining genealogies. However, some stories referring to their loss of power do not refer to any inability on their part to perform these well known, and ostensibly primary, functions. Rather, these accounts place the blame squarely on a loss of their abilities to both utilise visionary techniques and communicate the product of visionary experience to the community. In a nutshell, it appears that the point when the *filid* lost their shamanic abilities was also the point when they lost what was *essential* about their role in Celtic culture.

Nagy discussed the idea that audiences may have grown tired of poets claiming prestige based on knowledge they no longer possessed in relation to the story of the *Táin's* recovery.¹⁴⁸ One can only speculate that the lack of clarity may perhaps be attributed to the fact that shamanic techniques were increasingly repressed over time. Therefore, *filid* were expected to maintain their prior level of "inspiration" while growing increasingly cut off from their source.

The *Imacallam* provides additional evidence for this idea.¹⁴⁹ At the end, Néde acknowledged Ferchertne as senior, and Ferchertne told him to keep the ollaveship. Unfortunately for the poets, this warm and fuzzy moment of mutual admiration came at the end of a demonstration of verbal and metaphysical prowess that was only comprehensible to other shaman-poets. Witnessing their puzzling display led Conchobar to ban the bards as a class from ever pronouncing on matters other than bardic because no one understood a word out of their mouths.¹⁵⁰

146 Haycock, 1997, p. 19

147 Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1950-1967, p. 465, headword: *cerdd*

148 Nagy, 1997, p. 307

149 Stokes, 1905

150 Nagy, 1997, pp. 203-204, Binchy, 1978, p. 342

We know that some oracular utterances are deliberately or incidentally obscure—a language of initiates. For example, in Peru, the priests fell in trance, and upon “recovery” they gave forth the oracles in a language incomprehensible to the uninitiated.”¹⁵¹ This calls to mind the *fordorcha*, the “dark speech” of the poets, that can be compared to shamanic sacred language world-wide. People within the culture may accept or wonder at this use of language. Plutarch, for example, ponders the bad quality of verse coming out of the Delphic oracles, when their inspirer is, after all, Apollo, leader of the Muses.¹⁵²

In Kumaon in the Himalayas in modern times, people generally acknowledge that the language of the Gods is hard to understand. However, when oracles speak in what they consider to be a garbled, gasping way, they call it *ṭūṭi-phūṭi-bhāsā*, “broken up, shabby, messy, dissolving language,” and attribute it to the oracle’s impurity. One scholar’s research assistant said that communicating with the Gods is like a telephone call, and garbled speech is analogous to “static on the line.”¹⁵³ It may be that the Irish saw it this way and decided that inaccurate oracles could do little harm if their judgements were restricted to poetic matters.

After Conchobar’s pronouncement, the next clear wave of bardic disempowerment came when St. Columba declawed the poetic institution at the Council of Drumcett by stripping the poets of the weapons of satire and extortion, as well as other pagan elements, and reducing their numbers. This was not entirely without reason. The bardic orders were going around with “pot of avarice,” made of silver held by bronze chains and gold hooks and held by nine bards. Not to contribute was to invite satire.¹⁵⁴

Where Conchobar’s act seems to have been mainly about common sense, Columba’s is of a different quality. The pagan Conchobar seems to have been concerned with oracular clarity, where St. Columba seems to have been concerned with oracular orthodoxy and abuse of metaphysical power. The distinction is no longer between clear and unclear, but morally acceptable and unacceptable. As indicated by the story of St. Oran in the last chapter, all knowledge must be brought

151 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 292

152 Leavitt, 1997c, p. 153

153 Leavitt, 1997c, pp. 152-153

154 Graves, 1911-12, p. 176

into line with church thinking.¹⁵⁵ The Irish *literati* distinguished between *sous*, knowledge acquired by Christian learning or Christian revelatory experiences, and *imbas* acquired through mantic revelation, i.e., shamanic methods.¹⁵⁶

Of course, we cannot fully know all the reasons the *filid* lost their power. It may be a combination of the reasons given above, from losing oracular clarity to losing a shamanistic community who could understand what they were speaking about. The *filid* might also have become such an elite group over time that they no longer cared about communicating with those they perceived to be of lesser status. Ferchertne and Néde clearly cared primarily for their status among other poets.

Nagy says that in *Tromdám Gúaire* the “poets have become hopelessly and helplessly modern.” (Italics mine.) They had written the *Táin* down in a manuscript and then swapped it for a manuscript with Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, giving up their heritage to become nouveau intelligentsia.¹⁵⁷ Nagy argues that Marbán’s challenge is about getting the poets back to their roots, “unwritten and based in the living context of performance.” Perhaps it is also about getting them back to still more ancient roots, based in the kind of visionary experience they resort to by invoking Fergus’ spirit and recovering the *Táin*.

Having discussed both how shamanistic figures in Celtic tradition may have used, and lost, their power, it makes sense to look next at the totemic figures who supported that power. One example already given above was Marbán’s magical boar. Like Marbán’s boar, totemic figures act to support the shaman spiritually, physically and psychologically.

155 Nagy, 1997, pp. 203-205

156 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 100

157 Nagy, 1997, p. 309

CHAPTER 4

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS

TEACHERS, TOTEMS AND SHAMANIC EQUIPMENT

*“Take the cup with you, to distinguish truth from falsehood,”
Manannán told him, “and keep the branch to bring you
harmony. I brought you here to see the Land of Promise.
Now I’ll explain all you’ve seen.”*

The Otherworld Adventure of Cormac.¹

The best way to understand totems, divine teachers and ritual objects in psychological terms, may be as what British psychologist, D.W. Winnicott called “transitional objects.” These “objects” may be physical or psychological. They can range from a child’s teddy bear to a shaman’s spirit guide.

To me, the idea of transitional objects makes the most sense of the wide variety of material and non-material beings shamans believe support them and their work. For example, the guardians of Thompson Indian shamans include the spirits of “night, mist, the blue sky...sexual organs, the bat...graves,” and even other world locations like the land of souls.²

All these transitional objects support the person holding what Winnicott calls “transitional space.” Transitional space is a state of consciousness where psychological change can occur, because in that state one is not locked into day to day mental habits. It is not real like a brick, but not purely imaginary, since something *experienced* as real has real power, as the placebo effect repeatedly shows.

Transitional space is “betwixt and between” realities, as we sometimes hear the other world described in Celtic tales. It can be compared to the state of *súan* discussed in chapter two. It is a liminal space, an unchallenged area of experience which acts as both a buffer zone between the individual and life in the world, a realm where myriad different ideas, roles and emotions can be freely experienced.

In Winnicott’s research with children, the object that helps them access this

¹ Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, pp. 121-222

² Eliade, 1964, p. 106

space, the “transitional object” is often a stuffed toy, such as a teddy bear, which takes on a living reality like a totem animal to the child.³

Interaction with transitional objects reveals clear patterns of behaviour. For example, a person with the power of a totem has obligations to that totem, like making offerings to them. Similarly, as a recent documentary showed, a child meeting up with that ever popular transitional object, the “imaginary friend,” may habitually offer them food, to the extent that one mother found herself making a separate tea each night for her son’s dragons!⁴ The offering of food or drink, whether pouring a libation or sacrificing a bull to the spirits has to be one of the great universals of ritual. Even in the absence of a shamanic culture, the children in this documentary instinctively followed certain classic ritual patterns in relation to their transitional objects, which may partially explain some of the universals in shamanic practice.

These children’s imaginary friends also helped them come to terms with difficult situations. One child’s imaginary brother “died” around the time Princess Diana did, and was then resurrected, enabling her to come to terms with grief and find a reassuring belief in immortality. The confidence she built in her imaginary world helped her in physical reality.⁵

Likewise, the shaman’s totems and their lessons provide him with an ever present, unfaltering support system and clear assurance of eternal life. In some respects the shaman is one who either never loses his imaginary friends, or recovers them and their power at a later stage of life, returning to a paradisaical childhood state.

In many traditions the bond the shaman shares with his animal helpers cosmologically represents a return to another sort of paradise, that of the “beginning times” when mankind was at peace with the animals. This golden age features in numerous mythologies and was followed by a “fall” when man became what he is, living in a state of enmity with animals and the natural world. The shaman transcends this state of affairs, restoring the lost harmony.⁶

As the totem animals restore lost harmony, the spirit teachers restore lost wisdom, and give fresh revelation. They bring primordial truths into the life of the

3 Winnicott, 1989, pp. 1-25

4 Napier, Stuart, 1999

5 Napier, Stuart, 1999

6 Eliade, 1964, p. 99

community. In Celtic tradition, the divine figure Trefuilgid Tre-eochaire fulfils this sort of function. In *The Settling of the Manor of Tara* he tells the people how to arrange the land in harmony with cosmological ideas they have forgotten.⁷

The shaman's costume and implements make the spiritual reality he experiences visible to all who see him. Physical objects used in the shaman's work act as tangible representations of their other world helpers. As physical transitional objects, they also help invoke their spiritual counterparts, bridging the gap between worlds.

In what follows, I will frequently use the term shamanic practitioner rather than shaman, because all members of a shamanic culture have totems, totemic objects, and sometimes spirit teachers who they interact with.

TOTEMS

The shamanic totem may take many forms in traditional cultures.⁸ Plants, animals and elemental spirits like lightning or thunder can all serve as totems—and any combination of the above is possible. For example, the animal helper of a Salish shamanic practitioner sometimes comes down in a stroke of lightning, implying that it brings the power of both animal and element.⁹

TOTEMIC PLANTS

Plants and trees can have a totemic function, especially in healing work. Their use blends into medicinal herbalism, which, as I have mentioned, seldom worked on a purely physical level, but invoked spiritual powers as well.¹⁰

As is true of animals, we have examples of names derived from trees. Among the ancient continental Celtic tribes, we have the Eburones, the Yew People. In Irish literature, one Tuatha Dé Danann king is called Mac Cuill, Son of the Hazel. Other examples include Mac Cairthin, Son of the Rowan, Mac Ibair, Son of the Yew and Mac Cuilinn, Son of the Holly.¹¹

7 Best, 1910

8 Eliade, 1964, pp. 88-95

9 Eliade, 1964, p. 100

10 Beith, 1995, 1-3, 189-199. For the use of plants in shamanism, see also Harner, 1980, pp. 113-117.

11 Low, 1996, p. 81

We may see a later example of a totemic plant in the *suaicheantas* or clan badge. Clan members wore a part of this plant into battle, ostensibly to identify themselves. Some might interpret this as medieval heraldry. In response, one might question whether or not heraldry itself is likely to originate in some sort of totemic associations in earlier times. This question is beyond the scope of this study, however, I think we can be reasonably sure that the *suaicheantas* was more than a simple clan identifier or heraldic device.

For one thing, neighbouring clans might have the same badge. Because a clan would be more likely to battle its neighbours than anyone else, it would be impossible for clan members to identify their enemies in combat in these cases.

The second point is that some clan badges, like fir club moss or mistletoe, would hardly stand out in battle.¹² If they do not identify clan members, an obvious point to wearing them is totemic. A MacRae poem about the fir club moss makes this purpose explicit.

The Fir Club Moss is on my person,
No harm or mishap can me befall,
no sprite shall slay me, no arrow shall wound me,
no fay nor dun water nymph shall tear me.¹³

These associations are likely to go back to ancient times. The types of plants used are most often those with long standing sacred associations, for example, the mistletoe. Pliny said that the Druids “hold nothing more sacred than the mistletoe” and the tree it grows on, especially if it was an oak. “Hailing the moon in a native word that means ‘healing all things’ they prepare a ritual sacrifice.” It consisted of two white bulls, and was made after a priest had cut the mistletoe with a golden sickle.¹⁴

In much later times, mistletoe became the emblem of the Hays of Errol. The fate of the family was said to be bound to that of the mistletoe growing on a particular sacred oak, showing clearly the alter ego or external soul aspect of the totemic relationship. Its protective aspect is shown in the fact that the plant was considered to

12 Newton, 1998, p. 109

13 Kermack, 1953, p. 187

14 Green, 1997a, p. 18

be an infallible protection against witchcraft and injury in battle “when cut by a Hay at the right time and in the proper manner.”¹⁵

As in this case, a cutting of a totemic plant may be carried as a talisman. In the case of a tree, which you cannot really carry around entire, the cutting becomes a “pocket edition” of the tree’s power. We have a clear example in the *craeb sída*, the poet’s musical branch, discussed below. While plants do occupy a totemic role as shown above, the animal is the most frequently mentioned form of totem in all shamanic cultures.¹⁶

TOTEM ANIMALS

The totem animal may be seen as a messenger of the Creator, acting as a kind of “transformer” that makes the power of Absolute Deity into something the shamanic practitioner can use personally.¹⁷ Hence, it is referred to by some Pacific Northwest Coast tribes as a “power animal.”¹⁸

The fairy or supernatural animals that appear throughout Celtic legend and in Celtic iconography fulfil all the classic shamanic functions of the totem animal. They act as protectors, as friends and guides in the other world, and as sources of personal power and healing.

Totem animals are often wild rather than domestic. Since the shamanic practitioner uses them to access the other world, the spiritual wilderness, it makes sense that allies of a more “liminal” character may be helpful. However, canines and horses are frequent shamanic totems, perhaps because their long-term role as man’s helpers seemed to extend naturally into the other world.

As spirits, totem animals may also appear as humans, or humans with animal qualities, calling to mind the selkies and the numerous “bird-men” of Celtic legend, such as the one who doffs his bird-hood and fathers King Conaire Mór. Later another bird man of the same tribe forbids Conaire to kill birds.¹⁹ Sometimes, as in Conaire’s

15 Kermack, 1953, pp. 188-189

16 Eliade 1964, p. 89, also Durkheim, 1982, p. 104-5

17 Eliade, 1964, p. 103, also Harner, 1980, pp. 57-58

18 Harner, 1980, p. 64

19 Harner, 1984, 138-139. For selkies see Thompson, D., 1965, and for the conception and bird taboos of Conaire Mór, see Knott, Eleanor, 1975, pp. 5-6

case, the totem is also an ancestor. For example, Yakut shamans are considered to be the children of Bird-of-Prey-Mother; a mythical, eagle-headed, iron-feathered being.²⁰

As the above example indicates, we see totemic themes in Celtic tradition similar to those in more generally recognised shamanic cultures. For example, the MacCodrums of North Uist were thought to descend from the seals. due to the fact that one of their men had snatched a selkie's skin when she was in human form. He kept her as wife, and had children by her, until she found where he had hidden the skin and went back to sea.²¹ My own clan, the Camerons, went by the name of Clann 'ic Gill Onfhaidh, the Clan of the Lad of the Storm, linking them to an elemental spirit. The witch's familiar of later folk tradition also fulfils all the classic functions of a totem animal.²²

The shamanic practitioner may have one totem or many.²³ One totem in particular, usually an animal, is generally the shamanic practitioner's main power source and animal alter ego. For example, the Yuki tribe of California have "bear doctors," shamans with bear totem spirits.²⁴ A person training to become a bear doctor lived as, and sometimes even with, bears, eating the same food and sleeping in the same places.²⁵ Similarly, in an Irish tale, Derg Corra, banished by Finn, fled to the woods and "used to go about on deer's legs...for his lightness." Finn finds him living in a tree, sharing his food and water with a blackbird, stag and trout.²⁶

A later, similar account from the Isle of Jura describes a man called Iain Mor na Beinne, who "went away with the deer."

He fed with them on heather tops, and ran as swiftly as themselves when alarmed and lay in their midst when they rested. His body had become hairy all over like them. Many attempts were made to capture him, and ultimately he was caught and returned to the community of his kind. In course of time he became tame and settled and his body shed the rough hair grown in his wild state."²⁷

20 Eliade, 1964, p. 37

21 Thompson, 1965, pp. 142-161, Macleod, in Martin, 1934, p. 24, and Mackenzie, Donald A., 1935, p. 87.

22 Leach, 1950, pp. 368-369, headword: *familiar*, Harner 1980, p. 60.

23 Eliade, 1964, p. 90

24 Loeb, 1926, p. 377

25 Kroeber, 1925, p. 200

26 Meyer, 1904, p. 347

27 Robertson, 1987, p. 69

We can easily recognise the same pattern in the tales of Mis, Suibhne and other figures of Celtic tradition living as wild beasts and taking on their attributes, even to powers of flight.

There are also many instances of human identification with animals in Celtic tales, Cú Chulainn, the Hound of Culann, perhaps being the most famous. The word dog or hound appears frequently in early Celtic names such as the British Cunobelinus, “Hound of Belinus,” the Welsh Cynon, “Great or Divine Hound,” and the Irish Cú Roí, Conmael and so on.²⁸ Other animal names include Oisín, “Little Deer” born of a fairy woman enchanted in doe form, Conchenn, “Wolf-Head,” March, “Horse,” who had horses ears, Bran, “Crow,” Cairbre Caitchenn, “Cairbre Cat-Head,” not to mention the protagonist of *Cullwch and Olwen*, whose name, as well as narrative themes in the tale, associates him with pigs.²⁹

The shamanic practitioner interacts more frequently, and on more familiar terms with his totem than with any other spirit. He may journey to a deity or spirit teacher, or summon them in formal ritual, but the totem is “on call” twenty-four hours a day.³⁰ Besides channelling the Creator’s power to the shamanic practitioner, the totem also has a soothing role, as a best friend and constant companion.³¹ You will recall Marbán’s white boar and its soothing qualities from the last chapter.

Shamanic power of all sorts may be transmitted along family lines, and that of the totem animal is no exception.³² Many shamanic cultures, like that of the Australian Aborigines, or the Pacific North West Tlingit, are organised into clans who each possess, (or are possessed by) a specific totem, usually an animal or plant, though elements and natural phenomena like thunder are also represented.³³

It has been argued that the symbolism of the Pictish stones may represent just such a totemic clan system, with the pairings of symbols such as snakes and boars symbolising the intermarriage of clans represented by these totems.³⁴

28 Ross, 1993, p. 340

29 O’Brien, M.A., 1973, p. 228, Ross, 1993, p. 301. For the porcine themes in *Cullwch and Olwen*, see Ford, 1990.

30 Eliade, 1964, pp. 88

31 Harner, 1980, pp. 61, 67-68

32 For inherited totems, see Durkheim, 1982, pp. 102-115, for inherited shamanic power, see Eliade, 1964, pp. 20-22

33 Durkheim, 1982, pp. 103-104

34 Laing, 1993, pp. 123-125

The totem generally has a long standing reciprocal relationship with the shaman. This type of relationship is shown clearly with numerous repetitions for emphasis in the tale of a fisherman's three sons, assembled from various oral and manuscript sources by Campbell in *The Celtic Dragon Myth*.³⁵

THE CELTIC DRAGON MYTH

This story is far too long to give in full here, but what interests us is the clear totemic association between the three sons and a whole menagerie of animals.

It began when a smith and fisherman living with his "old wife, old mare, and old dog," met a mermaid who offered to provide him with fish if he would deliver his first born son to her.³⁶ He agreed, and the first fish he caught asked that he prepare it himself, giving a piece to his wife, mare, and dog, and bury the three bones in the side of its head in the garden. His wife bore three sons, his mare three black foals, his dog three black pups, and three trees sprouted where the bones were buried, that would be in good health so long as the three sons lived.³⁷

When the mermaid came to collect on the deal, the fisherman made numerous delays, but ultimately had to reveal his actions to his sons. The story of each son from this point consists largely of variations on a set pattern.

He sent the first son out with a bit to tame his horse, and a special cake for his dog. He was meeting these animals now for the first time, though they have been spiritually linked to him all his life. He went out on the moor, and hadn't gone far when the horse came "rushing as if to trample the lad under foot and tear him; but the lad shook the bit till it clinked and rang, and the black steed came and put his nose into the halter, and they were good friends at once." When he and his horse left the forest, the hound came with a similarly savage demeanour, but he tamed it by giving it the cake.

His father then made him an iron club and unearthed the fish bone at the base of his tree. When he gave it to his son, it became a golden sword. "Thanks to thee, Oh King of Princes and Mercies," said the lad. "Now I have done learning, wisdom, and

35 Campbell, J.F., 1911

36 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 33

37 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 36-37

knowledge, and now I may start.” This calls to mind the similar statement the boy in the *Cànain nan Eun* makes. The boy goes on to say, “Yonder tree will be in bud, blossom, and leaf from autumn to summer, and from spring to winter, now and for ever till I meet death...”

The boys headed for the hills with their respective black dogs and horses. They took three separate paths into the forest, and each encountered animals who would prove to be of great benefit to them. The first son’s encounter set the basic pattern.

He saw a wolf, a hawk, and a fox standing beside a sheep. The wolf asked him to divide the carcass. He did so, and put the pieces in front of the animals so they could choose. That pleased them, and they promised him help.

The wolf said, “When you are in a bad way, remember me.”

The hawk said, “When you are still worse, remember me.”

The fox said, “When all seems lost, think of me.”

They blessed the fisher’s son, and he blessed them, and he mounted again and rode through the forest at speed until he reached “a palace in a realm that was not of this realm at all.” The boy lodged there, and became a herd boy for the king’s cattle.

Then a huge and hideous giant appeared to steal the cows and he battled the giant. When the boy “began to think he was far from friends and near his foes, and he thought of the wolf, and he was a wolf. And he gave the giant a little light easy lift and tossed him up and knocked him down and stood upon him.”

He asked the giant what his *eric*, his price was, since death was surely upon him. To be spared the giant offered him all his goods. He expanded his goods and realms by going further afield, and fighting various other giants. In the final of these battles, on his knees in front of the worst giant of all, “he thought of his friends the beasts. And he was a wolf and a hawk and a fox all at once,” and overthrew the giant. When finally confronted by the giants’ hideous mother “he thought of the hawk, and he was a hawk, and he flew to the top of the high tree” to escape and ultimately defeat her, acquiring a host more magical treasures in the process.³⁸

When he appeared for his final battles with the dragons who had been causing

38 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 54-55, par. 69-74

trouble in the realm it was with all his magical powers, allies and accoutrements, as a fully magical being himself. Before one encounter, the people awaiting the dragon see “a rider riding through the sky in a glittering green garment on a yellow golden-brown palfrey, with a bright, glancing, glittering, bright sword of light in his right hand, and when they saw him they all fled to their lairs as was their wont.”³⁹

In the final battle, in his attempt to cut off the last of the dragon’s three heads, “he thought of the wolf and he was a wolf, and he tore at the dragon, and was a man and clutched his sword and cut off the dragon’s third head, and won the fight. And the dragon was a pool of water and a heap of sand.”⁴⁰

This story goes on a good while longer, recounting the tales of the other brothers and eventual complete triumph of the protagonist, but the passages above give enough for the purpose at hand.

The father is an old fisherman and a smith, living on the seashore. His age connotes wisdom. The smith is master of an arcane discipline involving repetitive sound and mastery of fire, like the shaman. They are so closely linked in Siberian tradition that a Yakut proverb says that “the shaman and the smith are from the same nest.”⁴¹

A seashore is a liminal space, between land and water, where the boundary between one thing and another, and so between this world and the other, was thin.⁴² The symbolism of fishing is likewise liminal, the fisher being one who draws things from the depths, especially in Celtic tradition, when what he draws forth may be the salmon of wisdom.⁴³ Whatever species of fish the fisherman’s first catch was, it was clearly not ordinary since it spoke, brought fertility to his household and its bones became magical weapons for his sons. The frequent Celtic three-fold scheme, the significance of which I will explore in a later chapter, is present in the sons, their totems and their magical equipment.⁴⁴

The shamanic practitioner’s life and fate are bound to his totems. The idea of a

39 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 66, par. 121

40 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 68, par. 133

41 Eliade, 1964, p. 470

42 Nagy, 1981a, p. 139, 1985, pp. 155-161, and Sjöblom, 1994.

43 Campbell, Joseph, 1991, p. 12-19, also Nagy, 1985, pp. 155-161, and Rees, 1961, pp. 160-161, 232

44 Ross, 1993, pp. 205-207, Green, 1993, pp. 32, 101-102, 114-115, Green, 1992, pp. 214-216, headword: *triplism*.

tree being related to a person's life is shown in later folklore by the custom of burying a child's afterbirth under a tree, which then had a mystical relationship with the child from birth.⁴⁵ Since the tree is the *omphalos* in so many cultures, as well as the Celtic, it should not surprise to see it representing the soul's umbilical connection to life.

The trees here are a manifestation of the "life-token," a common, and, I would argue, shamanically based motif in folk-lore. This life-token generally takes animal or plant form and manifests in some way that the human it is connected to is in danger, ill or dead.⁴⁶ In Old Irish, this life token is called a *comsáegul*.⁴⁷ This means literally a "contemporaneous life." In one story, it is three trout that guarantee the life of a "White Gruagach."⁴⁸

In shamanic cultures the state of a person's health is similarly linked to that of their totem in the shaman's diagnosis. If the shaman sees a patient's totem animal lying limply near them rather than looking lively, it does not bode well for their recovery from any illness.⁴⁹

In this story, the three sons are born in relationship with their first animal totems as well, the dogs and horses, just as Cú Chulainn is born on the same night as his two famous chariot horses.⁵⁰ However, the boys do not know of them until their father sends them out with the special bit, cake, and instructions for dealing with them. The full totemic bond is established via a two stage process.

Some shamanic cultures like the Jívaro in South America also connect with a totem in two stages. The Jívaro believe that almost all people have at least one totem from birth, since the totem is an essential source of power and health. If a child dies, it is thought to be because they do not have this invaluable protector and power source. However they usually only meet their totem later life on a vision quest.⁵¹

The shamanic practitioner may be required to make an offering, perform a service or otherwise demonstrate their worthiness to the totem. In this story, the first brother, later called "the Gray Lad," shows courage and discipline by following his

45 Leach, Maria. 1950. p. 145, headword: *birth tree*.

46 Leach, Maria. 1950. p. 619, headword: *life-token*.

47 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 143, headword: *comsáegul*.

48 See Campbell, J.F., 1994, p. 503

49 Harner, 1980, pp. 102-103

50 Rees, 1961

51 Harner, 1980, pp. 64-65

father's instructions when confronted with the wild and foaming black horse and dog. Similarly, in Eskimo and other traditions the shamanic practitioner is confronted and even dismembered by his totems before he gains their power.⁵²

Shamanic practitioners are not limited to one totem, but may also find more spiritual help in the form of additional totems, again, usually via making offerings of goods or services. When the Gray Lad meets the fox, hawk and wolf, he helps them by dividing the carcass, an incident echoed in his brothers' stories.⁵³

Another way of gaining a being's power is to kill, defeat, or even ingest that being. In this story the defeated giants and carlin yield all their goods, and the magical potency attached to them, to the Gray Lad. In a more oblique way, although no specific powers are mentioned, he later gains the princess and the kingdom by slaying the three headed dragon. An Irish example is the way Cú Chulainn takes the name, and by inference power, of the huge hound he killed.

There are numerous interesting examples of gaining power by ingestion of a special animal or substance in Celtic tradition. Most famous is perhaps the tale of how Finn mac Cumhaill ingested the salmon of wisdom while cooking it for his master, accidentally burning his thumb and sticking it in his mouth.⁵⁴ Equally accidentally, Taliesin ingested a brew which gave him knowledge and the power to shapeshift into all sorts of animals. There is also the curious episode I mentioned in chapter two in the *Cànain nan Eun*, where the protagonist consumes the birds, and gains "further acquaintance with bird language."⁵⁵

Another example is that of the famous white snake, whose ingestion gave the Beaton's their healing power.⁵⁶ The snake has been associated with both shamans and healing from the most ancient times to the modern medical Caduceus, based on the staff of Asklepios, Greek god of healing.⁵⁷

The fisherman's sons perform services to the animals whose power they have.

52 Eliade, 1964, p. 70, Kalweit, 1988, pp. 99-100, 105

53 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 83

54 See Nagy, 1985, 155-161, O' Rahilly, Thomas F., 1946a, pp. 318-334

55 Mackay, J.G., 1931, p. 163

56 The Beaton version is called *The Olladh Iteach*, the Islay Doctor. Another account gives the protagonist's name as Fearachur Leigh, and in 1511 a McCorrachie claimed descent from him. See Campbell, J.F., 1994, vol. 2, Story 47, "Fearachur Leigh," pp. 116-124.

57 For serpent symbolism: Thompson, William Irwin, 1981, pp. 110-115, for the serpent in Celtic tradition: Ross, 1993, p. 345, Green, 1992, pp. 194-195

In the case of the wild forest animals, one service gains their power. In the case of their dog, it is the magic cake. In the cases of both dog and horse, a give and take relationship is implied because of the ways humans typically relate to these animals. The dog and horse appear to be accessible on an ongoing basis, while the wild animals seem to be accessible for emergencies. The final brother's wild animals say he may only call on them three times each.

The shamanic practitioner has specific obligations in relation to his totem and often its species. For example Cú Chulainn, named for the large hound he killed, cannot eat dog meat. King Conaire was forbidden to cast at birds, because he was descended from a supernatural bird or bird man, of which more below.⁵⁸ The *Clann 'ic Codrum nan ròn*, the MacCodrums of the seals, would not kill them according to some accounts.

The shamanic practitioner can communicate with animals as the fisherman's sons all do in this tale.⁵⁹ There are numerous examples of human communication with animals in Celtic tradition, one being the conversation between the ancient Fintan and the equally venerable Hawk of Achill.⁶⁰

In the tale of Cullwch and Olwen, Gwrhŷr, Interpreter of Tongues, helps Arthur and Cullwch speak with the ancient Blackbird of Cilgwri, the Stag of Rhedynfre and the other animals whose help they seek. It is right for him to do so, as Arthur says to him, because "all tongues hast thou, and thou canst speak with some of the birds and the beasts."⁶¹

In the last chapter, I spoke of shamans turning into animals to do battle. The story that Campbell has called *The Celtic Dragon Myth* says that all the fisherman's sons become their totems simply by thinking of them.

There is ample further evidence of people having animal alter-egos or totems in Celtic lands. For example, on the Isle of Jura, the Buies were so strongly identified with the deer that it was said that "To dream of deer was to dream of Buies." Here it seems that the dream animal and totemic animal were one and the same, especially in light of a tale of one Buie patriarch.

58 Knott, 1975, pp. 5-6, para. 13-16

59 Eliade, 1964, p. 98

60 See Hull, 1932

61 Jones and Jones, 1993, p. 103

It was said that when Mac Ille-bhuidhe of Cnocbreac grew old, he asked his sons to help him to Beinn an Oir, the highest of the paps of Jura. When he got there he said:

*Is mise Mac Ill bhuidh nam fiadh,
'S mi 'm shuidh air sliabh Bheinn an Oir,
'S ged a tha mi aosmhor liath,
Is comasach le Dia mo dheanamh òg.*

“I am Buie of the deer,
I am sitting on the side of Beinn an Oir,
And though I am aged and grey
God has the power to make me young.”

He went home looking more like his sons' brother than their father.⁶² This tale calls instantly to mind that of Tuan macCairill, who shape shifted from form to form, including that of a stag, when he grew old and needed rejuvenation.⁶³

Different kinds of totem animals may be perceived as carrying different qualities. Shamanic practitioners might merge with a bear, tiger or wolf for combat, an eagle for spirit flight, or a fish for a journey to the under world. Different totems appear to be seen as carrying different energies, and helping the shamanic practitioner in different ways in Celtic tradition as well. The Gray Lad's totems appear in traditional shamanic cultures, as well as in the Celtic context.

The Gray Lad has a magical black dog, a wolf and a fox as totems. The Inuit consider the fox, dog and wolf to be powerful shamanic helpers.⁶⁴ The dog is particularly associated with the underworld, and the shamanic practitioner often encounters them when journeying in this realm.

The Gray Lad's horses are swifter than the March wind, and sometimes fly through the air. In many traditions, the horse is the animal that enables the shaman to fly through the air and attain the heavens.⁶⁵ The swiftness of supernatural horses, and their ability to fly over land and sea, as the Grey Lad's horses do, is continually emphasised in Celtic tradition. Manannán has a horse who can travel over sea and land, as does Iubdán. In Norse tradition Sleipnir is Odinn's horse, and has obvious

62 Robertson, 1987, p. 13

63 See Hull, 1932, pp. 387-389

64 Eliade, 1964, pp. 90, 188

65 Eliade, 1964, p. 467

shamanic associations.⁶⁶ The Gray Lad's hawk has counterparts in Celtic literature, such as the venerable Hawk of Achill, among the oldest of animals, who has the famous colloquy with the equally ancient Fintan. This hawk also has many shamanic counterparts because the bird is the most common shamanic totem of all.

THE BIRD: SHAMANIC TOTEM PAR EXCELLENCE

The ideal bird to accompany the shaman is often seen to be one with power of flight and swimming, with access to all realms. We have already seen the prominence of the swan in stories such as the *Aislinge Óenguso*.

Birds of all species are the most common shamanic totem worldwide. The reason is not hard to imagine, since spirit flight is central to shamanism. From the *ba* soul we see hovering above mummies in ancient Egyptian paintings to the white bird souls of the righteous perched in the “Downward Growing Tree” of the Irish apocrypha, the idea of the soul as bird is an almost universal phenomenon.⁶⁷

Of course, in traditional shamanic cultures, the shaman is considered to be the most “righteous” person there is. Feathers and avian designs are also prominent features of shamanic costuming in Celtic as in other traditions.

EQUIPMENT

The principle of gaining power by identifying with birds or other entities through costuming is easy to understand.

One becomes what one displays. The wearers of masks *are* really the mythical ancestors portrayed by their masks. But the same results—hat is, total transformation of the individual into something *other*—are to be expected from the various signs and symbols that are sometimes merely indicated on the costume or directly on the body: one assumes the power of flight by wearing an eagle feather, or even a highly stylised drawing of such a feather; and so on.⁶⁸

Yakut shamans make an entire bird's skeleton of iron as their costume. Even when bird symbolism is not quite this blatant the shaman's head-dress is often made

66 Eliade, 1964. p. 380

67 Rowland, 1978

68 Eliade, 1964, pp.179-180, Italics Eliade's

of feathers and imitates a bird.⁶⁹ A prominent pagan Celtic example of an item that may well have had totemic bird significance is the Ciumești helmet. Found in a warrior's grave in Ciumești, Romania, it features a large bird of prey with hinged wings that would have flapped and red glass eyes.⁷⁰

In later times, we can draw a comparison between the Siberian shaman's feather head-dress and the *encennach* made of speckled bird's wings Mog Roith wears in *Forbuis Droma Damhgaire* in connection with his spirit flight.⁷¹ Some sources also say that *gelta* like Suibhne wore "feather dress" as well.⁷²

The *filid* wore *tuigen*, bird feather capes. The name means a "bird covering."⁷³ Cormac's Glossary says it was made from the skins of white and multi-coloured birds from the girdle down, and from mallard's necks and crests from the girdle up to the neck.⁷⁴ Eliade noted its shamanic parallels.⁷⁵ Identification of the *filid* with a bird can also be seen as totemic. In one story, a group of bird caped *filid* say that an interloper is not "a bird fit for their flock."⁷⁶

The central image found on the over 200 pieces jewellery of the Celtic "princess" at Reinheim, Germany is "that of a woman, her arms folded across her stomach, a large bird of prey perched above her head." Green suggests it is either a Goddess image, like that of the Mórrígan who could shapeshift into bird form, or that of the woman dead, with the bird representing her spirit flying to Otherworld.

However, she would not have had to die to engage in spirit flight. It would also seem that a person would be more likely to wear jewels that had a talismanic function, depicting them as they'd *like* to be, rather than as a corpse. As the song goes, "Everybody wanna go to heaven but don't nobody wanna die tonight."⁷⁷

Cú Chulainn's war helmet is a transitional object on two levels. First as a piece of spiritually charged equipment, and second because it is inhabited by an assortment of familiar spirits. A passage in the *Táin* says that "Goblins and Sprites

69 Eliade, 1964, pp. 156-158

70 Cunliffe, 1997, p. 98

71 Sjoestedt, 1979, 110-113, Eliade, 1964, p. 373

72 Sailer, 1997, p. 150

73 O'Donovan, 1868, p. 160

74 O'Donovan, 1868, p. 160

75 Eliade, 1964, p. 179

76 Low, 1996, p. 110

77 Green, 1996b, p. 42

and Demons of the air” used to cry from Cú Chulainn’s war helmet “before him and above him and around him wherever he went, prophesying the shedding of the blood of warriors and champions.” It is interesting that a vivid account of Cú Chulainn’s *riastrad* follows this, a point I will return to in the next chapter.⁷⁸ One source also refers to the druid, Cathbad’s “powerful crown” like the Siberian shaman’s powerful head-dress.⁷⁹

We can see various universal shamanic themes emerging. There are certain items of equipment common to shamans throughout the world. But this leaves us with a question about one ubiquitous piece of shamanic equipment—the drum. There has been debate about when and how the drum came to Britain and Ireland.

The iconography does not present us with clear answers. A round object being held up by a figure may be a drum, a shield, a symbol of some kind, and so on. Archaeology does not help much either, because leather and wood rot.

I mentioned various uses of percussive sound in chapter two, and of course, drums are not always present in shamanic cultures. A gong may be used in Ceylon, China and South Asia, calling to mind the Irish saints’ bells.⁸⁰

In some places drums are not used for purely practical reasons. For example, South American tribes tend to use psychotropics rather than drums. The rain forest is a humid place. To get a drum skin to remain taut enough to produce the ringing, resonant tone required for a shamanic journey one would have to sit quite close to a blazing hot fire while drumming—no fun in the jungle. Drum skins do not stay particularly taut in Britain and Ireland either, though it is more pleasant to sit by a hot fire here.

Accounts in other cultures may provide a clue to the apparent absence of the drum. The Siberians have tales of *How the Shaman Got His Drum*, however, something of this sort would have been impossible to Christianise and so would not have been passed on to us.⁸¹

However, the way the drum is referred to, *or not*, in shamanic cultures may be more informative. In Siberian tales of what the shaman does, going to the land of the

78 Sayers, 1991, p. 49, quoting lines 2240-2242 from the *Táin*, rescension 2

79 Gantz, 1981, p. 258

80 Eliade, 1964, p. 179, Ralls-MacLeod, 2000, pp. 60-61

81 Eliade, 1964, 42-43

dead and so forth, the drum is taken as a given. The shaman does not say, “I drum, and go to the land of the dead.” Rather: “I go to the land of the dead.”

A name taboo can also apply to the drum because of its great power. It is referred to by other names. In some cultures, it is thought to be made from the wood of the world tree, and so is the tree that the shaman climbs. Among some Mongolian tribes that make their drum from roebuck, the shaman sings “I am travelling with a wild roebuck!” as he is spiritually “carried” out of himself by his drumming.⁸² Therefore, references to riding Otherworld horses, as in the Gray Lad’s tale above, may contain oblique references to drumming. (They may also, of course, simply be horses, albeit supernatural ones.) In Siberian culture the horsehide drum is the shaman’s horse, which he rides, or the boat he sails to the other world in.⁸³

Some words used to describe druid’s equipment have not been satisfactorily translated. I think one of these may relate to the shaman’s drum. The druid Mogh Ruith, and his daughter, Tlachtga use the *roth rámach* as a component of their gear in the spirit journey.⁸⁴

Ramach can mean “branch” as in the phrase *fri fidrad fonnrám*: a wood of delightful boughs.⁸⁵ Bear in mind here the world tree associations of the shaman’s drum. In later Scottish Gaelic the word can be branch or tree. A drummer would have been made from a branch of wood.

I think it is possible that the drum is the *roth* and the *ramach* the beater. This sort of paired symbolism is not unusual. For example, for the Altaians the drum is their “horse,” the beater the “whip.”⁸⁶

Siberian drums are often made of horsehide, sometimes complete with a tail and “reins.”⁸⁷ The Hobby Horse may relate. One cannot help but notice that it bears more resemblance to a drum in shape than to a horse, through it is impossible to say if this has any shamanistic significance.⁸⁸

I believe there is a riddling reference to drums and drum beaters in the

82 Eliade, 1964. pp. 173-174

83 Eliade, 1964, p. 172

84 Müller-Lisowski, 1923, p.158

85 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p.500, headwords: *rámach, rám, ráma*

86 Eliade, 1964, pp. 174-175

87 Eliade, 1964. pp. 173-174

88 See Alford, Violet, 1978

Imacallam in Da Thuarad. Nede asks Ferchertne by what path he came, and Ferchertne answers:

“Not hard: on *Lugh’s horserod*,
 on the breasts of soft women,
On a line of wood,
 On the head of a spear,
 On a gown of silver,
On a chariot without a wheelrim,
On a wheelrim without a chariot...”⁸⁹ (Italics mine.)

I think the last two lines are particularly suggestive. Another curious word is *timpán*. Caer, in the story *Aislinge Óenguso*, appears initially playing a *timpán*.⁹⁰ This is generally regarded as a stringed instrument, but the reason a drum word is used for a stringed instrument remains a bit mysterious. I can think of no clear reason for its use myself. It is, of course, a Latin loan-word.

Celtic tales feature many other kinds of magical instruments. I don’t have the space to discuss them all here but they include Finn’s crane bag, other magical bags, the four treasures of the Tuatha Dé, magical cauldrons, and all the equipment used in drinking, which, as discussed in chapter two, seems to relate to spiritual power.⁹¹

Earlier I mentioned the druids using a golden sickle to cut the mistletoe.⁹² The fact that the priest’s robes and implement, the bulls and the mistletoe all share a similar colour-scheme may indicate a totemic identification of priest, bulls and sacred plant.

Perhaps the most obviously shamanic piece of equipment in Celtic sources is the *craebh ciúil*, or musical branch. It was a stick with (usually three) metal balls or bells on it. Carried by the *filid*, it was used to signal the start of meetings, bring peace to assemblies and play the music of *súantraige*. The branch nourishes and produces harmonious sounds.⁹³ It was also said to harmonise even the most agitated throng. In

⁸⁹ Stokes. 1905. pp. 28-31. (Last two lines: *for creitt cen fonnad, for fonnad cen chul*) My translation based on Stokes.

⁹⁰ Shaw, 1934. p. 44. para. 1

⁹¹ McKay, J.G., 1931, pp. 11, 37, Eliade, 1964, p. 98, Nagy, 1985, p. 89, Hull, V. 1930b

⁹² Green, 1997a. p. 18

⁹³ Hull, E.. 1901. p. 439

Mesca Ulaid the *filid* Sencha, Conchobar's chief advisor, was the only one who could bring peace to the proceedings with his branch.⁹⁴ In *Fled Bricrend* he again shakes his "peace-keeping branch" to stop a battle.⁹⁵ Various kinds of staffs, bells and rattles appear in shamanistic contexts in other cultures.⁹⁶

A particularly close comparison can be found in the bough Aeneas carries into the Underworld in the *Aeneid*. Charon is surprised at the sight of the bough, "rarely seen in Hades." Hull takes this to mean that "it was only those who entered the realms of the dead *in life* who presented the branch to Proserpine." (Italics mine.) This bough grants admission to Hades. After a bath, Aeneas fixes the bough above Pluto's palace gate before entering. "It was the property of the queen of the unseen abode." She theorises that the branch is talisman that allows humans to enter the Otherworld while living—an obvious piece of shamanic equipment.⁹⁷ This piece of equipment is given to King Cormac by a figure who is apparently his spirit teacher.

TEACHERS

Examples of spirit teachers, like totems, occur throughout this thesis. One particularly clear example occurs in the tale of *The Otherworld Adventure of Cormac*.⁹⁸

In the story King Cormac was out on the hill of Tara when mist surrounded him. A dignified warrior emerged from the mist bearing a silver branch with three golden apples on it. Its music was so beautiful that even the sore wounded would go into *súan* upon hearing it. He tells Cormac that he comes from a land "where there is naught but truth. There's no decay or sorrow, no envy or jealousy, and no hatred or pride."

"It is not so with us." responded Cormac. Cormac proposed an alliance between them, and the warrior agreed. Cormac asked for the branch, and the warrior agrees on the condition that Cormac gives him whatever three things he asked for in Tara. Cormac agrees. The warrior then appears three times. First he asks for, and

94 Gantz, 1981, p. 193

95 Buckley, 1995, pp. 33-34

96 Eliade, 1964, pp. 128, 177, 347

97 Hull, E., 1901, pp. 434-435, 444

98 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 1, pp. 183-222

takes, Cormac's daughter, next his son. The court's grief is terrible each time, but Cormac shakes the branch and banishes their grief with *suantraige*. Finally, the warrior returns to take Cormac's wife, Ethne.

Cormac could not stand this and pursued the warrior. Another mist descended, so none of the throng could see each other and Cormac found himself wandering alone. He saw a host of strange things. For example, he came to a bronze fortress. Inside, a host of horsemen of the Síd were thatching a silver house with white bird wings. Each time it was half thatched, a gust of wind blew the wings away.

Then he came to another fort, with four houses in it. He entered the largest, which had beams of bronze and was well thatched with white bird wings. Five streams flowed from a sparkling spring in the courtyard making a sweet melody, and many drank from them. The nine eternal Hazels of Buan grew over that spring.

Cormac entered the palace and found a beautiful young woman and handsome warrior within. She was bathing in water heated with magical stones that floated in and out of the bath of their own accord. When she was done, Cormac bathed in the water. After various other magical events, the warrior revealed that he was Manannán, and restored his family and warriors to him.

Manannán also gave Cormac a golden cup that reveals truth and falsehood. "Take the cup with you, to distinguish truth from falsehood," Manannán told him, "and keep the branch to bring you harmony. I brought you here to see the Land of Promise. Now I'll explain all you've seen."

He explained that the horsemen of the Síd Cormac saw endlessly thatching the house with white bird wings were the Aes Dána, the poets and *filid* of Ireland who collected cattle and wealth which passed away to nothing. He also explained all the other things Cormac saw. The following day Cormac awoke back at Tara. His family and Manannán's branch and cup were with him. However, neither the cup nor branch remained after Cormac's death, but passed away with him.

In this story Manannán clearly acted as a spirit teacher. He expressly told Cormac that he initiated Cormac's Otherworld journey to teach him, and he gave him magical implements to return with.

Finn provides us with another example. He barely escapes with his life in

some of his many Otherworld journeys, but he always comes out the wiser for his experience. In one however, his Otherworld host, Cuanna, explains the symbolism of what he experienced the previous night, much as Manannán explained Cormac's journey to him.

Finn and his men lose their food to a ram they cannot control, but a twelve-eyed man can. This man represented the power of the world. A hag represented the power of age. The two wells he drank from are a well of falsehood and a well of truth. "Thus, at least in this particular *bruidhean* tale, Finn's otherworldly experience is an extended initiation into a state of enlightenment supervised for Finn's benefit by his otherworldly "mentors."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Nagy, 1981b, pp., 305, note 12, p. 315.

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS: TOTEMS, TEACHERS AND EQUIPMENT

SHAMANIC CULTURES	CELTIC CULTURE
Totems are supernatural helpers, amongst the Buriat, Tungus, Inuit and many others.	Totems are supernatural helpers.
Totems may be acquired via a two stage process. Children are generally believed to have totems from birth, but may only become aware of them later during a formal vision quest, among the Jívaro, the Southern Okanagon of Washington State, and others.	Some totems in the Celtic Dragon Myth are acquired via a two stage process. The dog and horse counterparts of each son are born when they are, but the boys are ignorant of them until they reach maturity and are sent to seek them.
The health of an individual may be diagnosed by a shaman by observing the health of the totem.	The health of the boys in the Celtic Dragon Myth may be ascertained by observing their totemic trees.
Power may be acquired via defeat, and/or ingestion of a being.	Power is acquired by the defeat of giants and their mother.
Shamanic practitioners are identified with their totems.	Shamanic practitioners are identified with their totems.
Shamanic practitioners transform into their totems.	Shamanic practitioners transform into their totems.
There are often tribal totems	There are clan totems
Shamanic practitioners speak with their totems in animal language.	Shamanic practitioners speak with their totems in animal language in many tales.
Shamanic practitioners may live as animals, eating the food of animals.	Mis, Suibhne, Derg Corra, and others live as animals in the forest, eating animal's food.
Shamanic practitioners make offerings of food or other items to their spiritual allies.	Derg Corra shares his food and water with a blackbird, stag and trout. Others offer food to their animals.
Water birds are considered to have particularly strong supernatural powers, and to be particularly appropriate totems for the shaman.	Water birds such as swans are clearly associated with supernatural powers, and with shamanic figures in stories such as <i>Aislinge Óenguso</i> and <i>Tochmarc Étain</i> .
Canines and horses are frequently totems in Siberian and other shamanic cultures.	Canines and horses are frequently totems.
The bird is the shamanic totem par excellence amongst the Buriat, Tungus, and others.	The bird appears to be shamanic totem par excellence.
Bird motifs are the dominant theme in shamans' costuming world-wide.	Bird motifs are a dominant theme in the costuming of <i>filid</i> and druids.
The drum is an important piece of shamanic equipment in many cultures.	There is some evidence for the drum in Celtic culture.

Various other equipment is used by the shaman, including ritual staffs.	The <i>craebh ciúil</i> , or musical branch, is clearly a piece of shamanistic equipment in Celtic tradition.
Shamans have spirit teachers.	Spirits act as teachers in shamanic contexts to figures such as Finn and Cormac.

CONCLUSIONS: THE UNION OF TOTEM AND SHAMAN

There are so many references to “transitional objects” in Celtic sources that I could only scratch the surface. I hope I have shown evidence above for objects that correspond to the classical equipment of the shaman, and for shamanistic relationships with totems and teachers.

The relationship with the totem can be so close that the practitioner becomes the totem.¹⁰⁰ The Gray Lad’s final battle with the dragon shows how fluid the identities of all parties concerned are. The tale tells us, “he thought of the wolf and he was a wolf, and he tore at the dragon, and was a man and clutched his sword and cut off the dragon’s third head, and won the fight...And the dragon was a pool of water and a heap of sand.”¹⁰¹ Here we are dealing with spiritual and material realities undistinguished from each other in the tale, so often the case in Celtic narrative.

We see this occurring in various legends, such as the story of Taliesin, where both he and Cerridwen change shapes into various animals.¹⁰² The theme of animal transformation is reflected in later Scottish folklore in an invocation in *Carmina Gadelica*. This is the *Ora Ceartas*, the invocation for justice, performed before going into court. In the section invoking the animal powers the person takes on their attributes, like the white swan, they are flying above the heads of the dark townsfolk, superior. The power of their totems makes them stronger than all persons.

Is dubh am bail ud thall, is dubh daoine th'ann;

Is mis an eala bhan, Banruinn os an ceann.

Falbhaidh mi an ainme Dhe,

an riochd feidh, an riochd each,

an riochd nathrach, an riochd righ:

Is treasa liom fin na le gach neach.

Dark is yonder town, dark those therein,

I am the white Swan, Queen above them.

I will go in the name of God,

in likeness of Deer, in likeness of horse,

100 Eliade, 1964, p. 94

101 Campbell, J.F., 1911, p. 68, par. 133

102 Guest, 1906, pp.263-264

in likeness of Serpent, in likeness of King:

Stronger will it be with me than with all persons.¹⁰³

The practitioner here also describes himself transforming into the likeness of a king who can be seen as an *axis mundi*, linking this world with the other. The shaman can fulfil this world-linking function by transforming into another likeness, that of their spirit teacher or tutelary deity.

CHAPTER 5
THE SHAMAN ORACLE AS DEITY

*I am wind on sea,
I am ocean wave...
I am a drop of the sun...
I am a salmon in water,
I am a lake in the plain,
I am the word within man,
I am the word of co-creation,
I am the point of the lance in battle,
I am the god who brings fire to the mind.*

Amergin in the Lebor Gabála¹

*I am the radiant sun among the light-givers...
I am the ocean among the waters...
Of water-beings I am Varuna:
Aryaman among the Fathers:
I am Death...
I am the wind...
I am the silence of things secret,
I am the knowledge of the knower...
I have described...only a few of my countless forms.*

Śrī Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gītā²

Karl Pribram, a Professor of neuroscience at Stanford, has concluded that memory is held in the brain not in cells, but in fields, and learning occurs through the resonance of these fields. In collaboration with the physicist, David Bohm, he theorised that the field of the mind as a whole can be extended beyond the physical body. This could lead to the experience of seeing into all things and experiencing them as part of oneself, as Amergin speaks of doing in his well known *rún*.³ Chapter five focuses on the ways these studies, and others like them, shed light on Celtic experiences, myths, and practices.

An oracle acts as a vehicle for the gods on earth. They merge with tribal deities, totemic spirits and their own personal spirit teachers to manifest the power of those beings to the community.

¹ Macalister, 1938-1956, pp. 110-113, translation mine, based on Macalister

² Rees, 1961, p. 99

³ Rees, 1961, pp. 214-217

Eliade initially de-emphasised the shaman's oracular role, but later admitted that he did not attribute the importance to possession he should have.⁴ "Both experiences," he says, "are equally constitutive for shamanism; ecstasy and possession are not contrasts but two aspects of the same reality."⁵ Oesterreich, in his definitive work on possession, also found it to be clearly related to shamanism in many cultures, as do others.⁶

An important source of living information on possession is to be found in Haitian Vodou and other modern religions such as Santería. While Eliade didn't think Vodou could be classed fully with shamanic phenomena in the strictest sense, he felt that the "morphology of the trance, the techniques of possession, the initiatory rites, etc., form invaluable documents for comparison with shamanistic phenomenon."⁷

The relationship between shamanism and possession is a natural one, first because the shaman's goal is in many ways to become *as a spirit*, leaving behind human qualities. Next, because there can be a continuum between the spirit journey and possession. In Tungus and other traditions, the shaman may enact his travels in the Otherworld to his audience, chanting his dialogues with gods and spirits, and dramatising their actions through dance.⁸ It is easy to see how this sort of ritual performance segues into trance possession—the shaman dancing the god becomes the god.⁹

Possession further empowers the shaman, and sometimes even begins a shaman's career. One example is that of the Sakha Siberian man mentioned in chapter two who gained his power by accidentally camping the night on a Tungus shaman's grave. The source of his power was possession by that shaman's spirit.¹⁰ The Tuvans also commonly believe that a man becomes a shaman due to

4 Eliade, 1964, p. 6, Eliade 1961-1962, p. 156. My discussion is limited to the possession of the willing shaman oracle and does not include the phenomenon of involuntary possession.

5 Eliade, 1961-1962, p. 156

6 See Oesterreich, 1974, pp. 236-293, Kalweit, 1992, pp. 137-138. Despite this association, one can't assume shamanic activity from possession alone. (Eliade, 1961-1962, p. 155) Here I present it as another facet of the overall shamanistic pattern in Celtic literature.

7 Eliade 1961-1962, p. 167

8 Chadwick, N.K., 1942, pp.16-17. Balzer, 1997, pp. 99-100, Eliade, 1964, pp. 199-204, Vajnštejn, 1984, p. 359

9 Lonsdale, 1981, pp. 11-12

10 He sometimes spoke in Tungus during rituals. Sieroszewski, 1901, p. 103

possession by a dead shaman's spirit.¹¹

When the shaman leaves his body on the spirit journey it can create the opportunity for a spirit to take over.¹² Celtic tales reflect ideas of gaining power via possession and that possession can be a swap, where the god inhabits the shaman's body while the shaman adventures in the Otherworld. One example examined below is the tale of *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed*, who becomes a better king by trading places with Arawn, king of Annwn. There are many examples of possible trance possession or relics thereof in the literature, like the way poets frequently spoke in the first person as figures such as Merlin and Llywarch Hen in early Welsh poetry.¹³

There is considerably more than a relic to be found in a biography of St. Samson, the *Vita Samsonis*. The Saint is said to have lived in sixth century Wales, and attended the Council of Paris around 560 AD, although these dates are far from certain. While passing through Cornwall on his way from Wales to Brittany, he came across what he found to be a disturbing scene.

Now it came to pass, on a certain day, as he was on a journey through a certain district which they call Tricurius, he heard, on his left hand to be exact, men worshipping a certain idol after the custom of the Bacchantes, by means of a play in honour of an image. Thereupon he beckoned to his brothers that they should stand still and be silent while he himself, quietly descending from his chariot to the ground and standing upon his feet and observing those who worshipped the idol, saw in front of them, resting on the summit of a certain hill, an abominable image. On this hill I myself have been and have adored and with my hand have traced the sign of the cross which St Samson with his own hand carved by means of an iron instrument on a standing stone. When St Samson saw it (the image), selecting two only of the brothers to be with him, he hastened quickly towards them, their chief, Guedianus, standing at their head, and gently admonished them that they ought not to forsake the one God who created all things and worship an idol. And when they pleaded as excuse that it was not

11 Alekseev, 1984, p. 273. See also Vajnštejn. 1984, p. 358

12 For example, among the Tungus, see Eliade, 1964, p. 239

13 Ford, 1974a, pp. 56-57

wrong to celebrate the mysteries of their progenitors in a play, some being furious, some mocking, but some of saner mind strongly urging him to go away, the power of God was made clearly manifest. For a certain boy, driving horses at full speed, fell from a swift horse to the ground, and twisting his head as he fell headlong, remained just as he was flung, little else than a lifeless corpse.

Then St Samson, speaking to the tribesmen as they wept around the body, said, ‘You see that your image is not able to give aid to the dead man. But if you will promise that you will utterly destroy this idol and no longer adore it, I, with God’s assistance, will bring the dead man to life.’ And they consenting, he commanded them to withdraw a little further off, and, after praying earnestly over the lifeless man for two hours, he delivered him, who had been dead, alive and sound before them all. Seeing this, they all with one accord, along with the aforementioned chief, prostrated themselves at St Samson’s feet and utterly destroyed the idol.¹⁴

St Samson then helped them by destroying a malefic serpent and set up a monastery near the cave where it had lived. He moved into the cave himself.¹⁵

Tolstoy has argued that the “play” described here was of a shamanistic, oracular sort, involving people portraying or possessed by the spirits.¹⁶ Although we cannot be certain that this was the case, the reference to Bacchantes clearly implies a spiritually ecstatic or abandoned state. Before looking further at these states in Celtic tradition, it will be useful to see how the states themselves have been viewed by anthropologists.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEWS OF POSSESSION

Some anthropologists have seen possession as a compensatory mechanism for social powerlessness. Particularly in the case of women involved in the Zaar possession cult in Northern Sudan and Egypt, possession by a powerful spirit, good or bad, brings the woman prestige and power.¹⁷

Trawick says of possessed women in Tamil Nadu, that “What the possessed

14 Taylor, 1925, Book 1, chapters 48-49

15 Taylor, 1925, Book 1, chapter 50

16 Tolstoy, 1985, p. 92

17 See Boddy, 1989

dare not demand for herself, the possessing spirit will demand. What the possessed feels but dare not speak, the possessing spirit will scream out.”¹⁸ It is interesting to note in this context that, as I will discuss below, women in oracular roles are very prominent in Celtic literature, which might mean that they continued in the role longer.

This may be in part due to disempowerment in other spheres of life. The role of women in Celtic culture is of course highly contentious. I do not have the space to deal with this difficulty here. Whatever the complete truth of the matter is, I think that it is of interest in relation to my topic that women are depicted by Classical authors and in the later literature as holding considerable power in ancient Celtic culture. Some of these accounts are definitely not fictional. For example, Queen Boadicca was clearly a real historical figure and she cannot have been the only female warleader.

There are numerous accounts of women wielding political, spiritual, and military power in Celtic materials and Classical materials relating to the Celts in the pre-Christian period. There are many fewer, however, in the post-Christian period. I think it is therefore likely that the degree of power women enjoyed in pre-Christian Celtic culture, *whatever* degree of power it was, must have decreased under Christianity.¹⁹

One example is the *Cáin Adomnán*. While it was intended to protect women, it also would have disarmed them—and we know that being unarmed does not make one proof against attack. This all clearly requires further research, but in relation to my current topic, it would make sense that holding an oracular role would fulfill women’s needs for power and prestige in post-Christian Celtic culture, especially if they were being disempowered in other facets of life. As in the modern examples above, women in Celtic culture might have used oracular practice as a compensatory mechanism for social powerlessness.

Of course, trance possession and shamanic rites in general fulfil a valuable social function for the shaman’s community as well as the shaman. On one level it provides entertainment. The Russian ethnographer Shirokogoroff asserted that the

18 Trawick, 1997, p. 62

19 For various articles on the roles of women in Medieval Ireland, see Meek and Simms, 1996

satisfaction of participating in a shamanic rite is infinitely greater than that derived from a Western theatrical performance.²⁰ This would of course depend on the quality of the play or the abilities of the actors or shamans in question!

As in a cinema or theatre, the shamanic rite brings the “mundane and the supramundane realms” together.²¹ Pwyll acts in a classically shamanic way in the *Mabinogion* when he is described as uniting “the two realms in one” through his oracular role and exchange with the Otherworld.²²

The shaman’s dramatic talents are of great importance to the oracular process, but it is not simple play-acting. Shamanic cultures acknowledge to varying degrees the importance of the “vessel” as well as the god who fills it.²³ They carry the audience along with them in a kind of mass ecstasy where the inhibitions and stress of daily life are released, and the audience is drawn to a higher sphere along with the shaman.²⁴

As Kalweit notes, ecstatic release through dramatic performance can be an instinctive process, where humans “divest themselves of inveterate patterns of thought and behaviour and of rigid ideas in order to heal themselves.”²⁵

Although divesting the self of rigid ideas may be instinctive for the indigenous person, it requires more work for the scholar, as evidenced by the different ways possession has been perceived and described by anthropologists and other observers.

THE ORACLE PERCEIVED

The perception of what the shaman actually *is* in relation to their god ranges all the way from avatar or incarnation to momentary embodiment. The underlying point to bear in mind is, as I have mentioned before, that shamanic cultures see the world in *eitherall*, rather than *either / or* terms.

In Castaneda’s first book, Don Juan speaks of shape-shifting.

...to become a crow is the simplest of all matters...it takes a very long

20 Shirokogoroff, 1935, p. 330, footnote, quoted in Kalweit, 1992, p. 134

21 Kalweit, 1992, p. 135

22 Ford, 1977, p. 42, Jones and Jones, 1993, p. 8

23 Leavitt, 1997b, pp. 153-154, Kalweit, 1992, pp. 133-135

24 Eliade, 1964, p. 511

25 Kalweit, 1992, p. 135

time to learn to be a proper crow, he said, but you did not change, nor did you stop being a man. There is something else.²⁶

An indigenous person can accept the multifarious identities of the shaman as a human in daily life, as a magician when healing or invoking powers and as god when trance possession. Norse deities seem on one level like archetypes enacting cosmic dramas, on other like human magicians, and at times, like human beings with all the usual interpersonal issues. Components of both mythic and historical reality are present in Norse myth. For Snorri, there “is no one-way explanation of the gods.” but I believe shamanistic rites and world views can give a reason for the multiple explanations.²⁷

Of course, in shamanistic cultures, the lines between gods and oracles may blur, especially in speech, where to constantly draw distinctions between god and oracle would be even more hopelessly clumsy than drawing such distinctions proves in describing shamanic experience in general.

These blurred lines have led to a misapprehension among some researchers that the natives themselves do not know what is going on. One anthropologist, writing of a tribe in Kerala, appears to throw up his hands saying, “About *avatars* in the Kurichiya belief system, I am not sure; nor are they.”²⁸

It seems unlikely that they are really not sure, rather that, unlike outside observers, they can hold a continuum of identity concepts between man and god simultaneously without cognitive dissonance. Being able to hold both realities, that of a person as human and divine and all the points between, is quite different from confusion. I think the problem of perception sometimes arises when outside observers from Western belief systems cannot distinguish between traditional cultures’ capacity to experience multivalent reality and confusion because they cannot do it for themselves.

One piece of common ground between natives from traditional cultures and modern Western observers is in speech about the oracle. They both often find that they cannot separate oracle and god in their discussion, or find that they feel it is

26 Castaneda, 1969, p. 184 ff.

27 Bolle, 1976, p. 30

28 Aiyappan, 1976, p. 148

more accurate to refer to the oracle by the name of their spirit or god's rather than their personal, human name.

THE ORACLE DESCRIBED

For example, Trawick refers to the oracle Sarasvati as Mariamman, her goddess, when possessed. She also speaks of the many differences of action and speech between the two that makes the distinction natural and necessary to her. Unlike Sarasvati, Mariamman uses cryptic language. She has absolute certainty and confidence, making ongoing references to her power. She is very blunt, lacking social niceties.²⁹

Roy Willis gives good examples when discussing the Lungu *ngulu* cult. One of his research assistants wrote of the possessed oracle Lisita during a ceremony, that "the spirit went outside and danced and sang."³⁰

Willis goes on, speaking of his own responses to Lisita's possession,

And so it did, moving in that slow, almost languorous way I remembered from Jenera's performance, a smooth, gliding movement, sensual too, with simultaneously gyrating hips as the human-spirit-body turns through a wide arc, and then suddenly stops, perfect control...*Mama Ngulu*...begins again the spirit dance of power and desire, gliding...³¹

If anthropologists and other modern observers blur the distinction between spirit and oracle in their written descriptions, it makes sense that an early Irish *fili* might do the same as he told tales of the gods and their human oracles. Especially if, as I will argue below, he might have acted as an oracle as well.

Additionally, the *literati* who transmitted these tales clearly understood that divine and human could merge, even in Christian contexts of demonic possession or the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, Willis has made the effort to understand the Lungu view of reality. The same effort is needed if we are to understand the evidence for trance possession in Celtic sources, most particularly those that deal with the Tuatha Dé.

29 Trawick, 1997, pp. 73-75

30 Willis, 1999, p. 86

31 Willis, 1999, p.86

Anthropological observation and textual analysis require some different skills, but as I noted in the introduction, my approach is based on the premise that the literature to some extent reflects real practices, individuals and events. Therefore anthropological methods are valid for helping to decipher what occurs in the tales. As I will detail below, the overlap between oracle and god as it appears and is described in anthropological accounts of trance possession may go some way towards explaining the sometimes human, sometimes divine natures of the Tuatha Dé in the literature.

It will prove helpful to look at possession in the larger Indo-European area, before focussing on the Celtic.

TRANCE POSSESSION IN INDO-EUROPEAN CULTURES

Some scholars trace yogic practices to the shamanistic practices of the Indus Valley culture of 2500 BC. The practices of the *sādhus*, the wandering ascetics, to attain total identification with god are particularly likely to come from older sources, and retain many shamanistic features to the present day.³²

In some respects *sādhus* are still worshipped as living idols. “After all, in appearance and behaviour they most closely resemble the gods as they are known through popular mythology and iconography.”³³ They outwardly imitate their god, Shaivites bearing tridents, for example, or sitting on a tiger or deer skin, which conveys to them the power of the animal.³⁴ They also consciously try to become the divine “vehicle” of the god, a concept we will see arise in horse symbolism, below.³⁵ Shankarāchārya, a Shaivite teacher of about 800 CE, shared Shiva’s title of Shankara, “auspicious one,” and was regarded as His avatar.³⁶ Additionally, of course, any number of Hindu gods, including Krishna, Rama and others are described as having been human kings, or otherwise incarnate, at different times.³⁷

India yields numerous examples of trance possession today, although the

32 Hartsuiker, 1993, p. 11

33 Hartsuiker, 1993, p. 90

34 Hartsuiker, 1993, p. 90

35 Hartsuiker, 1993, pp. 79-80

36 Hartsuiker, 1993, pp. 28-29, Of course, it is difficult to tell if this relates more to trance possession or the basic doctrine of identification with the godhead, *tat tvam asi*, “That art thou.”

37 Mahapatra, L.K., 1976, p. 53

shamanic links have faded in some cases.³⁸ The Todas of South India have a shaman called a *tenuol* who becomes possessed by a god, but in earlier times was able to travel to the land of the dead, crossing a thread bridge, like the Siberian shamans.³⁹

Moving to other Indo-European cultures, Greece had the famous *Pythia*, oracle of Apollo, who sat on a tripod and spoke words that the priests interpreted. This oracle and others saw themselves as married to the god, as in shamanic spirit marriage. This oracle became very popular. Originally an annual event, it became ongoing, with three oracles working in shifts.⁴⁰ There were many other Greek oracles as well, ranging from priestly to poetic.

Poet as oracle is very well documented in Greece. The performance began with an invocation to the muses, and assertion of the poet's prophetic abilities and a statement of authority sometimes thought of as "boasting" common to many oracular performances.⁴¹ We can see many Celtic parallels, including *Amergin's Rún*, above.

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Tiresias speaks of the god's visitation.

This god's a prophet, too, for those rituals—
the Bacchic celebrations and the madness—
unleash considerable prophetic power.
When the god enters the body fully,
he makes those possessed by frenzy prophets.
They speak of what's to happen in the future.⁴²

Given the above examples, it is not surprising to find that the Greeks thought a lot about the gods' natures and to what extent they connected to man's.

EUHEMERISM AND THE ORACLE

Euhemerism has been defined as the process by which certain gods, "functioning in an early Indo-European mythical structure are 'transposed,'" into

38 Jones, Rex L., 1967-1968, pp. 343-345. See also Rahmann, 1959, pp. 683-715. Eliade, 1964, pp. 421-427 and Harper, 1957, pp. 267-287

39 Jones, Rex L., 1967-1968, p. 337

40 Oesterreich, 1974, pp. 312-313

41 See Leavitt, 1997b, p. 10, Trawick, 1997, pp. 68-69, Chadwick, 1942, p. 21

42 Euripides, 2002, lines 377-382

heroic figures, the keywords being historicisation and humanisation. The process is named for the Greek writer Euhemerus, who lived in the 3rd to 4th centuries BC. In one story he wrote that Zeus and other gods had once been humans who became divine via good works.⁴³

These accounts have been viewed in different ways, ranging from Müller's idea that myth can be based in historical fact to Jan de Vries that euhemerism is the result of the intellectual reduction of myths. Hume had the idea that the polytheistic process, involving euhemerism, was essentially that of an ignorant humanity making gods "just like them" because they cannot think of anything better.⁴⁴ Brennus, the Celtic chief who sacked Delphi and mocked the idea that humans could depict the gods as tidy marble statues, would probably have agreed with Hume.⁴⁵ O'Rahilly believed that the early Irish pseudo-historians vigorously euhemerised the Irish gods to eradicate pagan beliefs, turning Manannán into a skilful navigator rather than a deity, for example.⁴⁶

However, euhemerism may not be reducible to one idea. Diodorus, and probably Euhemerus, believed that some gods were eternal, but "the other gods, we are told, were terrestrial beings, who attained immortal honour and fame because of their benefactions to mankind."⁴⁷ Hindu myths describe people who become Indra, leader of the gods, through their *tapas*, mystic heat generated through austerities.⁴⁸

Here we get closer to a shamanic world view, that the divine pervades all and can manifest through humans even as it remains transcendent. Also that the human can, through his own efforts, ascend as the shaman does to the heavens. Thus, the concept of a "human god," not in an euhemerised but rather, a religious, sense has ancient authority.

The relevance to the question of oracles is evident, and, if we move closer to home, we find that Germanic tradition gives us a particularly useful and straightforward example of a "euhemerised" account.

Saxo describes Odin as a person honoured falsely as a god in the first book

43 Bolle, 1976. pp. 19-20

44 Bolle, 1976. pp. 34-37

45 For discussion see Green, 1995c, p.466

46 O'Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, p. 261, 482-483

47 Oldfather, 1952, p. 331

48 Aiyappan, 1976, p. 139

of his *Danish History*. Snorri tells us that Odin and his wife had the gift of prophecy, and left Turkey for parts north because their vision revealed that they would become famous there.⁴⁹

All appears to be going to plan at first. Kings eagerly worship him and give him gifts, including a gold covered statue of himself. However, his wife strips it of gold for her own adornments and engages in other kinds of misbehaviour. Publicly shamed by all this, Odin goes into exile, replaced by a man called Mit-Othin “famous for his juggling tricks” who was “...likewise quickened, as though by inspiration from on high to seize the opportunity of feigning to be a god.”

His reign is a disaster, and finally he dies, as does Odin’s wife. Her death evidently “revived the ancient splendour of his name, and seemed to wipe out the disgrace upon *his deity*...”.

...so, returning from exile, he forced all those who had used his absence to assume the honours of divine rank to resign them as usurped; and the gangs of sorcerers that had arisen he scattered like a darkness before the advancing glory of his *godhead*. And he forced them by his power not only to lay down their divinity, but further...quit the country, deeming that they, who had tried to foist themselves so iniquitously into the skies, ought to be outcasts from the earth.⁵⁰

Viewed from a shamanic perspective, it seems quite clear that the figures here were oracles, engaged in a spiritual, political and interpersonal power struggle. Snorri depicts them as ambitious humans, with shamanistic powers. The idea that these powers might include being possessed by a deity is implied in part by the shared name. Both Odin and Mit Othin have a similar name, which I suspect may be a title possessed by those the *god* Odin possessed. In fact, the name Odin itself derives in part from the Old Norse *ōðr*, meaning raving or possessed.⁵¹

Where Saxo says that Odin was honoured falsely as a god, Snorri seems to feel that he was not honoured as falsely as those who “had tried to foist themselves so iniquitously into the skies” who went on to scatter “like a darkness before the

49 Young 1965, p. 27

50 Bolle, 1976, pp. 27-28, quoting from Elton, 1905, p. 110. Italics are Bolle’s.

51 Puhvel, 1987, p. 193

advancing glory of his (Odin's) *godhead*.”⁵² Odin is apparently a better oracle than Mit Othin or the sorcerers who arise in Odin's absence, since his power forces them to “lay down their divinity.”

Then, as now, the oracular role brought great perks. Snorri tells us that Odin and his wife with their gifts of prophecy were ambitious and sought a fame and degree of power that they ultimately attained.⁵³

For a modern example of what's involved politically, financially and spiritually in this kind of contest we need look no further than the recent, sometimes armed, struggle of two groups of Tibetan Buddhist monks, each supporting a different candidate as reincarnation of an ancient religious leader, the Karmapa, a living god, and head of the wealthy Kagyu sect.⁵⁴ The issues involved are religious, yes, but also political and financial.

Given all the examples above, it seems clear that there are examples of possession in Indo-European tradition. The next question is how shamanic cultures conceptualise what happens during possession, and what evidence we can find in Celtic tradition for similar concepts.

THE MECHANICS OF POSSESSION AND CELTIC SOURCES

Possession can take three essential forms. The most classically shamanic by Eliade's definition would be exchange, where the shaman goes to the Otherworld and the spirit takes over his body in this one. Second is when the possessing spirit displaces or merges with their oracle. Finally, the most complete possession might be more properly termed incarnation, where the oracle is avatar of the god or spirit.

POSSESSION AS EXCHANGE

A Celtic example is found in the tale *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed*. Pwyll gains power by encountering Arawn, king of Annwn, the Otherworld, and trading places with him.⁵⁵ Pwyll meets Arawn while hunting. He commits a great discourtesy by driving Arawn's hounds off a stag they've killed and feeding his own pack on it.

52 Bolle, 1976, pp. 27-28, quoting from Elton, 1905, p. 110. Italics are Bolle's.

53 Young 1965, p. 27

54 Scott-Clark and Levy, January 30th 2000, pp. 22-29

55 Ford, 1977, pp. 35-56, Chadwick, N.K., 1942, p. 8, Jones and Jones, 1993, pp. 3-4

Arawn swears to have Pwyll satirised. Pwyll asks how he can make peace. Arawn requests that Pwyll swap roles with him and defeat Hafgan, another king in the Otherworld who wars with Arawn continually.⁵⁶

I will form a strong bond with you in this way: I will put you in my place in Annwfn, and give you the fairest woman you have ever seen to sleep with you every night. You will have my shape and manner, so that neither chamberlain, nor officer, nor any other who has ever followed me shall know that you are not I. And that until a the end of a year from tomorrow, when we meet in this place.⁵⁷

Despite the physical resemblance, Pwyll's people notice the superiority of Arawn's rule. Similarly, although the oracle may look the same, with perhaps the addition of deity specific costuming, the spiritual or personality differences between oracle and shaman are evident to observers.⁵⁸

When they switch back, Pwyll has defeated Arawn's enemy and loyally refused to sleep with his wife, and Pwyll's people say they have never been ruled so well as they were by "Pwyll" over the prior year.⁵⁹

The tale of Cú Chulainn's *immram* to rescue the three sons of Dóel Dermait, told in chapter three, relates a similar swap. Cú Chulainn gives a prince a magical spear, and the prince replaces him at court while he is in the Otherworld. They so resemble each other that no one knows Cú Chulainn is gone.⁶⁰

TITLES

Pwyll receives numerous gifts after his "mission" is completed. In his case, the ongoing spiritual commerce with the Otherworld is described as an exchange of gifts. This is exactly the sort of commerce that exists between the oracle and his god. The shaman makes offerings and receives spiritual bounty in return, often in the form of totem animals, jewels, crystals, magical objects and the like.⁶¹ When Pwyll tells his tale, his people ask that he continue to rule as Arawn did, and he

56 Ford, 1977, pp. 37-38

57 Ford, 1977, p. 38

58 Trawick, 1997, pp. 73-75.

59 Ford, 1977, p. 42

60 Rhys, 1892, p. 346

61 See Kalweit, 1988, pp. 220-224 141 169 182, 210. Eliade, 1964, pp. 248-249, 40-41

agrees. Pwyll then receives a title: Arawn's. The full passage is as follows:

From that time on, they began to strengthen their friendship, and sent each other horses, hunting dogs, hawks, and treasures of the sort that each supposed would give pleasure to the other. Because of his living for that year in Annwfn and ruling it so successfully, and bringing together the two realms in one by virtue of his bravery and valour, his name, Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, fell out of use and *he came to be called Pwyll, Head of Annwfn, henceforth.*⁶² (Italics mine.)

I already discussed in chapter three how the *dichetal do chennaib na tuaithe*, extemporaneous chant from the heads of the tribe, may in fact be trance possession.⁶³ *Cenn*, like *penn*, can mean "head," but can also mean leader of a realm as it does in Pwyll's case. To add to the case is the fact that he is said to bring together the two realms. It might be argued that it is Hafgan and Arawn's realms he has joined by getting rid of Hafgan. However, I think that the context makes it quite clear that the realms spoken of are his kingdom and Annwfn. Uniting this world and the other is, of course, what oracles do.

This is far from the only time in Celtic literature when a title suggestive of assuming a divine role is given to a tale's protagonist after a significant interaction with the Otherworld.

As you'll recall, in the *Aislinge* when Óengus goes to the lake to take the first ritual action on his own behalf and claim Caer as his beloved, his name changes from Óengus, possibly "Chosen One," to *in Macc Óc*, or "*the Young Son.*"⁶⁴ (Italics mine.) When he takes a title like those of his parents (*the Dagda*, or Good god, and *the Boann*, or She of the White Cows or something to that effect) he becomes the young son in the divine family. I emphasise *the* because the use of the definite article implies that we are not dealing with a name but a title. One says, the bus driver, or the professor, not the Joe Bloggs (unless he is so famous that his name has become a title in and of itself, like *the Harrison Ford*).

Yet another titling comes when Finn eats the salmon of wisdom and gains the name or title of the *other* Finn to whom he was apprenticed. After he eats the

62 Ford, 1977, p.42

63 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 3, p. 117, Chadwick, N.K., 1935, p. 3

64 Shaw, 1934, p. 62, par. 13. line 9, my translation.

salmon, this other one, called Finnéces, (Finn the poet), told that the boy's name is Demne, says, "Finn is your name my lad, and to you was the salmon given to be eaten."⁶⁵ He goes on to say, "and it is *you* who are the Finn in truth," (*ocus is tu in Find co fir*).⁶⁶ The name Finn itself could mean either "Radiant One" or "Knowing One," or both, referring to "one who has bright knowledge and becomes resplendent by its virtue."⁶⁷

Oesterreich, commenting on the way some worshippers of Dionysos took on the god's name says, "Such identification always indicates a psychic transformation. If the worshippers had not been changed into Dionysos the transference to them of the god's name would be inexplicable."⁶⁸ This identification also explains why the worshippers described the god's voice, expressions, in short, his *physical* presence so vividly at festivals. He was physically embodied in one or more of his worshippers.

It is typical that the shaman takes on the attributes of his god, as he does those of his totem. Indeed, many shamanic cultures, such as that of Kumaon in the Himalayas, as well as much of South Asia, see possession as less an "eviction" of the oracle than a merging of oracle and god.⁶⁹ Therefore, shamanic cultures often call the possessing deities and their oracles by the same name. This can cause confusion even amongst contemporaries without the additional distortions of time and text rescensions.

For example, one scholar said that there is difficulty in understanding what is told about Melanesian spirits because "the name Nopitu is given both to the spirit and to the person possessed by the spirit, who performs wonders by the power and in the name of the Nopitu who possesses him. Such a one would call himself Nopitu...".⁷⁰ In one modern Santería account, a priestess told her student that what she needed was "to meet Obatalá in person." She was then taken into a separate

65 English translation: Meyer, 1904a, p. 86. Old Irish, Meyer, 1881-1883, p. 201. For more on the episode, see Nagy, 1981a, pp. 139-140.

66 My translation.

67 Nagy, 1985, p. 22. Radiant from *finn*, white, luminous, (Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 307, headword *finn*) or knowing from *ro-finnadar*, literally, to find out or discover, as he is so often depicted doing. (Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 510, headword: *ro-finnadar*)

68 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 339

69 Leavitt, 1997c, p. 151

70 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 281, quoting from Codrington, 1891, *The Melanesians*, (Oxford), p. 153

room from where the main ceremony was conducted and conversed with the god Obatalá through his possessed oracle.⁷¹

We may also contemplate the relation of the goddess Brigit to the Christian saint Brigit. The ancient goddess Brigit, daughter of the Dagda, had two sisters. The three were patronesses of poetry and seership, smithcraft and the healing arts.⁷² She was also concerned with fertility.⁷³ The saint retained many of the Primal goddess's features, not to mention sacred sites, as has been well chronicled elsewhere.⁷⁴ In light of oracular ideas it may be more appropriate to think of this saint as *the* Brigit.

Brigit's name is a title to begin with, meaning something like "Exalted One."⁷⁵ There is no doubt that she "represents the meeting and merging of paganism and Christianity."⁷⁶ Her identity and mythos may in fact be a confluence of the ancient Celtic goddess and the personality and history of that goddess's oracle at the time of the Christian conversion.

Odin and Mit-Othin above may be Indo-European examples, and it's worth noting that the various double-barrelled deity names we find in the iconography, generally interpreted as being local aspects of deities, may also have something to do with this.⁷⁷

One can go too far, of course. As Dr. Mark Scowcroft once said to me, to say that *every* Irishman in the literature whose name incorporates "Lugh" in it is his embodiment is like saying every Spanish girl called Maria is an avatar of the Blessed Mother. Our next example, however, is more conclusive than a single person named for a deity, it is a group described clearly as oracles.

POSSESSION AS MERGING OR DISPLACEMENT

In this type of possession the god possesses the oracle but the oracle does not journey to the Otherworld. Here the oracle may merge with the god, mingling

71 González-Wippler, 1992, pp. 228-232

72 Rhys, John, 1892, pp. 74-75, Ó Catháin, 1995, pp. ix

73 Green, 1995c, p. 198

74 See Ó Catháin, 1995, Bowen, 1973/1974, Green, 1995c, pp. 196-202, and for the Saint's life. Ó hAodha, 1978.

75 Green, 1995c, p. 196

76 Green, 1995c, p. 202

77 For various examples see Ross, 1993, pp. 170-179.

identities, or may simply lose consciousness of what has happened. Vodou priests describe the *Lwa*, the Vodou deities, driving the *gros bon ange*, the big good angel (one of two souls everyone has) out of a person's head.⁷⁸

A well known and clear example of this type of trance possession is to be found in Giraldus Cambrensis' account of the twelfth century Awenyddion.

There are certain persons in Cambria, whom you will find nowhere else, called Awenyddion, or people inspired; when consulted upon any doubtful event, they roar out violently, are rendered beside themselves, and become, as it were, possessed by a spirit. They do not deliver the answer to what is required in a connected manner; but the person who skilfully observes them, will find after many preambles, and many nugatory and incoherent, though ornamented speeches, the desired explanation conveyed in some turn or word: they are then roused from their ecstasy, as from a deep sleep, and, as it were, by violence compelled to return to their proper senses. After having answered the question they do not recover till violently shaken by other people; nor can they remember the replies they have given. If consulted a second or third time upon the same point, they will make use of expressions totally different; perhaps they spoke by means of fanatic and ignorant spirits. These gifts are usually conferred upon them in dreams: some seem to have sweet milk or honey poured on their lips; to others (it seems) that a written document is applied to their mouths, and immediately on rising up from sleep after completing their chant, they publicly declare that they have received this gift...they invoke, during their prophecies the true and living god, and the Holy Trinity and pray that they may not by their sins be prevented from finding the truth.⁷⁹

This fits many examples of trance possession precisely—we can compare the elements point by point.

First, the Awenyddion are described as possessed. Cambrensis says that the Awenyddion are possessed, and their name is based in a word that explicitly states that their inspiring force comes from outside themselves. Speaking of the “poetic”

78 Métraux, 1972, p. 120

79 Tolstoy, 1985, p. 140

form of knowing, called the *awen* in Welsh sources, Ford says that the “special characteristic of this knowledge is a ‘blowing’ or ‘breathing in,’ literally ‘inspiration.’ In Irish the related word is *ai*, from **awi*, ‘poetic art;’ its Welsh cognate, still in use, is *awen* ‘poetic inspiration.’”⁸⁰ One could thus even translate their name as “the Possessed Ones.”

The *Awenyddion* become hysterical and incoherent in the early stages of trance. Incoherence and hysteria are the first stages of possession in many cultures. When one of the *Alledjenu* spirits possesses an African member of the Bori religion, the *Alledjenu* “fells this man or woman to earth.” Sometimes the “person is so strongly affected that he becomes as if insane...”.⁸¹ An African woman from of the Bori “threw herself upon the ground in all directions, and imitated the cries of various animals.”⁸² *Cambrensis* similarly describes the *Awenyddion* “roaring.”

The *Awenyddion*’s speech is ambiguous and convoluted. The meandering and obscure quality of speech *Cambrensis* then describes is also present in some cases of possession. This calls to mind shamanic sacred language, discussed in chapter three in relation to the *fordorcha*, the “dark speech” of the poets.

The use of obscure sacred language can imply trance possession in a variety of ways. First, it is sometimes based on animal cries, suggesting possession by the spirit of that animal, or at the least a spiritual affinity or communion with them.

Even when language is recognisable, the oracle still sometimes requires an interpreter, like the priests who interpreted the often obscure speech of the Delphic oracles. *Jamblich*’s work on the mysteries states that divine possession “emits words which are not understood by those that utter them...they pronounce them...with an insane mouth...and entirely yield themselves to the energy of the predominating god.”⁸³ One observer’s description of a Batak oracle’s language is similar to *Cambrensis*’ description of the *Awenyddion*’s. “The words of this special language are...in part cautious circumlocutions...and in part quite strange words.”⁸⁴ This language was reminiscent of ancient Batak.

80 Ford, 1974a, pp. 7-8

81 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 254

82 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 256

83 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 343

84 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 272. The Batak are a Sumatran tribe.

Similarly, Celtic poems with an oracular character like *Amergin's Rún* and Taliesin's *Cad Goddeu* are crammed with archaisms and obscure words. We can see these as survivals, deliberate archaising, or combinations of both. In any case, the aura of age gives legitimacy to oracular utterance, suggesting that it is truly not the medium himself speaking, but a god or ancient ancestor.

The Awenyddion do not remember what they have said. This is true in many cases of possession. Sometimes the possessed have admitted that they remember something to observers, but the quality of memory is changed. One woman said she sees those assembled at the seance but does not recognise them.⁸⁵ Others believe themselves to have been genuinely possessed, but merged with the god, so they retain memory, but feign that they have forgotten because this is a convention that enhances the possession's "authenticity" in the eyes of observers.⁸⁶

The Awenyddion must be brought out of trance by violent means. This is not entirely unusual in shamanism, as I showed in my examination of initiatory illness. Although most shamans have good control of their state of consciousness, there are occasions, especially when trance possession, when help is required to return to a normal state and/or release the possessing spirit. For example, the *hamatsa* must be doused in salt water to restore him to usual consciousness after his possession.⁸⁷ In some cases a person possessed by a Vodou Lwa needs help to come out of trance.⁸⁸ Cú Chulainn required a similar submersion to bring him out of his *riastrad*.⁸⁹

The Awenyddion's powers come in a dream, conferred by contact with a substance. As discussed earlier, the idea that ingesting a substance can bring spiritual awakening may possibly be a memory of psychotropic drugs used by Indo-European peoples, or simply the result of their ongoing use of ale, wine and mead.

There are various specifically oracular examples of this theme in shamanic cultures. The Batak oracle's lips were "unsealed" with a substance called *piri*

85 Leavitt, 1997c, p. 152

86 Métraux, 1972, pp. 122-123

87 Eliade, 1958a, p. 71

88 Métraux, 1972, p. 122

89 See Eliade, 1958a, pp. 84-85, O'Rahilly, Cecile, 1976, lines 1177-1196, pp. 170-171

before he made his pronouncements.⁹⁰ The oracle of Apollo at Deiradiotes at Argos, and the Achaian priestess of the Earth became possessed by drinking the blood of the sacrifices. This is closely paralleled in Santería. In one account, a student was upset that priests drink animal blood because of the Biblical injunction that “the blood is the life” and properly belongs to god alone. A senior priestess responded that “the Orishas are manifestations of god. And as such, blood also belongs to them.” Only a possessed priest will be seen drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. These examples recall Mis’ blood drinking.⁹¹

That the substance that gives the *Awenyddion* their power may be honey or milk has other associations in Celtic and other traditions. In Hunza, one shaman acquired his powers when he went away to the *peris* or fairies on a mountain for five days, receiving their power in a glass of blue milk.⁹² I have also mentioned earlier that milk is a powerful detoxifier of *amanita muscaria*, and can be combined with it. Given the raving state of the *Awenyddion*, drug use would not seem entirely outwith the bounds of possibility, though there are other explanations.

According to legend, to consume fairy food often means you become one of them. As I will argue, fairies and oracles seem to be identified in some Celtic tales, and milk is often the offering left out for the fairies.⁹³

Cambrensis tells us that the *Awenyddion*’s power may also come through a document being applied to their lips. Magical objects are typically given to the shaman, sometimes placed in their bodies, in their visionary experiences, as discussed in chapter four in relation to the shaman’s physical equipment. In a typical example, Arunta initiates receive numerous small crystals and magical shells from the spirits.⁹⁴

The *Awenyddion* declare their authority. Cambrensis says that “immediately on rising up from sleep *after completing their chant*, they publicly declare that they have received this gift.” (Italics mine.)

This begs the question—was this “sleep” actually trance that they chanted

90 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 271

91 The Greek references are in Oesterreich, 1974, pp. 344-345. For Santería, see González-Wippler, 1992, pp. 226-228

92 Kalweit, 1992, pp. 78-79. Hunza is a kingdom in Karakorum, Northern Pakistan.

93 Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 47, Basilov, 1984a, p. 257. Also see Wasson, 1968, pp. 63, 31, 41, 43-44.

94 Eliade, 1958a, pp. 97-98

throughout, or did the chant occur after awakening and before the declaration of the power that has come to them? In any event, it sounds more like a deliberate quest or spirit journey than something that just happens to them. Although the text is unclear on this point, the immediate declaration of authority is typical of an oracle.

For example, in Fiji, when the oracle is “seized by the possession, the god within him calls out his name in a stridulous tone, ‘It is I! Katouivere!’ or some other name,” declaring his power.⁹⁵

The Awenyddion invoke God. Invoking divine power is obviously an essential component of oracular work. The Awenyddion invoke the power of the Trinity. As noted earlier, oracular practice and other kinds of shamanistic practice can easily co-exist with Christianity.

They pray that their sins may not prevent them from finding truth. Where oracles are concerned, traditional cultures commonly believe that an oracle’s sins or impurity can create “static in the line” and prevent the spirits manifesting through them.⁹⁶

POSSESSION AS INCARNATION

The final type of possession, if one can call it that, is total incarnation, where the oracle is not just identified with the god or goddess during moments of possession, but all the time. For example, Pele’s priestess in Hawaii proclaims with certainty, “I am Pele, and I shall never die.”⁹⁷

The famous woman oracle, Veleda, described by Tacitus, seems to have been no less confident. She was ally of the Batavian leader Civilis in the first century AD.⁹⁸ There has been much argument as to whether Veleda was German or Celt. Classical authors sometimes confused Celtic and Germanic tribes and there was a good deal of interaction between Celtic and Germanic tribes in the Rhineland and elsewhere. Her name is more likely to be Celtic, corresponding to Irish *fili* and Middle Welsh *gwelet* both literally meaning “seer.”⁹⁹ As such, it is a title.

95 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 286

96 Leavitt, 1997c, pp. 153-154.

97 Chadwick, N.K., 1942, p. 21

98 Moore, 1951, vol. 2, pp. 118, 126, 212, 216

99 Enright, 1996, p. 170. Enright also gives a summary of the arguments here.

Veleda's prophetic abilities brought her temporal as well as spiritual power, since she had successfully predicted German victories.¹⁰⁰ To inspire greater respect among the people, Veleda "dwelt in a lofty tower, and one of her relatives chosen for the purpose, conveyed, like the messenger of a divinity, the questions and the answers."¹⁰¹ Elsewhere Tacitus says specifically that she was "regarded by many as a divinity."¹⁰² She was later "succeeded" by a woman named Ganna, showing she was not a one off.¹⁰³ It seems more likely that she was one occupier of an established religious role.

THE WISE CHILD

The avatar of a deity may be conscious from infancy of who they are, or the realisation may come in stages later on, after being officially recognised as an avatar and trained in the role as a child, like the tulku, "Living Buddhas" of Tibetan tradition.¹⁰⁴

The figure of the "wise child" of Celtic myth suggests the avatar—after all, their wisdom has to come from somewhere. Taliesin speaks of many other lives. "I have been a blue salmon," he said, "I have been a dog, a stag, a roebuck on a mountain. A stock, a spade, an axe in hand, a stallion, a bull, a buck." When Gwyddno, the father of his finder and patron, Elffin, wonders that this tiny baby can speak, Taliesin responded that he was better equipped to answer than Gwyddno to question him.¹⁰⁵ And no wonder—not only has he had numerous incarnations, he is coeval with the Divine.

An impartial chief bard

Am I to Elffin;

My accustomed country

Is the land of the Cherubim.

Johannes the Diviner

100 Moore, 1951, vol. 2, p. 118

101 Moore, 1951, vol. 2, p. 118

102 Moore, 1951, vol. 2, p. 126

103 Enright, 1996, p. 93

104 Scott-Clark and Levy, 2000, pp. 22-33 describes the human qualities and conflicts within one of the young candidates to become the current *Karmapa*, head of an important sect.

105 Guest, 1906, p. 267

Called me Merddin,
 At length every king
 Will call me as Taliesin...
 I was at first little Gwion,
 At length I am Taliesin...
 I was on the horse's crupper
 Of Eli and Enoch;
 I was on the high cross
 Of the Merciful Son of god...
 I have been instructed
 In the whole system of the universe,
 And I shall be till the day of judgement
 On the face of the earth...
 I have been in an uneasy chair
 Above Caer Sidin,
 And the whirling round without motion
 Between three elements.¹⁰⁶

Taliesin here is all capable, all skilled, because he coexists with numerous forms and beings. He has moved beyond any limited human identity to a transcendent one outside of time.¹⁰⁷ The drops he ingested as Gwion Bach from Cerridwen's cauldron only made him aware of who he truly was—a limitless being.¹⁰⁸

A Lungu oracle, Mr. Simpungwe, said, "when the *ngulu* are in me I don't know I'm Simpungwe—I am several other people and can do anything, even if as Simpungwe I am sick."¹⁰⁹

Both Pwyll and Taliesin benefit others by their power, in part by acquiring knowledge. This is an especially important part of trance possession in shamanic cultures. It is especially important to learn how things were in the past, extending to

106 Middle Welsh and English in Nash. 1858, pp. 161-162

107 See Rhys, 1892, p. 248

108 Rees, 1961, p. 230

109 Willis, 1999, p. 88

“first times,” primordial periods of history, such as Taliesin refers to above.¹¹⁰

We may debate what deity or deities Taliesin embodied, in the poem above he even shares Christ’s cross. However, the Irish branch of Celtic tradition has one deity more associated with oracular practice than any other.

LUGH AND HIS AVATARS

Lugh seems to be associated more closely with oracles than any other Celtic god.¹¹¹ Like the Norse Odin, with whom he is so often compared, Lugh may have been a deity to be emulated and possibly embodied, as well as worshipped. It is also possible that the god Odin is a Celtic “import” into Germanic religion, or at least strongly influenced by the figure of Lugh.¹¹²

Like Apollo, also well provisioned with oracles, Lugh’s focus on manifestation through skilled action would make it seem natural for him to appear in the bodies of his priests or avatars. Two related tales, one directly involving Lugh, *Baile in Scáil*, usually translated as the *Phantom’s Frenzy*, and *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* both depict an apparently oracular process.¹¹³

BAILE IN SCÁIL AND BAILE CHUINN CHÉTCHATHAIG

Baile in Scáil begins when Conn, High King of Tara, was walking Tara’s ramparts with his three Druids and filid each night, to prevent the Fomoiré from taking Ireland unawares.

One night, he stepped on a partially buried stone. Its shrieks echoed throughout Tara. Conn asked his fili, Cesarn, what sort of stone it was and why it cried out. After fifty three days, Cesarn discovered it was called Fál, from *fo-ail*, meaning the “under-rock,” that is, under a king, since it was used to inaugurate kings. Its screams indicated the number of Conn’s progeny who would inherit the throne of Tara.

“Tell me their names, Cesarn.”

“It is not my destiny to reveal them.” he responded.

110 See Lambek, 1998

111 Tolstoy, 1985, pp. 92-98

112 See Enright, 1996, pp. 270-279

113 Dillon, 1946, pp. 11-14

Suddenly they were surrounded by mist. A man on horseback approached and cast his weapon at them three times. Conn stood his ground, though Cesarn shouted in alarm. The man stopped and invited Conn to go with him. He did, and soon they came to a plain with a golden tree, and a great palace with a centre pole of white gold. A beautiful girl sat on a crystal throne in the house, wearing a golden crown. She was the goddess of sovereignty, and had a gold and silver vat before her, and a golden vessel and goblet beside her.

A magnificent figure was beside her on a throne, who said “I am not a phantom and I am not a spectre,” he began, “and I have come after death to be honoured by you, and I am of the race of Adam. I am Lugh, mac Ethniu, mac Smretha, mac Tigernmar, mac Faelu, mac Etheor, mac Irial, mac Érimón, mac Míl of Spain. I have come to tell you the span of your sovereignty and of that of every prince that will come of you in Tara forever.”

The goddess fed Conn and each time she poured ale, she asked Lugh for whom she poured, and he named another king descended from Conn. Cesarn inscribed them all on yew staves in *ogham*. Then Lugh, the goddess and their palace disappeared, but the vat, vessel and staves remained with Conn.

Lugh does not just prophesy who will inherit Conn’s throne. He and the goddess of Sovereignty dispense the *derglaith*, a pun which can be translated as red ale or red sovereignty. The yew tree has the potential to regenerate infinitely, so it is an appropriate wood for recording a long-lived lineage. The entire experience has an initiatory quality.

Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig is an earlier text. In this version, Conn himself speaks the prophecy in an archaic rhetoric, with many of the names disguised as poetic kennings. While *Baile Chuinn* and *Baile in Scáil* differ in form and content, it is interesting that both are prophecies of the kings to reign after Conn, and that one features Lugh speaking, the other Conn covering the same ground. It is also interesting that the oldest one is *Baile Chuinn*.¹¹⁴ This may possibly mean that the earlier text is Conn’s oracular utterance when merged with Lugh, taking the form of poetic rhetoric that refers to Ireland as personified by the sovereignty goddess.¹¹⁵

114 Dillon, 1946, p. 12

115 See Carey, 1996

I have already shown the relationship between this kind of alliterative verse and shamanistic practice in chapters two and three.

Chadwick suspects a connection between *dichetal do chennaib* and the *baile* literature. She says, “It is impossible to avoid a suspicion that these expressions somehow contain a veiled allusion to the *baile* literature, such as the *Baile in scail* and the *Echtra Cormaic*, though so far as I am aware, ‘heads’ are not actually mentioned as playing a part in these stories. The redactor of the *Echtra Cormaic* is at pains in his colophon to bring the *baile* literature, and these two stories in particular, into the circle of Christian orthodoxy, and he tells us, in words which sound like an echo of the colophon to *Imbas forosnai*, that these experiences were brought about by divine means, and were not connected with ‘demons.’”¹¹⁶

In chapter three, I discussed the possibility that *dichetal do chennaib na tuaithe* may refer to trance possession. As will be recalled, this version of the name means extemporaneous chant from the heads *of the tribe*.¹¹⁷ *Cenn* can mean “head,” but can also mean “chief” or “leader” of a natural or supernatural realm. Amergin’s *Rún*, in which he says “I am the god who forms a mind of fire” is also called a *cetal do chendaib*.¹¹⁸ Therefore, ‘heads’ in the decapitated physical sense do not need to come into it at all. Rather, the connection between these tales may be trance possession. The fact that the redactor clearly states that these experiences were brought about by *divine* not demonic means, also points to trance possession of either deities or ancestors.

In the *Baile*, Lugh says, “I am not a phantom and I am not a spectre, and I have come after death to be honoured by you, and I am of the race of Adam.”¹¹⁹ He traces his descent through the Milesian line, though he is also clearly the pre-Milesian god, Lugh. This alone suggests a line of oracles. Oracular abilities, like shamanic abilities in general, can move through family lines, and Conn, as well, was of Lugh’s lineage. It also suggests that Lugh is a god who can manifest in mortal form, via oracular or other means. Of course, we cannot discount the fact that contacting a pre-Christian ancestor would be seen as less “suspect” than

116 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 135

117 Stokes and Windisch, 1880-1909, vol. 3, p. 117, Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 3

118 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, p. 107

119 Dillon, 1946, p. 13

contacting a pre-Christian god.

There may also be an interesting etymological point here. *Baile* means a trance or frenzy arising from spiritual vision.¹²⁰ *Scál* can mean a hero, phantom or super-being, human or supernatural.¹²¹ *Scáile*, compared with the former term by Pedersen, can mean a shadow, reflection, semblance or image of something. An oracle can be thought of as a “reflection” of a god. O’Brien equates *skál* with the Gothic *skōhsl*, which he interprets as “demon” or “evil spirit.”¹²² The term has a great range of meaning—from human to divine to demonic—a range of meaning we typically find in the descriptors of shamanic oracles.

Accounts call Lugh the *scál* par excellence. Chadwick thinks that a poetic reference to Labraid Loingseach both identifies him with Lugh, and implies that he has similar powers, that his “spirit still lives and is capable of reappearance, perhaps of reincarnation.”¹²³ Of course, if this poem is a panegyric on one of Labraid’s descendants, as Chadwick thinks is likely, this may mean in part simply that Labraid and his descendants are worthy of Ireland’s sovereignty.

Some sources say that Lugh is the son of Scál Balb, the “Dumb or Stammering Scál.” Scál Balb is also said to be Finn’s great grandfather, associating him, and the term *scál*, with another shamanistic figure. There is also a tradition that he was a foreigner, not proficient in Irish, hence the epithet *balb*.¹²⁴

If *scál* may mean oracle, and I have already shown the relationship between oracular and shamanic practice and poetry, the Old Norse and Icelandic *skáld*, the ancient Scandinavian term for a poet, provides an interesting comparison. The word has no satisfactory etymology.¹²⁵ It has been equated with the Irish *scél*, tale, however, given the complex of meanings and connections above, I suggest that it might be translated as “oracle,” one uttering the kind of divinely inspired shamanic, poetry I have already discussed.¹²⁶ This is obviously purely speculative, however, since no other satisfactory etymology exists for the word *skáld*, it seems reasonable

120 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 63, headword *baile* 2

121 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 523, headword *scál*

122 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 523, headword *scáile*. Chadwick, 1935a, p. 1

123 Chadwick, N.K., 1935b, pp. 4-5

124 Chadwick, N.K., 1935b, pp. 2-3

125 Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 127, headword *skald*

126 Partridge, 1990, p. 595, headword *scold*

to state this as one possibility.

Tucait Baile Mongáin shows a similar structure involving an Otherworld journey, drinking and Mongán reciting his *echtrae*, or Otherworld adventures in the form of a *baile*.¹²⁷ *Buile Suibne* gives us another example of a *baile*. Suibne shows considerably less control than the protagonists of the other tales I have discussed, but he does acquire shamanistic powers of flight and compose poetry.¹²⁸

Carey says that we may situate the *Baile Chuinn* within a “farflung, ancient context,” that derives the sovereign’s legitimacy from the supernatural realm.¹²⁹ An oracular component would seem a natural manifestation of this process. While the *baile* tales do not explicitly state that the kings involved are actually oracles, Fled Bricrend makes a strong case for either Conchobar, king of Ulster, or Senchae, another of the Ulaid, being an “earthly god” of the Ulstermen.

CONCHOBAR OR SENCHAE AS ORACLE

During one of the many brawls in *Fled Bricrend*, Lóegure and Conall have attacked Cú Chulainn over the champion’s portion and the accompanying right to be declared champion of Ulster.

Ní rabi la Ultu fer no lamad a n-etergaire, co n-epert Sencha fri Conchobur: “Etarscar na firu,” or se: ar is é dia talmanda robói oc Ultaib ind inbuid sin Conchobur. Dolluid Conchobur ocus Fergus etarro iarom. Dollécet a láma la tóeb fó chetóir. “Dénaid mo reir-se” or Sencha. “Dogenam-ne” ol seat. “Isí mo ríar-sa didiu,” or Sencha. “in caurathmír ucut,” ol se “do fodail fón slóg uile innocht ocus teacht immi iar sudiu irréir n-Aillella maic Mágach, ar bid aingcess la Ultu in dal so do gleód, mani brethaigther hi Cruachnib.”

There was no man among the Ultonians who dared separate them, till Sencha spake Conchobar: “Part the men,” quoth he. [For at that period, among the Ultonians, Conchobar was the earthly god.] Thereupon, Conchobar and Fergus intervened [the combatants] immediately let drop their hands to their sides. “Execute my wish,” quoth Sencha. “Your will shall be obeyed,” they

127 Hull, 1930c, pp. 417-419. See also Carey, 1996, p. 191-192

128 O’Keefe, J.G., 1913

129 Carey, 1996, p. 201

responded. “My wish then,” quoth Sencha, “is to-night to divide the Champion’s Portion there amongst all the host, and after that to decide with reference to it according to the will of Ailill mac Māgach, for it is accounted unlucky among the men of Ulster to close this assambly unless the matter be adjudged in Cruachan.”¹³⁰

Henderson translates this passage to read that Conchobar is the earthly god—however, I believe the Irish is ambiguous on this point. Gantz translates part of the same passage as follows.

Not a man of the Ulaid dared separate them, however, until Senchae said to Conchobur, “Part the men,” for Senchae was the earthly god amongst the Ulaid in the time of Conchobur. Conchobur and Fergus stepped between the combatants then, and the men at once dropped their hands to their sides. “Do my will.” said Senchae. “We agree.” said the men.¹³¹

One problem is that Conchobar’s name is abbreviated to *Con* in the manuscript, so one cannot tell if it was a genitive, Conchobur, or a nominative, Conchobar.¹³² A genitive would result in the end of the sentence reading, “in the time of Conchobur” as Gantz suggests.

In favour of Henderson’s reading, the goddess personified as queen seems to be an institution in ancient Irish culture, as I shall discuss below, so it should not surprise us that the king would also be seen as an embodiment of the divine.

In favour of Gantz’s reading, the structure of the sentence, a gloss, seems a bit odd. *Ar is é dia talmanda robói oc Ultaib ind inbuid sin Conchobur* seems a strange word order. If it was Conchobar, I would expect *Ar is é Conchobar dia talmanda robói oc Ultaib ind inbuid sin*. “For it was he, Conchobar, who was the earthly god of the Ulstermen at that time.” However, because it is a gloss, the scribe might have written all but Conchobar’s name, realised the ambiguity of the statement, and added Conchobar’s name to try and make it clear in a parenthetical way, meaning something like, “For it was he who was the earthly god of the

130 Henderson, 1899, pp. 16-17

131 Gantz 1981, p. 226

132 Henderson, 1899, p. 16, line 9

Ulstermen at that time. [That is] Conchobar.”

Another point in favour of Gantz’s reading is that after (and before) this point, Senchae is the one giving all the orders, not Conchobar. It is Senchae who actually asks Conchobar to intervene in the first place, and after he and Fergus do, it is apparently Senchae’s will that must be obeyed.

Given that the text is ambiguous, and we cannot know for sure, there are other points that would make Senchae an interesting candidate for “earthly god.”

Senchae is elsewhere described as one of the three best warriors of Ulster.¹³³ Cú Roi said he was “A man of the world from sun to sun, a man who can make peace with three fair words.”¹³⁴ Perhaps these words are the formula he says above and repeats later in the tale. He commands Fergus, Conchobar and the Ulaid with the words “Do my will,” perhaps more correctly rendered with emphasis as: “Do *My* will.”¹³⁵

The idea that even a king must show great respect to an oracle is a feature of many societies. The King of the Hausa of West Africa, of the Bori religion, traditionally had to throw himself at the feet of the oracle when they met and assure him that he would do the will of the gods as transmitted by the oracle. Following this the king collected any necessary offerings from the people to make the sacrifices the oracle demanded. Frobenius said that this pattern is present throughout Central Africa, not just among the Hausa, and believed the Bori religion, a “religion of possession,” originally came from the East, possibly Persia.¹³⁶

Reflecting possibly similar protocols, *Mesca Ulaid* says that it was “*geis* for the king to speak before his druids did.”¹³⁷ Druids were also arbiters of all sacrifices, implying their oracular role, because shamanic cultures believe that for someone to know what the gods want they must either be in communication with them or *be* them. For example, the possessed Katandirale or “Devil-dancer” of Ceylon is “worshipped as a present deity.” He tells the people what gifts and

133 Gantz, 1981, p. 97

134 Gantz, 1981, p. 210

135 Gantz, 1981, pp. 244-245, Henderson, 1899, p. 16, par. 16

136 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 255

137 Gantz, 1981, p. 196

sacrifices he requires and they consult him about a wide variety of life issues.¹³⁸

Besides the oracle's obvious ability to transmit the god's wishes, he can also transmit the god's judgement about other matters with unimpeachable authority. Caesar, Strabo and Diodorus all tell us that Druids were well known as judges, and could even stop a battle if they walked between the approaching lines.¹³⁹ Again, we see Senchae in the Druidic role of judge and peacemaker.

In *Mesca Ulaid* he shakes his "peace keeping branch" to stop a battle.¹⁴⁰ He makes a brief peace again when he alone somehow perceives that it is a tumult of the Ulaid's quarrelling wives at the door rather than enemies and orders the doors shut against them.¹⁴¹

Although he is not described as such, his outfit and equipment are those of a druid or *fili*. He is ancient and sleek, with a "bright cloak" fringed in silver, a musical voice, white clothes and a "bronze branch the height of his shoulder."¹⁴²

He is paired with a druid in some stories, which suggests they fulfil the same function. In *Mesca Ulaid*, the kingdom had been divided into thirds between Conchobar, Cú Chulainn and Findtan. Senchae was sent by Conchobar to request Cú Chulainn's third for a year, and his opposite number, sent to Findtan, is described as "the most excellent Druid, Cathbad."¹⁴³ He is again paired with Cathbad in a druidic role in the *Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*. When the unborn Deirdre cries out in Fedilmid's womb, Senchae calms the Ulaid and says, "Let the woman be brought to us that we might learn what caused this noise."¹⁴⁴ They bring Fedlimid to Cathbad and him, and the former divines the problem.

Like just about all oracles, (except those kept in isolation, like Veleda) Senchae displays mixed human and divine qualities. His authority, and nerve, are not absolute. In *Bricriu's Feast* he silences the men but has no luck with the women, and later in *Mesca Ulaid* he "dare not intervene," in a battle.¹⁴⁵

138 Oesterreich. 1974, p. 350, p. 251-252

139 Green. 1997a, pp. 44-45

140 Gantz. 1981, p. 193

141 Gantz. 1981, p. 228

142 Gantz. 1981, pp. 210

143 Gantz, 1981, p. 192. He also acts as intermediary and emissary on other occasions. See pp. 237-238, for example.

144 Gantz. 1981, p. 258

145 Gantz. 1981, pp. 194, 230

A very human and rather fed up side is revealed in *Bricriu's Feast* when Cú Chulainn has destabilised the building to let Emer in. This was a “problem” for the Ulaid, but when they came running to him he said, “I can only advise you to ask the man who made the house lopsided to set it straight.”¹⁴⁶

Whether Conchobar or Senchae is the “earthly god” of the Ulstermen is to some extent secondary to the fact that there is an “earthly god” in this account. This much, at least, is quite clear, but all cases in the literature are not as easy to interpret. The figures that present us with the most evidence for oracular practice as a group are the Tuatha Dé.

BLURRED LINES: THE TUATHA DÉ AS ORACLES

The Tuatha Dé are continually identified with poets and druids, who each seem to have fulfilled oracular functions in Celtic culture. For example, Ban Buannan, who lived in Síd Cairn Breactanan and trained the famous Druid Mog Roith is described as one of the Tuatha Dé and as a Druidess.¹⁴⁷

The Tuatha Dé are strongly associated with magical practices, having come from four cities in the northern islands of the world where they studied magic.¹⁴⁸ The Dagda, Father god of their pantheon, is the Master of the Druidic Arts.¹⁴⁹ As Lugh discovered when he sought admission to the Tuatha Dé's assembly by virtue of his magical powers, they already had a sufficiency of sorcerers.

He said, “Question me, I am a sorcerer.”

“We do not need you. We have sorcerers already. Our druids and our people of power are numerous.”

Atbert-sum, “Atom-athcomairc,” ol sé, “Im corrguinech.”

*“Nit-recom e les. Atáut corrguinidh lionn cheno. At imdou ar ndruih 7 ar lucht cumhachtai.”*¹⁵⁰

The etymology of the name “Tuatha Dé Danann” is much debated, one

146 Gantz, 1981, p. 229

147 Sjoestedt, 1979, pp. 110-113, Matthews, 1994, p. 191

148 Gray, 1982, pp. 24-25

149 Gray, 1982, p. 121

150 Gray, 1982, pp. 40-41, par. 63

interpretation being “People of the goddess Dana.”¹⁵¹ Another etymology associates it with the word *dán*, and the fact that their gods were *Aes Dána*, with Lugh being *Samildánach*, all-skilled. This is sometimes referred to as a “folk” or “poetic etymology,” but it is also the one the Irish *literati* stressed.¹⁵² The fact that the earliest text mentioning the *tri dee Danann* “refers to them as the *tri dee dána*, (‘three gods of art’)” supports the latter view. The oldest texts always use the terms Tuath(a) Dé, *aes síde* or sometimes *siabrai*, a term mentioned above and discussed further below.¹⁵³

There is no question that their name was associated with the word *dán* by the Irish *literati*, whether or not it originally came from this word. If, as I have suggested in chapter three, the word *dán* in the largest sense stands for a complex of ideas of co-creation and interchange with the divine, it would be an appropriate word to associate with oracles.¹⁵⁴

For various reasons, including a misplaced trust in the absolute historicity of the texts, earlier scholars such as O’Curry and O’Donovan regarded the Tuatha Dé Danann as real immigrants to Ireland who might have been technically superior to the natives.¹⁵⁵ Now, however, scholars generally regard them simply as the gods of ancient Ireland.¹⁵⁶

The literature describes the Tuatha Dé or Tuatha Dé Danann variously as immortal gods or as mortal heroes or wizards. Our discussion of euhemerisation and the way god and oracle may share a name or title is relevant here. It is easy to explain scribal confusion by recognising the Tuatha Dé as shamans acting as oracles for deities, making them mortal and immortal, god and human hero or wizard by turns.¹⁵⁷

If this is so, some accounts may be purely mythic, about the transcendent gods or goddesses, while some may have the more mixed character of the shaman’s experience in a journey, or the experiences of the oracle’s audience. This may be

151 For a summary of the various arguments see Carey, 1980-1981.

152 See Ford, 1974a, pp. 39-40

153 Carey, 1980-1981, p. 291-292

154 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, pp. 180-181, headword *dán*.

155 O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, pp. 260-262

156 See Green, 1995b, p. 481. Ross, 1995, p. 437. Mac Cana, 1995, p. 783. O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, pp. 141, 194, 261, for examples.

157 See also O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, pp. 260-263

reflected in the fact that the Tuatha Dé or Aes Síde have differing degrees of manifestation in the stories.

For example, at the end of the *Serglige*, when Fand goes off with Mannanán, everyone can see Fand, but only Cú Chulainn's charioteer, Lóeg, can see Manannán.¹⁵⁸ In this case, Fand, who is, like Manannán, described as one of the Síde or Tuatha Dé, seems more like a human shaman. Here, Manannán is incorporeal, and seems like Fand's spirit mate, however, in another story Manannán has enough physical presence to sire Mongán. Interestingly, he does so in the form of Fiachna, the boy's "human" father, another possible incidence of possession, comparable to the way in which anyone sired on the festival of a god was the "child" of that god in Greek culture.¹⁵⁹

These kinds of peculiar inconsistencies seem to speak of the Tuatha Dé as both gods who could manifest on a purely spiritual plane, and their oracles who, depending when you encountered them, could be human or divine.

Accounts of their arrival underscore their dual natures. Some say that they arrived in a cloud of mist from the heavens, lighting down on a mountain top, while others say they arrived in boats and burned them, hence the smoke.¹⁶⁰ In the *Cath Maige Tuired* they hail from islands "in the northern islands of the world," (*i n-indsib túascertachaib an domuin.*)¹⁶¹ However, the word actually used here is based on *túas*, meaning above. North can also be seen as above, i.e., 'up north,' but we might equally translate this to mean that they came from islands 'above the world.' The word *túas* is also used of heaven, and this is the origin suggested by the compiler of the *Book of the Dun Cow* for the Tuatha Dé.¹⁶²

He says that although wise men are not sure where the Tuatha Dé come from, it "seems likely to them that they came from heaven, on account of their intelligence and for the excellence of their knowledge."¹⁶³

By contrast, the *Serglige's* scribe reviles them as demonic, but gives us

158 Gantz, 1981, p. 178

159 Rees, 1961, p. 221

160 Rees, 1961, p. 107

161 Gray, 1982, pp. 24-25

162 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 612, headword *túas*.

163 Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 286, quoting from Kuno Meyer, *Voyage of Bran*, ii, p. 300. Here we have a clear statement that knowledge is sourced in the Otherworld in Celtic, as in ancient Chinese and other shamanic traditions. For example, see Chang, K.C., 1983, p. 45.

some useful information by doing so.

So that is the destructive vision sent to Cú Chulainn by the people of the Síd, for demonic power was great before the faith, and it was so great that the devils would fight bodily against the people, and they used to show them pleasures and hidden things as if they existed permanently. It is thus that one believed in them. Therefore, it is on account of those visions that the ignorant talk about the Síde and Aes Síde.¹⁶⁴

Just as Dionysos' worshippers describe their god as a physical presence, the scribe at the end of the *Serglige* tells us that the Tuatha Dé contended *bodily* with men. They are physical beings *and* demons. He says that the Tuatha Dé were believed in as gods because they manifested physically, I would argue via oracles, and showed the people visions and secrets of the Otherworld, just as the shaman does in his seance.

GODS AND NOT-GODS

The *Book of the Dun Cow* calls the Tuatha Dé “gods and not-gods,” *dée* and *andée*, comparable to the Sanskrit *deva* and *adeva*.¹⁶⁵ The phrase suits oracles perfectly.

The gloss on these terms in the *Táin* says: *batar é a ndee in t'áes cumachta agus andee in t'áes trebaire*, ‘the *dee* were people of power and the *andee* farmers.’¹⁶⁶ *Cóir Anmann*'s scribe explained it as poets and farmers, interesting because of poets' well attested oracular practices.¹⁶⁷ In *Fled Bricrend* the term *áes cumachta* is used of “apparently supernatural agents” who help Cú Chulainn raise the house single-handed.¹⁶⁸

Rankin relates the term to the *Rig Veda* 1.602, which speaks of “the gods who are the gods and the brahmins who have studied sacred lore are the human gods.” He says that the “distinction between *dee* and *andee* may be a modified

164 Dillon, 1975, par. 49, my translation.

165 O'Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, p. 581

166 Rankin, 1999, p. 117

167 Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 286, quoting from *Cóir Anmann*, in *Irish Texts* III, ii, p. 355

168 Rankin, 1999, p. 119. The phrase is *áes cumachta agus a lucht anantha*. He quotes from Henderson, G., 1899, par. 28.

inheritance of just such a concept of deified human beings associated with divine affairs.” Where previously *dee / andee* may have meant divinities and druids, in later times it “slips a notch” and comes to mean druids or *áes dana* and farmers. This is a demotion to a more secular status. If the categories were originally simply human ones, there would have been no reason for the divine pairing in the first place.¹⁶⁹

POETS AND THE TUATHA DÉ

There are various examples of poets being equated with the Aes Síid or Tuatha Dé besides the *dee / andee* examples above. One early Irish poet specifically traces their descent from the Tuatha Dé, saying “Every artist, harmonious and musical, / Folk wont to resort to tricks of magic, / Are of the host of the Tuatha Dé Danann.”¹⁷⁰ *Echtrae Cormaic* describes a group of people thatching a house with feathers in the first instance as a host of the Síid. Later, Manannán says, “The host of horsemen of the Síid you saw endlessly thatching the house with white bird wings are those of the Aes Dána, the Men of Art, the poets and filid of Ireland who collect cattle and wealth which pass away to nothing.”¹⁷¹ This may possibly refer to their using shamanistic powers purely for self-aggrandisement. Many traditions have taboos against using spiritual powers purely for personal gain. In this case, such powers might be represented by the white wings, such as might be used in an *encennach*, *tuigen*, or other piece of totemic clothing.

The next figures in Celtic tradition who demand our attention are the female figures, most often described as Tuatha Dé themselves, seen as manifestations of the “Sovereignty goddess.”

THE SOVEREIGNTY GODDESS

The well documented “Sovereignty goddess” is the figure who, perhaps more than any other, can be most convincingly identified as an oracle.¹⁷² In many

169 Rankin, 1999, pp. 120-121

170 Rhys, 1892, p. 603

171 Stokes, 1891, vol. 1, p. 216

172 See Mac Cana, 1955-56, Ó Riain, 1994, p. 35, O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, pp. 15-16, 176, Herbert, 1992, p. 266

tales, the goddess dispenses the power of sovereignty when she dispenses a libation and often, gives herself in the *feis* or *banfeis*, the sacred marriage, to the king.¹⁷³

These goddess figures differ in the degree to which they seem human. In some stories, like that of Niall Noigiallach, she seems pure archetype. A hideous hag who becomes fair when Niall embraces her, as sovereignty is foul at first, won by wars and bloodshed, but a good thing all in all by the end.¹⁷⁴

It has been noted, however, that although this marriage is often depicted mythically, it must have been enacted physically by human beings, and some tales strongly identify the goddess with a human woman.¹⁷⁵ For example, Cormac Ha Cuinn dreamt that his wife slept with Eochu Gunnat and then returned to him, which his druids interpreted as meaning that his kingship would “sleep with” Eochu, but he would only reign at Tara for a year.¹⁷⁶ In another account, the queen symbolically embodied the people as a whole. Cormac mac Art sees Lugaid mac Lugna decapitating Ulster’s queen in a dream, which his druids say means that the Ulaid will be defeated by Cormac’s allies.¹⁷⁷

Represented as a historical figure, she and the sovereignty of the territory with which she was associated are bound together, “so figures such as Medb Cruachan and Medb Lethderg, really the same, were personifications of the sovereignty of Ireland. To gain possession of Medb was to gain possession of the kingship, a fact which explained the unusual number of her husbands.”¹⁷⁸ Medb is far from the only queen to display the mixed human and divine qualities of the oracle.

Étain for example, is clearly described as queen as well as human incarnation of a goddess of the Tuatha Dé. Like some Tibetan *tulkus*, she does not remember who she is until Midir “recognises” her and awakens her memories.¹⁷⁹ The Pictish Princess of the Síð mounds mentioned above, who married the king of Tara, gives us another possible human example. Mis and Mór Muman, another

173 Binchy, 1958, p. 134. Enright (1996) has discussed these themes in the Anglo-Saxon sources in great detail, and gives useful comparisons to Celtic.

174 Stokes and Strachan, 1903. Joynt, 1910

175 Binchy, 1958, p. 136

176 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 86

177 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 87

178 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 76

179 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 82-92

Munster figure who has been linked with Mis, provide us with two more.¹⁸⁰

Mac Cana has shown clearly that on one level Mór is a goddess figure, but she also has an “initiatory crisis” strikingly similar to that of Mis. She starts hearing a voice and will not leave the house, yet, the tale enigmatically tells us, “the kings of Ireland were seeking her.”

One day she heard the voice say, “Woe to thee Mór,” and she responded that she would “prefer it to be given than constantly promised.” It was given indeed, so that “a great derangement (*falang*) was put upon her and she bounded over the liss.” No one knew where she went and she wandered in rags for two years. A Tuvan shaman, Mongush Kenin-Lopsan, says that a person hearing his or her name called presages initiatory illness. “The oldest myth about human beings is this. A person hears his name pronounced. Perhaps he is in the *taiga*. Perhaps she is beside a spring. This is the first sign of the coming illness.”¹⁸¹

Mór finally came to Cashel, where Fingen mac Aeda was king, and tended his sheep. Then, in a curious episode, Fingen’s wife offered him her brooch to sleep with Mór, otherwise she would not sleep with him again. He finally consented, and, in bed with Mór, asked her who she was. When she told him her name her senses came to her. In the morning Fingen gave her the purple cloak and brooch of the queen, telling the queen he was leaving her for Mór because she was “of better race.” As with Mis, “every excellent woman in Ireland was compared to Mór Muman.”¹⁸²

The value system we see operating here is clearly different than that of the modern west. As in Mis’ tale, where she was deemed so valuable she must be saved despite her depredations, Mór is perceived as valuable despite her derangement and scruffiness.

Why is this ragged, demented woman considered to be “of better race?” Why does the queen want Fingal to sleep with Mór? And why, when Mór’s crisis begins and she will not leave the house because of the voice from the sky, are the

180 It’s interesting to note here that both Piaras Mac Gearailt and Eóin Rua Ó Súilleabháin writing in the 18th century referred to Mis as one of the leading *mná sí*, or fairy women of Ireland. (O’Rahilly, T.F., 1946b, p. 382) This reveals the same possible fairy/shaman blending discussed above, since some sources speak of Mis as a woman and others as one of the *Áes Síde*.

181 Quoted in Van Deusen, 1997, p. 9

182 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 79

kings of Ireland seeking this agoraphobe, presumably as wife?

If we look at this tale through a shamanic lens, most of it snaps into clear focus. Like Mis, Mór's derangement is the focus of the tale. As discussed in chapter one, these deranged women are considered valuable, and of "better race" because shamanic cultures believe the quality of a lineage is based on its shamanic power. Their illnesses illustrate that they possess a high level of this power.

That the queen wants her husband to sleep with Mór is still somewhat inexplicable, unless for some reason she thought the king should have a child out of Mór. We are not told if she had children of her own. If she does not, or cannot, it could be a simple case of her choosing a suitable surrogate, as in the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, perhaps as concubine. Then she had the rude shock of being replaced as queen because the surrogate was all too suitable.

All this is pure speculation, however, when Mór accepts the queen's cloak and brooch, one gets the sense that these are badges of office.¹⁸³ A later episode in Mór's life is still more revealing.

She remained with Fingen and bore him a son...Then Fingen died and she went to Cathal mac Finguine, king of Glendomain. For the kingship of Munster was centred in Cashel for one period (of three), in Glendomain for the second and in Aine for the third; for these are all Eoganacht...one day Cathal heard Mór mourning her former husband...He pointed out to her that it was not proper to weep for one who was dead, and she then promised to forget her dead husband and love the living.¹⁸⁴

Here, as Mac Cana points out, we clearly have the Sovereignty goddess, because the sovereignty passes with her to the new king.¹⁸⁵ However, he also comments on the difficulty of squaring her divinity with her presence in genealogies as a historical figure.

Unsure if she actually lived, he asks if we are to regard Mór "as a historical personage of the early seventh century upon whom various attributes...of a pagan goddess were foisted by later tradition, or...as an unhistorical figure conceived in

183 It must also be noted that the transformation of the Sovereignty goddess from ill dressed hag or lunatic to radiant beautifully attired woman is a "set piece" in these stories. See Mac Cana, 1955-56, pp. 84-85

184 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 79

185 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 81

the traditional pattern of the goddess and set in a particular place and in a particular period of Irish history?"¹⁸⁶ Her name may point us in the direction of a third option

Mac Cana believes Mór is one and the same as another Munster goddess/queen figure, Mugain.¹⁸⁷ Her name is a feminine of *mug*, meaning slave or servant, often servant of a god. The name is often associated with spiritual figures like Mog Roith. The name of the queen in Beowulf, Wealhtheow, has similar associations, and may in fact be Celtic derived. Wealhtheow has been shown by Enright to be an oracular, prophetic representative of the goddess.¹⁸⁸

One wonders if the second component might not relate in some way to the word *áin*, meaning bright, fiery and swift, relating to words meaning "frequent traveller." It is often borne by Ériu as an epithet, and there is also a goddess named Áine.¹⁸⁹ O'Rahilly focuses on the solar symbolism of the word, but ideas of heat, light, swiftness and especially equine symbolism, as we shall see, have shamanic and oracular associations.

Taking all this into account, we may see Mór as a human woman, regarded as divine or semi-divine due to her shamanic calling and lineage. In the account above, she performs her *transpersonal* role as oracle despite *personal* feelings of sorrow for her dead husband. In Mór, we can clearly see both sides of the oracular coin.

Other potential oracular queens include the various Gormlaiths. Feidlimid mac Crimthainn, a ninth century king of Caiseal, who aspired to, and some say attained, the high kingship at Tara, carried off one Gormlaith, Niall Caille's wife. If this actually occurred, Mac Cana wondered whether or not Feidlimid carried out his abduction of the queen with "an eye to tradition. Was his action intended partly to suggest that just as he had taken possession of Niall's spouse of flesh and blood, so also was he in virtual possession of that other spouse claimed by Niall, namely the kingdom of Ireland."¹⁹⁰

Again, I propose to take Mac Cana's idea just one step further. I believe that

186 Mac Cana, 1955-56, pp. 356-357, 90

187 Mac Cana, 1955-56, p. 101

188 Rees, 1961, pp. 126-127, 137-139, Enright, 1976, pp. 190-195

189 O'Rahilly, T.F., 1946a, pp. 286-300

190 Mac Cana, 1955-56, pp. 62-63

these royal oracular figures were not *symbolic* of deities, they *were* the deities embodied, and as such, were conduits through which divine power could flow to the land from the Otherworld. Therefore, to steal the queen was to steal an *actual* link with the gods, not a symbol of that link.¹⁹¹

A final source is of particular interest in that it is a historical rather than literary account dating back to the 4th century BC. It describes a southern Gaulish wedding. Euxenos was the Phocian guest of the Gaulish king, Nanos, who had a daughter called Petta. Euxenos arrived on the day of Petta's wedding and was invited. The girl was allowed to choose between a variety of suitors who had come to present themselves by giving them a drink. She chose Euxenos, who took her, "changing her name to Aristoxene; for even her father considered it right that he should have her on the grounds that the girl had been *divinely prompted* to give the cup to him."¹⁹²

This marriage led to Euxenos founding Marseilles, so, like the goddesses of Ireland, the territory came with Petta. It's unlikely that any culture of this time would base such an important marriage on a young girl's whim, and indeed, the account tells us that the only reason her decision was accepted was because *she* did not choose, but the goddess in her.

ORACULAR ECHOES IN LATER TRADITION

The early literature is richest with explicit references to trance possession and others that could be interpreted as trance possession, but there are also what one might regard as "echoes" of trance possession in later folklore. As we see in many of the accounts above, women are prominent in oracular roles and continue to appear in these sorts of roles into later times.

For example, keening women, according to some views, aren't so much makers as *vehicles*, and are sometimes referred to as *bean chaointe*, also frequently used for the supernatural death messenger, more often known as *bean sí*.¹⁹³

191 There's a similar idea that the divine king, embodying the god Tammuz, could be carried off to ill effect in Sumer. See Jacobsen, 1961

192 Enright, 1996, p. 82, quoting from Ioannes Zwicker, *Fontes historiae religionis celticae* (1934), p. 2, translation by James Carney in his review in *Béaloides* 1, (1937) p. 143. Italics mine.

193 Lysaght, 1986, p. 33

O'Brien, has said that "...anyone who has heard the keen will feel...the keener is as one possessed. The tribe speaks through her, resenting, striving to undo the 'vile subtraction,' ultimately accepting it and falling back on propitiation to the departed."¹⁹⁴

There were also village healers who seemed to act as channels at one level or another for supernatural power. One woman mentioned in chapter three said that when she was called to attend as a midwife she felt "helpless in the grasp—the friendly grasp—of a power" that controlled her, and attributed her success to it.¹⁹⁵

There is also a very late but interesting case from the 1920's. The Irish Pegni Lynchi used to fall into trance at wakes and give what has been described as "public trance performances." She spoke with the spirits, acting as their mouthpiece, transmitting their messages to her community, who publicly acknowledged that this was, in fact, what she was doing. Community support and benefit are important evidence that someone is acting fully as shaman. Indeed, Ó Cruialaoich has said the term shaman "might be tentatively invoked" in her case.¹⁹⁶

Her example requires further investigation, of course. We cannot know how much may have been drawn from later spiritualist influences as opposed to Primal Celtic ones. Whatever the source, her "performances" gave her greater power in her community—an observable feature of possession phenomena in many cultures.

Later folk-tradition has continues to attest powerful women with divine attributes, and often blurs the lines between witches, fairies and druids, suggesting the same sort of divine/human confusion we saw in relation to the Tuatha Dé.¹⁹⁷

For example, the Cailleach a' Bheinn Mhoir, the Witch of Jura, like so many fairy women in the tales, fell in love with MacPhie of Colonsay and captured him. When he tried to escape she threw a magic ball of yarn into his boat and drew him back, just as the fairy queen in *Imramm Mael Duin* does. The ball of yarn itself is called a *ceirsle dhruidheachd*.¹⁹⁸ Many Scottish witch trial accounts reveal a great deal of overlap between fairies and witches and Evans-Wentz has noted that

194 O'Brien, Máire Cruise, 1982, p. 248

195 Mackinnon, 1908-1909, pp. 343-344

196 Ó Cruialaoich, 1999

197 McKay, 1931, p. 31

198 Robertson, 1987, p. 31

the *Fairy Faith* could be based on memories of Druids.¹⁹⁹

Fairy changelings behave in much the same way as earlier avatars like Taliesin, revealing knowledge of ancient times. In the later tales, they are tricked into speech by a bizarre act, like cooking in eggshells. One says, “I remember when they were building Babel, and never heard before of a brewery of eggshells.”²⁰⁰ Now, however, the changeling is viewed with horror rather than the delight. Often described as wizened or deformed, as well as possessing unusual knowledge, the supernatural child is no longer the radiant child of a Deity, but the evil child of a devil.²⁰¹

With the advent of Christianity, knowledge must only come through approved channels; any supernatural knowledge not gained through approved sources (i.e. the minister or the Bible) is classed as demonic.²⁰² It is well put in the *Senchas Már* which tells us that after Patrick, the speech of the chroniclers, men of art and judges “is under the yoke of the man of white language—that is, of the Bible.”²⁰³

Needless to say, this spelled bad news for the oracles. Obviously a caste of such highly trained, highly revered figures would not “go gentle into that good night,” so one would expect to find traces of the ensuing conflict in the literature—and we do.

THE CAILLEACH AND CORMAC’S DRUIDS: ORACLES DEPOSED?

The cailleach and sovereignty goddess figures are inextricably linked. One of the most famous figures in Celtic tradition is that of the *Cailleach Bhéarra*. The poem placed in her mouth depicts her mourning the loss of her succession of noble kings. Significantly, she passed into seven periods of youth, rather than remaining ever young, which suggests a succession of oracles. Also suggestive is the *Book of Leinster’s* statement that her people, the Corco Duibne, would “never be without

199 MacCulloch, 1911, pp. 239, 257, Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

200 Rees, 1961, p. 243

201 Evans-Wentz, 1990, pp. 198-199, 204, 212

202 Baptism was considered to protect a child from becoming a changeling. (Campbell, J.F., 1994, pp. 431, Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 87)

203 Nagy, 1997, p. 203, Binchy, 1978, p. 342

some wonderful cailleach among them.”²⁰⁴

There is no lack of prose written about the poem, and the figure of the cailleach herself, most commenting in one way or another about her ambiguity.²⁰⁵ Mac Cana has said that perhaps “no text in Irish literature achieves such a rich and dramatic expression of the interplay of the human and the divine, the temporal and the eternal, as the *Cailleach Bhérrí*.” One reason it has such power and seems to mask a deep underlying ideological complexity is that it epitomises a state in society at the time, the tensions between Christian and primal ideas and ways of being.²⁰⁶

In the poem, we seem to hear goddess and woman vying with each other. She speaks of her hands, bony and thin, yet in times past, “When my arms are seen, all bony and thin!—in fondest fashion they acted, once: they used to be around glorious kings.”²⁰⁷ This seems to refer to a woman outside of time, wife of many kings. But now, the human woman complains “speak no honeyed words, no wethers are killed for my wedding; my hair is scanty and grey, to have a mean veil over it it is no cause for regret...May cups of whey be my drinking horns, may whatever hinders me be god’s will; raying to you, oh living god, may the wound deal a spear against anger.”²⁰⁸

McKay interprets a later Scottish tale of the cailleach as describing a priestess and possibly goddess spurned. The cailleach of this tale, protectress of the deer, has a great battle with a hunter in which her dual human and divine natures are revealed. As a mortal woman she is pulled over coals by her ankles in the combat, yet, as McKay points out, the Cailleach Bheurr could wade across the Sound of Mull.²⁰⁹

Though the storytellers must have known she was a giantess, “None of them attempts to explain how it was that a mere man could wrestle with her. This shows that the events commemorated a time when *cailleach* in common parlance

204 Rees, 1961, p. 135

205 For example, Ó Cruaíoch, 1988, Green, 1995c, pp. 84-85, Murphy, 1953, p. 84, Mac Cana, 1982, pp. 151-153, Rees, 1961, p. 135

206 Mac Cana, 1982, pp. 151-152

207 Ó hAodha, 1989, p. 315, par. 8

208 Ó hAodha, 1989, p. 316, par. 11, 24

209 McKay, 1931, pp. 17-19, 21-22

might mean either a goddess or priestess, divinity or mortal, and a time when storytellers failed to distinguish between them."²¹⁰

If the *cailleach* is in fact the ageing avatar of an immortal goddess, she would particularly feel the bittersweet experience of age and loss in the knowledge of eternity. However, there are additional losses.

In the poem of the *Caillech Bérrí*, the conflict between native myth and Christian ethic is personalised in the individual predicament of the once beautiful consort of kings who struggles to resign herself *to her actual condition as an aged and impoverished nun*. At the same time, though on another level, the introverted heroine is the great and immortal goddess of sovereignty who not merely shaped the destinies of kings but also by her inexhaustible chthonic power helped to shape, in other words create, the very landscape of Ireland. Yet *in accepting Christianity she has become subject to age and death*, as Oisín, son of Finn, succumbed to physical decay when he returned from the ageless Otherworld and set foot once more on the finite shore of Ireland.²¹¹ (Italics mine.)

If she was an oracle, one with her goddess, she would not have felt subject to death in the same way as most people, anymore than a tulku confident of rebirth does.²¹² However, with Christianity, the god resided in a book rather than a body. And though an eternal life in heaven was promised, it may have had less pull than the eternity here and now in god's great day, where death was truly but the "mid-point of a long life."²¹³

CORMAC'S DRUIDS

King Cormac is said to have died when cursed by a group of Druids. In some versions, it is because he refuses to worship their gods, in others, it is because

210 McKay, 1931, p. 18. It's interesting to note that formerly *cailleach* meant veiled woman. A primal priestess might have gone about veiled to protect people from her power, just as the shaman is often veiled or masked during their work. For example, the headgear with fringes in front of the face of the Siberian shaman. (Vajnshtejn, S.I., 1984, p. 366) See also McKay, 1931, p. 16. Additionally, in Vodou, when the possessed person is in the transitional stage when the spirit is leaving them, a cloth is thrown over their face to show respect to the departing god. (Métraux, 1972, p. 124)

211 Mac Cana, 1982, pp. 152

212 Of course, the Celts were traditionally fearless of death as a whole, even making debts payable in the next life. (Green, 1997a, p. 51)

213 Posidonius, speaking of the ancient Celts' attitude towards death, quoted in Carey, 1991, p. 157

he refuses to worship *them* as gods. As we have seen, both could essentially mean the same thing.

One version of the tale says Máelchend the Druid's wrath was aroused against Cormac Mac Art because Cormac would not worship Cromm Cruaich. He then cursed the king by turning stones in a convocation of Druids. However, in the *Four Masters* version Máelchend is angry because Cormac "worshipped god rather than them." The insult to Cromm is not mentioned here, but rather the insult to the priest's divinity is the point.²¹⁴ Máelchend was not alone in claiming divinity. Other Irish druids evidently said that they were creators of heaven and earth.²¹⁵

What's more, Máelchend "accomplishes his end by means of a *siabrad*, which denotes the form of magic practiced by the *Siabhras*, or *Daoine-Sidhe*, otherwise known as the Tuatha Dé Danann."²¹⁶ The association between Máelchend and his druids, Cormac's killers and Siabhras or Tuatha Dé Danann, are hard to ignore in a copy of the *Senchas na Relec*, the History of the Cemeteries.²¹⁷ This manuscript says that King Cormac was killed by "the Siabhras, i.e. the Tuatha Dé Danann, for they were called Siabhras."

After Cormac is cursed, he chokes on a salmon bone and dies. Cormac's great attribute from childhood has been his wisdom, and here the fish of wisdom chokes him. We could read this outcome two ways. The first is that his wisdom in not worshipping the Druids has been the cause of his death. The second is that he literally "could not swallow" the idea that the Druids were divine. This idea is one of *primal* or pagan wisdom, therefore represented by the primal symbol of wisdom, the salmon.

Of course, the literary evidence was written down in a Christian context, so we cannot tell which of the interpretations above is closer to the truth. Fortunately, pre-Christian Celtic sculpture gives us further evidence for trance possession that could not be similarly re-framed.

214 MacRitchie, 1908-9, p. 261, Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, also mentions cryptic variants of this account, pp. 70-72.

215 Rhys, John, 1886, p. 673

216 MacRitchie, 1908-9, pp. 263-4

217 As found in Trinity College, Dublin MS. Class H. 3 17. (It's not found in the version of the *Senchas na Relec* found in the *Leabhar na h-Uidre*).

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF POSSESSION

I do not believe that one can necessarily read objects or art like a book for a clear narrative as some have suggested.²¹⁸ It is extremely difficult for a scholar to try to reconstruct an ancient belief system through the use of material and iconographic remains.²¹⁹

Celtic iconography is relatively scarce before the 7th century BC. This might be due to the iconoclastic views the early Celts are described as having, as demonstrated by Brennus mocking the whole *idea* of religious imagery at Delphi. This changed dramatically in the Romano-Celtic period.

Celtic religious imagery blossomed, due largely to the adoption by the Celts of Classical traditions of representation. Under the stimulus of Roman custom, Celtic communities adopted the practices both of making images of their deities and recording their names on dedicatory inscriptions. Thus, for the first time, Celtic perceptions of the spirit world are brought into sharp focus.²²⁰

Green goes on to discuss three themes in the iconography: the human head, whose cult significance is well attested, triplism, reflecting “the perception of divine forces as triads,” and zoomorphism, stressing the importance of animals in Celtic religion. “All three types of image-making have links with later Celtic myth, where we read of heads with supernatural properties, triads, and shape-shifting between animal and human form.”²²¹

I would suggest that one way we could deepen our understanding of the Celtic perceptions of the spirit world as expressed through the iconography is by comparing the imagery with that of other cultures, particularly animistic and shamanistic cultures. One reason for doing so is that there is evidence suggesting that similar states of consciousness can produce similar expressions and postures, which may, in turn, be expressed artistically in comparable ways.²²² While iconographic evidence is certainly not conclusive on its own, in this case it is striking. (Figures 1-16 are at the end of this chapter, pp. 285-291.)

218 Olmsted, 1979

219 Green, 1996c, p. 29

220 Green, 1996c, p. 28

221 Green, 1996c, pp. 28-29

222 Goodman, 1990

It has already been observed that some figures generally considered divine in Celtic iconography may actually be priests or shamans. For example, the Cernunnos on the Gundestrup Cauldron, in figure 6 may actually “be interpreted as a shaman, a shapeshifter, or a god perceived as having a part-human, part animal shape.”²²³

A recent paper also identified the famous, torc wearing head shown in figure 1, usually thought of as a divinity, as a druid.²²⁴ Interestingly, that figure has some attributes that may relate to trance and possibly trance possession. For one thing, his mouth is pursed in a tight “o” which suggests that he is chanting, or at least vocalising in some way. As will be remembered, in chapter two I discussed the *dord fiannsa*, the droning chant the Fenians made by pursing the lips together, possibly reminiscent of Tuvan throat singing or overtone chant. For an even clearer example of this sort of expression on the face of an apparently chanting person, see figure 2.²²⁵ Next, he has a mask like face and large, staring eyes, frequent features in Celtic depictions of sacred figures.

We may attain a possibly deeper understanding of these features of Celtic art by reference to the art of one of the best known religions that feature possession in the modern world: Haitian Vodou.²²⁶

There are physical manifestations of Vodou possession depicted in photographs and sculptures that make for interesting comparisons to Celtic iconography. These artistic conventions date back to ancient Africa.

Thompson says that in Vodou a “face in trance inscribes, in the flesh, an African mask on New World soil. And with the mask go attitude and posture.”²²⁷ There is one element in particular he notes as a manifestation of possession.

...one of the unifying threads is a frequent bursting quality of the eyes as they fill with inner vision (*ojú inú* in Yoruba terms). When this happens, the face takes on a timeless gaze. That bursting quality of the eyes is one of the marvels of

223 Green, 1996, pp. 137-138. Image from Olmsted, 1979, plate 2

224 Venclová, 1999. She identifies him as a member of the Bouii tribe of Bohemia in the third century B.C., and part of her reasoning was that this figure is tonsured in what looks like the druidic “ear to ear” tonsure, and deities like Cernunnos on the Gundestrup cauldron are not tonsured in depictions. Image from Moscati, Arslan and Vitali, 1991, p. 28

225 Image from Ross, 1993, p. 122, fig. 48, 2

226 I use here the spelling arrived at in Cosentino, 1995.

227 Thompson, Robert Farris, 1995, p. 98

the art of African antiquity...We can study a delicate rendering of possession eyes on an early 15th century fragment from a ritual pot from the ancient Yoruba city of Owo, now in the National Museum, Lagos.(fig. 9) The moment of truth is underscored by massive reptiles issuing from the nostrils, “representing the power of the *ashe*, (spiritual command) of those-who-keep-the-earth.”²²⁸

Various accounts of Kongo possession describe the same phenomenon. In a 1668 account a priest is described as chanting, then “his eyes would exorbit, and he would become possessed by the spirit of Triko.” Compare this description and the photograph of a possessed man taken in the fifties in figure 3 with the 1st century BC Celtic image of a staring man in figure 4.²²⁹ “In the extremity of the eyes one reads the coming of a spirit, astonished to find himself emerging, in borrowed flesh, from the land of the *lwa*, from the island beneath the sea.”²³⁰

I have included other images for comparison. See, for example, the resemblance in expression and gesture between the photograph taken of the possessed Kwakiutl *Hamatsa* emerging from the woods in figure 5 with the three Celtic images that accompany it, figures 6 through 8.²³¹ The anthropologist Felicitas Goodman has made a detailed study of the ways in which similar “trance postures” found in iconography and modern practice, may produce or represent particular kinds of trance experience, perhaps for neurophysiological reasons.²³²

Now look at the similarly “exorbited” eyes in the two sculptures that follow, the African figure 9, and Celtic figure 10.²³³ This type of eye, so common in Celtic sculpture, has been seen as a sort of far away, mystical gaze, that often appears in Deity representations.

Green speaks of this type of expression as “distant and impassive, *as if to reflect the archetype of divinity.*”²³⁴ The expression may mean the same as its African and Haitian equivalents, a god, yes, but one manifested through a human

228 Thompson, Robert Farris, 1995, p. 99. final quote from Araba Ekó. personal communication to Thompson. 1983. Figure 9 from Cosentino, 1995, p. 99

229 Figure 3 from Cosentino, 1995, p. 98. Figure 4 from Moscati, Arslan and Vitali, 1991, p. 536

230 Thompson, Robert Farris, 1995, p. 99

231 Figure 5 from McDowell, 1997, p. 228. figures 6 and 7 from Olmsted, 1979, plate 2, figure 8 from Moscati, Arslan and Vitali, 1991, p. 501

232 Goodman, 1990

233 Figure 9 from Cosentino, 1995, p. 99, figure 10 from Ross, 1993., figure 24 a and b

234 Green, 1976, p. 140. (Italics mine.)

oracle. The similarity of depiction is particularly marked in figures 11 and 12.²³⁵

Finally, figures 13 through 16 show various animal / human combinations that Green has interpreted as possible shaman shape-shifting figures merged with or possessed by totems or deities. As we can see in these pictures, many animals may be associated with the shaman and shaman oracle. In four I explored the totemic associations of the bird and the shaman. Figures 13 and 14 possibly show the shaman merged with a stag.²³⁶

However, the most intriguing animal association with the shaman *as oracle* is one we may see depicted in figures 15 and 16.²³⁷ In these, humans merge with horses, one woman-headed horse being driven forward by a mysterious being above her.

RIDDEN BY THE GODS: EQUINE IMAGERY AND THE ORACLE

The horse's sanctity is well known in Celtic tradition.²³⁸ It is often associated with sovereignty, most obviously in the *asvamedha* type of sacrifice in India and Ireland.²³⁹ Most important to the issue at hand, the horse is especially associated with queen figures, who, as we have seen, may also be connected with oracular practices.

The Welsh queen Rhiannon is a prominent example. She appears to Pwyll when he engages in what can only be described as a vision quest on a grave mound. Arriving on a magnificent horse, she marries him, and finally bears a child. The child is supernaturally kidnapped, and she is accused of infanticide. She is then made to carry visitors to court on her back and tell them her tale.²⁴⁰

The three Machas of Ireland give us examples where the woman's possible oracular role seems closer to the surface. First, the repetition of the divine name recalls the earlier discussion of oracular titles. The first Macha is then described as a prophetess, wife of a druid. The second was called Mongruad, red-maned, and her father, Aed, had contracted with two other kings to share sovereignty in a

235 Figure 11 is from Cunliffe, 1992, p. 4, figure 12 is from Cosentino, 1995, p. 99.

236 Figures 13 and 14 from Green, 1989 p. 87, fig. 35, p. 135, fig. 54

237 Figures 15 and 16 from Green, 1996a p. 122, fig. 87, p. 70, fig. 44

238 See Davies and Jones, 1997, Green, 1997b.

239 Puhvel, 1987, pp. 269-276, O'Flaherty, 1982, pp. 149-165

240 Ford, 1977, pp. 50-52, Jones and Jones, 1997, pp.8-19

triumvirate fashion for seven year periods, in a similar arrangement to that described in Mór's story. However, upon Aed's death, Macha claims sovereignty herself, and keeps it for seven years by force of arms. The third and best known Macha could run like the wind, and was forced by king Conchobar to race against horses despite her pregnancy. This resulted in her curse against the Ulaid that they should be in the pains of a woman in travail when they most needed their strength.²⁴¹ Speed, as described in the cases of Mis and Suibhne, can be a shamanic characteristic, and Macha was also capable of cursing a whole tribe, pointing to further shamanic abilities.

Horse oriented epithets are very common in Celtic tradition, most especially amongst divinities and royalty.

Medb is...a sovereignty-conferring warrior-harridan and fountain of sexuality alike, whose nearest undebased parallels are the warrior goddesses Morrighu and Badb. Her relation to the former is evident from the fact that Medb and Morrighu both figure as interchangeably active in various versions of the prelude to the *Táin*, and bird symbolism ties her closely to the ornithomorphic Badb...Her lover Fergus was known as Ro-ech, 'Big Horse,' and the third of her four husbands...was named Eochaid, a name also borne by the two husbands of Tailtiu, the divine nurse of the god Lugh who closely resembles Ériu herself...Eochaid may be connectable with Old Irish *ech*, 'horse,' and with the epithetal string Eochu Ollathir Ruadrofessa, 'Horse, All-father, Red Great Sage,' that characterises the god Dagda.²⁴²

He goes on to say that he doubts that "Medb's name simply means 'intoxication' or the like, and would rather interpret it as "a Celtic **Meduā*, uncompounded feminine parallel to the Arvernian Epomeduos, much as Badb corresponds to the Gaulish Cathubodua."²⁴³ Medb's name would thus be associated with horses as well as intoxication. This association can be seen as shamanic, and particularly, as oracular.

The horse is often associated with liminal states. It is said in Ireland that

241 Puhvel, 1970a, p. 166

242 Puhvel, 1970a, p. 167

243 See Puhvel, 1970a p. 167 for detail.

you can see the Otherworld if you look between a horse's ears, and Epona guides the dead as psychopomp in one image, a function frequently associated with shamans.²⁴⁴ The *Mari Lwyd* and hobby horse figures are of particular interest in that they perform at a liminal time, typically twelfth night, and are often made of a horse skull, seemingly between death and life, a theme we'll return to in the next chapter in relation to shamans.²⁴⁵ The normal way of riding a horse from place to place in this world often segues into an encounter with the Otherworld in the tales, calling to mind the totemic horse and horse/drum of Siberian tradition that transports the shaman into Otherworld.²⁴⁶

Shamans are often identified with horses. For example, the Hungarian shaman is called a *táltos*, a noun also commonly used in folk tales to describe a spiritually powerful or magical horse.²⁴⁷ In a Sakha Siberian ritual described in the 1920's, the shaman calls himself a "stallion shaman." The ritual "built in intensity, enabling ecstasy and inspiration, until the shaggy stallion shaman dance-rides and thus unifies himself with his sacred drum-horse."²⁴⁸

As the Siberian example infers, the symbolism of horse and rider can represent the merging of separate yet allied powers to form a more potent whole.

Along these lines, possessed oracles are almost universally viewed and described in shamanic cultures as a horse the god rides. Women of the Zar cult are called *yazâr faras*, the horses of the Zar spirits.²⁴⁹ The relationship of the *Lwa* to the possessed is that of rider and horse. The Vodou priests and priestesses are the horses of the gods, the gods themselves the Divine Horsemen.²⁵⁰ In the central Himalayan region of Kumaon, the oracle is the *dangari*, the 'little carrier' or 'beast of burden,' or the *ghori*, the 'little horse.'²⁵¹ Examples could easily be multiplied further.²⁵²

244 Green, 1997b, p. 14

245 See Wood, 1997, Alford, 1978

246 Wood, 1997, p. 176

247 Dömötör, 1984, p. 428

248 Balzer, 1997, p. 105

249 Fries, 1996, p. 56

250 Deren, 1983

251 Leavitt, 1997c, p. 150

252 Wadley, 1976, pp. 243-246 gives examples from North India, Eliade, 1974-1975, pp. 160-172 speaks of trance possession being implied in the case of the Spanish *căluşari*, or horse dancers.

THE RACES OF FERADACH

All this symbolism provides further evidence for the oracular role of queen figures with equine associations, and a couple of curious accounts in Irish literature give us still more. First, there is an anecdote of women performing what's described as a *grafaing*, or horse race in the funeral rites for the Danish dead after the battle at Sulchoit in 968 AD.

It was then they celebrated also the races of the son of Feradach, viz., a great line of the women of the foreigners was placed on the hills of Saingel in a circle, and they were stooped with their hands on the ground, and marshalled by the horseboys of the army behind them, for the good of the souls of the foreigners who were killed in battle.²⁵³

Despite the fact that this is called a horse race, neither racing or even motion is described, except that implied by the *mairescud* or “marshalling” of the gillies. Todd says that the “whole was no doubt a heathen performance, intended, in some way, to benefit the souls of those who had fallen in battle.”²⁵⁴ This calls to mind the equine figure as psychopomp, as in the case of Epona, mentioned above. The women's posture, and the fact that it is associated with horses, is also interesting.

Describing the initial stages of Vodou possession, when the god “seizes his mount,” Métraux tells of one oracle leaping and bucking like a wild horse who “feels the weight of a rider on his back.”²⁵⁵ The possessing entity “seizes the head” of the possessed, holding on at the base of the neck, and some possessed by the Vodou *Lwa* compare the first “inrush of the spirit to a blow on the nape of the neck.”²⁵⁶

The oracle often pitches forward in response to this, “as though projected by a spring,” and stiffens and stays still “with body bent forward.”²⁵⁷ This bent forward posture, which can range from all fours to bending from the waist with the

253 Todd, 1867, pp. 82-83

254 Todd, 1867, p. cxxii, note 2

255 Métraux, 1972, p. 122

256 *ibid.*, p. 123. Negative possessing entities as well as gods sometimes “attach” here as well. See for example Willis, 1999, p. 79

257 Métraux, 1972, pp. 120-121

hands outstretched and palms downwards, is a frequent possession posture. The Iroquois “False Faces,” a masked Medicine Society, are sometimes called hunchbacks due to their characteristic crawling or hunched forward possession postures. Goodman and others see these postures as motor behaviours characteristic of dissociated states.²⁵⁸

The role of the gillies in “marshalling” the women also makes sense in this context. In Vodou, the possessed are “protected from the possible effects of their frenzy by the crowd which surrounds them...if they fall, arms are ready to catch them...their modesty is shielded: a woman rolling on the ground, convulsed, is followed by other women who see to the disorders of her dress.” The sympathetic concern creates an atmosphere of trust and safety “conducive to total abandon in the state of trance.”²⁵⁹

Putting all this together with our Irish account leads me to believe that what we may be seeing here is a garbled description of trance possession. The writer clearly understood that the women were at least *imitating* other beings, horses. One could imagine that the idea of the oracle as a horse of the gods, coupled with the trance posture could come down to us this way, although we cannot know for sure.²⁶⁰

THE DRUIDS OF FERGNA

There is also a strange, possibly related, incident in the *Book of Fenagh*. The Druids of Fergna of the Steeds, Son of Fergus, King of Brefné perform a curious ceremony in resistance to St. Caillin and his clerics. Fergna was enraged when St. Caillin converted his son and others, and ordered his druids into action. They are then described as putting their rumps (*tona*) in the air and advancing towards the saint reviling him and his clerics. The saint turns them into stone, but Fergna do not convert till his “body separated from his soul.”²⁶¹ Hennessy

258 Lex, 1976, p. 290

259 Métraux, 1972, p. 122. The possessed Tibetan oracle also has “attendants.” (H.R.H. Prince Peter, plates 10-11)

260 A horse race also takes place in the story of St. Samson, above, and horse-races traditionally took place at Lughnasa Festivals. (Tolstoy, 1985, p. 92, McNeill, 1959, vol. 2, p. 101)

261 Hennessy, 1875, pp. 114-115 126-129

comments on the similarity of this and the prior account.²⁶² This is not conclusive in and of itself, but again we see the same curious posture used to attempt to effect a spiritual purpose, in this case cursing the clerics, where in the prior instance it was for the benefit of the dead. There is even an oblique horse reference immediately before the episode in Fergna's epithet, "of the Steeds."

For another possible example of trance possession, I must turn again to the figure who has thus far demonstrated more shamanic features than any other in this study, Cú Chulainn.

CÚ CHULAINN : WARRIOR AND ORACLE?

The tale of Cú Chulainn's conception, as the Reeses have noted, seems to represent a three-fold process of transition from fully divine to fully incarnate.²⁶³ In one version, Dechtine, Conchobar's daughter, and the rest of the Ulaid pursue a flock of beautiful but destructive birds.²⁶⁴ At night they arrive at a house where they are welcomed. The man says his wife is in labour and she gives birth to a son. Simultaneously a mare gives birth to two foals. In the morning, these three are all that is left of house and host. Dechtine takes the boy but he dies.

Then she dreams of Lugh, who tells her that the first boy was his son, and he will now come into her womb and she will bear a child called Setanta. Her mysterious pregnancy causes the Ulaid to suspect her father has slept with her. She is betrothed to Sualdaim mac Roich, but is so ashamed she aborts her child. Finally she conceived again with Sualdaim, and *this* Setanta becomes Cú Chulainn.²⁶⁵

Other figures like Mongán are children of a god or divine being, but none have such an elaborate gestation process. This process seems to be one of *emanation*, where the divine father manifests by elaborate stages in the world, rather than one of a divine father and human mother producing a third party.

Like Lugh, Cú Chulainn has many skills, including shamanic, and his *riastrad* strongly suggests possession. He said his education with the druid Cathbad had "made him master of inquiry in the arts of the god of druidism...and rendered

262 Hennessy, 1875, p. 128, note 1

263 Rees, 1961, pp. 217-218

264 In another variant, she is in bird form herself, giving her a shamanic character.

265 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 134-136

him skilled in all that was excellent in visions.”²⁶⁶

He certainly thought well enough of himself, but was also adored by the Ulaid, and likely seen as an avatar, evidenced by the fact that they wanted to be sure that he have a son for they knew “his rebirth would be of himself.”²⁶⁷

The only way a direct reincarnation of *his own* soul could be accomplished is if he died at the moment of conception, or at least during the pregnancy. We cannot rule the idea out, after all, he was supposed to have a short life, but it is not mentioned as part of the process. However, if he is an avatar or oracle of Lugh, then, as is the case in many shamanic cultures, his son could inherit his link with the god.

The first recension of the *Táin* gives us an incident that strongly suggests trance possession. When Cú Chulainn is wounded and exhausted, Lugh appears to him, and tells Cú Chulainn that he is Cú Chulainn’s father. He sings healing spells and replaces Cú Chulainn for three days in a battle without anyone knowing. Revealingly, only Lóeg sees the god at first, no one else in camp can.²⁶⁸ In *the Book of Leinster* version, Cú Chulainn sleeps for three days and nights, a shamanically significant number, as mentioned in chapter two.

When Cú Chulainn is rejuvenated, his and Lóeg’s preparations for battle, and the subsequent battle itself, have many supernatural elements.²⁶⁹ Lóeg puts on his raven feather mantle (*forbratt faing*) made by Simon Magus, and other elaborate equipment.²⁷⁰ Cú Chulainn casts spells of protection and invisibility on his horses and on Lóeg. His attire, like Lóeg’s, is elaborate and has supernatural associations. He wears a protective raiment given to him by Mannanán from the king of *Tir na Sorcha* (the Land of Light). He also wears the helmet mentioned in chapter four, that “goblins and sprites, spirits of the glen and demons of the air” cried from, prophesying the deaths of other warriors.²⁷¹

It is interesting to note that the description of Cú Chulainn’s war helmet,

266 Rhys, 1892, pp. 223-224. See also Gray, Elizabeth A., 1989-1990

267 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 155

268 O’ Rahilly, C., 1967, p. 58, lines 2137-2148, trans. p. 198, Gray, Elizabeth, 1989-1990, p. 50

269 O’ Rahilly, C., 1967, pp. 58-63, lines 2137-2337, trans. pp. 198-203

270 O’ Rahilly, C., 1967, p. 60, line 2209. She translates this as “black as ravens’ feathers” on page 200, but I think the other reading is more accurate.

271 Sayers, 1991, p. 49, quoting lines 2240-2242 from the *Táin*, rescension 2

apparently inhabited by an assortment of familiar spirits, *immediately precedes* a vivid account of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*. Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* is a fascinating and much debated phenomenon. In practice, it refers to Cú Chulainn's battle frenzy, which contorts or distorts him.²⁷²

In this account, Cú Chulainn is quite literally "ridden" by the spirits (of the helmet) and goes into *ríastrad*. After Cú Chulainn creates great carnage the *Táin* says that some say that "Lug mac Eithlend fought along with Cú Chulainn at Sesrech Breslige." This seems a clear indication that the *ríastrad* is some kind of possession, and certainly bears a closer look.

RÍASTRAD

All the Ulster warriors, including Cú Chulainn, can go into *ferg*, the battle rage described in chapter two. However, only Cú Chulainn gets a *ríastrad*—and no one else seems as likely to be an avatar or oracle of the god Lugh.²⁷³ It is therefore reasonable to investigate whether trance possession and the *ríastrad* may be linked.

His *ríastrad* gives him power in combat and in some cases power over animals, like the swans and deer he ties to his chariot after he kills his first men. Like the possessed Kwakiutl *hamatsa*, he is only restored to reason by immersion in tubs of water and exposure to naked women.²⁷⁴

An easy way to spot the supernatural in literature is, obviously, when something happens that could not possibly occur in physical reality—at least not while leaving our hero intact.

Then his first distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognisable. His haunches shook about him like a tree in a current...every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front...He sucked one of his eyes into his head so that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from

272 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 507, headwords *ríastrad*, *ríastraid*.

273 O'Rahilly, Cecile, 1967, p. 116, lines 4224-7, p. 120, lines 4362-5. Sadowska, 1997, pp. 35-39

274 Cross and Slover, 1969, pp. 191-193

the back of his skull...His mouth was twisted back fearsomely. He drew the cheek back from the jawbone until the inner gullet was seen. His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and throat...the torches of the war goddess...were seen in the clouds and in the air above his head with the seething of fierce rage that rose above him...Though a noble apple tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it but an apple would have stayed impaled on each single hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above him. The hero's light rose from his forehead...As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood that rose up from the very top of his head and became a dark, magical mist like the smoke of a palace when a king comes to be attended to in the evening of a wintry day.²⁷⁵

Cú Chulainn shakes violently at the start of the *ríastrad*. In Kimbanguist tradition to shake, (*zakama*), or shake violently, (*tuntuka*), is a sign of possession, of being chosen by the god.²⁷⁶ Strange contortions and distortions are not uncommon in possession, as anyone who has seen *The Exorcist* knows. One Polynesian account describes a case of voluntary possession this way:

As soon as the god was supposed to have entered the priest, the latter became violently agitated, and worked himself up to the highest pitch of apparent frenzy, the muscles of the limbs convulsed, the body swelled, the countenance became terrific, the features distorted, and the eyes wild and strained.²⁷⁷

Though no one else gets the full *ríastraid*, the earlier account of Mog Roith in chapter three has his knees turning backwards, also in the context of shamanic battle, and his hair becomes rough as a pine. A similar process of spiritual disjuncting happens to each Australian shaman as part of his initiation. It has to do with making him symbolically dead—the point being that a dead man cannot be killed.²⁷⁸

Sayers discusses symbolism of heat and eruption “with strong graphic ties

275 O' Rahilly, C., 1967, pp. 61-62, lines 2262-2294, trans. pp. 201-202

276 Simbandumwe, Samuel S., 1992, p. 167

277 Oesterreich, 1974, p. 286

278 Eliade, 1958a, p.98

to blacksmithing” associated with the images above.²⁷⁹ Eliade has discussed the generation of mystical heat as a key feature of shamanism and yogic practices, and as one Siberian source says, “the smith and shaman are from the same nest.”²⁸⁰

In chapter three, discussing the *teinm laida*, I mentioned that the word *tenm* comes from the root **tep-*, meaning “heat,” the same root that gives us the Sanskrit *tapas*, meaning mystically generated heat and spiritual power.²⁸¹ There are many Hindu stories of people who rise to the position of Indra, leader of the gods, through their *tapas*.²⁸²

Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the Ulstermen’s *ferg*, martial fury or heat, is Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*. Where the Ulstermen have spiritual and martial power, Cú Chulainn may have attained an ultimate goal of this power—merging with the god.

The character of this “possession” if it is in fact possession, is ambivalent. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Lugh in particular is a deity that encompasses many polarities of action and identity. Celtic deities in general seldom seem wholly “good” or “bad” but rather, may behave benevolently or aggressively as it suits them.

Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* can be seen as positive or negative by the Ulaid. In the most severe state, he cannot tell friend from foe. He is described as binding himself tightly with ropes and thongs beneath his battle gear so that “his mind and understanding might not be deranged when his rage should come upon him,” an expedient that was evidently not always effective.²⁸³

“He would recognise neither comrades nor friends. He would attack alike before him and behind him. Hence the men of Connacht named Cú Chulainn the Distorted One.”²⁸⁴ One Himalayan oracle said she sees those assembled at the seance but does not recognise them. “Her faculties are functioning, but the link to family and society has been cut, and with it, the need to know who and where she

279 Sayers. 1991, p. 53

280 Eliade. 1964. pp. p. 470. 474-477

281 Chadwick, N.K., 1935a, pp. 119-122 Of course this root may be debatable.

282 Aiyappan, 1976, p. 139

283 O’Rahilly, C., 1967, p. 200

284 Sayers. 1991, p. 54

is.”²⁸⁵

His *ríastrad* seems akin to a whole range of psychotic possession behaviours in different cultures, including the *hamatsa* possession, *berzerker* and *ulfhednar* possessions by bear and wolf spirits respectively for combat, and others such as *amok*, *latah*, *koro*, *imu*, *witiko* or *windigo*, *pibloktok* and *negi negi*.²⁸⁶

Lugh may possess Cú Chulainn on at least one other occasion. When Cú Chulainn is in his *serglige*, he utters the *briathartheosc*, instructions to the future king. Carey says that “here too it is Lugh who is acting on behalf of his unconscious son. The god of the Tara kingship speaks out of Cú Chulainn’s body, enunciating the principles of perfect rule, just as the lord of Annwn practices perfect rule while wearing Pwyll’s appearance.” Carey notes that Pwyll’s name means “mind,” and therefore “mind” goes off into the Otherworld for a year, the period of Cú Chulainn’s illness.²⁸⁷ Therefore, both accounts may refer to a similar process of initiation and possession.

A related term of interest in relation to Cú Chulainn as oracle is the verb *siabraid*, verbal noun *siabrad*. Sayers translates it as “arouses to fury, distorts, transforms.”²⁸⁸ As I have shown above, this word is also clearly identified with druids acting shamanistically and with the Tuatha Dé Danann in Cormac’s death tale.²⁸⁹

Sayers comments that the “accumulation of superhuman force, an entry into the world of the supernatural, also poses a threat to the host society of the hero. In a sense, Cú Chulainn passes to the ranks of his supernatural opponents.” In chapter three, I described how Cú Chulainn is referred to by a variety of terms that suggest he is seen as a supernatural being, as shamans are in so many cultures. Still another term used was *sirite*, or shapeshifter, a term that is also linked to his *ríastrad*.²⁹⁰ As I have noted in chapter three, I translate this term as “shapeshifter” because one source tells us that the supernatural figure, Úath, like Cú Chulainn, is called a *sirite*

285 Leavitt, 1997c, p. 152

286 Pattison, Kahan and Hurd, 1986, p. 289, emphasis in original. Price-Williams and Hughes, June 1994, p. 2

287 Carey, 1999a, p. 196

288 Sayers, 1991, p. 54

289 MacRitchie, 1908-9, pp. 263-4

290 Sayers, 1991, p. 54

because “of his capacity to form himself into a multitude of shapes.”²⁹¹ Therefore, I believe “shapeshifter” is the most appropriate translation of this term.

²⁹¹ Sayers, 1991, p. 53

THE SHAMAN ORACLE AS DEITY

SHAMANIC CULTURES	CELTIC CULTURE
There are references to trance possession.	There are some explicit references to trance possession, such as that of the <i>Awenyddion</i> , who clearly show all facets of possession phenomena, Veleda, and Cú Chulainn's possession by Lugh in combat, others where it is very likely, such as Pwyll's case.
There are terms for trance possession.	Terms such as <i>dichetal do chennaib</i> , <i>siabraid</i> and <i>baile</i> suggest possession. Cú Chulainn's <i>ríastrad</i> , and the passive way in which the word is used, strongly suggests possession.
Possession is a way of gaining power.	In tales such as <i>Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed</i> , shamanic figures gain power through apparent possession.
The shaman oracle gains prestige and power from their role.	Senchae, Mór, Pwyll and other possibly oracular figures gained prestige and power from their role.
The oracle unites spiritual and material realms through their practice.	Pwyll is described as uniting "the two realms in one" through his oracular role and exchange with the Otherworld.
Observers often do not or cannot distinguish between the possessed oracle and their god in speech, leading to blurred lines between god and oracle, and mythic figures who seem neither fully human nor fully divine.	The Tuatha Dé and other figures seem neither fully human nor fully divine. Other Indo-European cultures like the Norse give clear examples. Cú Chulainn is referred to by terms that suggest he is a spirit.
The oracle may receive the title of the god.	Figures such as Pwyll, Óengus, Finn and Merlin receive titles at ritually significant points, or are referred to by titles, suggesting trance possession to greater or lesser degrees.
Oracles may become hysterical or incoherent at stages of possession.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> become hysterical and incoherent at stages of possession.
Oracles may use strange or archaic language.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> , Amergin, Taliesin and others may use strange, archaic language.
Oracles may not remember what they have said.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> often do not remember what they said. Cú Chulainn "sleeps" during the three days Lugh fights for him.
Oracles may need to be brought out of trance through violent means.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> must be brought out of trance through violent means.

Oracles may receive their power from spirits in dreams or journeys.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> receive their power in a dream.
Oracles declare their divine power and authority.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> , Senchae, Amergin, Cú Chulainn and others declare their power and authority, often in ways that suggest divine authority behind the assertion.
Oracles invoke their god.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> invoke god.
Oracles believe that their sins or impurity can prevent the gods manifesting through them.	The <i>Awenyddion</i> pray that their sins may not prevent them from finding truth.
Oracles may be avatars, incarnations of a god, and thus be “wise children.”	Taliesin and others show prodigious wisdom and skill as children.
Particular deities may be channelled more frequently than others.	There are more frequent references suggesting trance possession Lugh and the “sovereignty goddess” in her various forms than other deities.
The oracle’s power and prestige is not explicable by purely social concerns but derives from the supernatural.	The Gaulish girl, Petta, is accorded power far beyond what her social role would justify.
Oracles accustomed to great power do not take kindly to being deposed when a new religion, etc. takes over.	Figures like Cormac’s druid, Máelchend, and the Cailleach do not adapt comfortably to power loss.
Art work suggests and depicts possession states.	Art work suggests and depicts possession states.
Oracles are frequently associated with equine imagery and called by equine names.	Figures we may see as oracles are frequently associated with equine imagery and called by equine names.
Oracles generally have shamanic biographies.	The biographies of Cú Chulainn, Mór and others have other shamanistic features like initiatory illness.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope I have shown sufficiently clear examples above to indicate that trance possession is a highly likely branch of shamanistic behaviour in Celtic culture. Given all that I could not include, I am sure that this theme alone would fill another thesis. I believe that a particularly good case can be made for Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*.

The etymology of this word is unclear. Zimmer believed it was related to the Welsh, *rhwystr*, meaning to hinder or frustrate.²⁹² I think Sayers's translation is more likely. He derives it from a root **reig-*, meaning "to twist."

But there are also other words that may be relevant to the etymology of *ríastrad*. For example, the word *ríata*, from *réidid*, "ride," means to be broken, as horses are. The other *réidid* can mean to smooth the way, to disentangle, or to ransom. *Ríarad* means to "serve" or "do the will of."²⁹³

While these words are not definitely related to *ríastrad*, it is interesting to note that they compass a shamanic complex of meanings. The shaman oracle is "ridden" or "broken" to the gods' will, and is also one who ransoms or frees others.

The fact that the verb *ríastraid* is used "in an impersonal passive, with the preposition *imm*" reveals that the transformation is "seemingly imposed externally without the hero's volition."²⁹⁴ The word *síabraid*, "transforms," mentioned above, relating to the Tuatha Dé and used of Cú Chulainn, is also used in an impersonal passive. This word was also used in relation to Maelchend and the other druids in the story of Cormac's death, above, who claimed to be gods.²⁹⁵

We saw in chapter one how the use of impersonal passive verbs also coincides with Óengus' initiatory crisis, imposed spiritually from outside.²⁹⁶ In this case, I think that the use of the passive along with all the other features noted above is a clear indication of trance possession.

The idea of the shaman as one who rescues or ransoms is a common one in shamanic cultures. Yet it is not just by doing, but by being, that the shaman acts as

292 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 507, headword *ríastrad*

293 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 507, headword *ríata*, p. 503, headwords *réidid* 1, 2, p. 506, headword *ríarad*

294 Sayers, 1991, p. 53

295 Sayers, 1991, p. 54

296 Ó Cathasaigh, 1997, p. 434

a guarantor of the cosmic order. The shaman's role as guarantor is a central shamanic function, one demonstrated in a number of Old Irish sources, and once again, quite clearly in Cú Chulainn's case.



Figure 1
Head from near the square sanctuary of Mšecké
Žehrovice, Bohemia, 2nd to 1st Century B.C.E.,
Prague, Národní Museum



Figure 2
One face of tetracephalos,
Ovingham, Northumberland, England



Figure 3
Photograph from the series
"Haiti, 1958-1959,"
by W. Eugene Smith



Figure 4
Bronze mount with protome from
the chariot found at Dejbjerg,
Denmark, 1st Century B.C.E.



Figure 5

Koskimo Hamatsa emerging from the woods. Photograph by Edward Curtis, 1914. (Courtesy of Native American Trading Company, Denver)



Figure 6

Cernunnos from the Gundestrup Cauldron



Figure 7

Figure with Wheel from the Gundestrup Cauldron

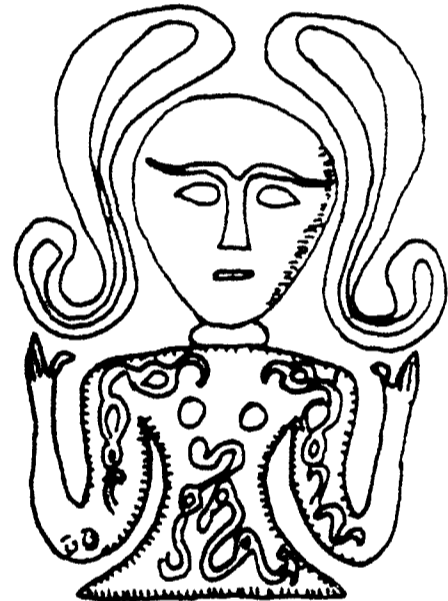


Figure 8 a and b

Yoke Mount in sheet bronze from the Waldalgesheim tomb, Rhineland, 4th Century B.C.E. Photograph and drawn reconstruction.



Figure 9
Yoruba pot from Owo with possession eyes
and reptiles, Nigerian Museum, Lagos.



Figure 10
"Maponus" head with
hollow in top for libations.



Figure 11
Detail of bronze flask, Dürrnberg, (Austria)
Late 5th-early 4th century B.C.E.
Staatliche Museen, Berlin



Figure 12
Arará drum with the exorbitated
eyes and the frozen lips of the spirit.
Casa de Africa Museum, Old Havana,
Photograph, Robert Thompson, 1988



Figure 13
Rock carving of Cernunnos,
4th Century B.C.E.,
Val Camonica, Italy
illustrator: Paul Jenkins.



Figure 14
Rock carving, perhaps
7th Century B.C. E.,
depicting half-man, half-stag
figure with huge antlers.
Val Camonica, Italy,
illustrator: Paul Jenkins.



Figure 15
Flagon lid, human faced
horse from Renheim, Germany,
4th Century, B.C.E.



Figure 16
Coin from Brittany,
early 1st Century B.C.E.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SHAMAN AS GUARANTOR OF COSMIC ORDER

Only to the extent that man exposes himself over and over again to annihilation can that which is indestructible arise within him. In this lies the dignity of daring... Only if we venture repeatedly through zones of annihilation can our contact with Divine Being, which is beyond annihilation, become firm and stable.

*Von Dürkheim*¹

*If this man was healthy, he would be a guarantor of all Ulster,
When he is suffering from wounds he is a greater guarantor than he has ever been.*

*Óengus, of Cú Chulainn, in the Serglige*²

It feels appropriate to return to the place I began at this stage, as Old Irish poems often conclude with their first verse. In this chapter I will look at the pervasive idea that the shaman is not just a mediator between this world and the Otherworld, but a guarantor of the co-creative process that maintains all worlds in right relationship.

I first found this concept reflected in Celtic sources in a word in the *Serglige*, the first text I translated and studied in detail. My later work on the stories of Mis, Óengus and others served to confirm and amplify my initial thoughts.

Because I am mainly looking at questions of meaning in this chapter, the results will naturally take on a more speculative character, since the sources available to us do not make pagan religious symbolism clear. Themes such as cosmology, sacrifice and the shaman as guarantor could also quite easily be expanded to form chapters, or even theses, of their own.³ Here I can do no more than touch on these important topics. I chose to do an overview of all of them to show that they exist in Celtic culture as they do in more generally recognised shamanic cultures. I hope to expand on these themes in later research.

In the last chapter I showed how various figures in the literature seem to symbolise deities, act as oracles, or somehow represent an overlap between human

1 Grof, 1989, p. 137, quoting Von Dürkheim, from *The Way of Transformation*

2 Dillon, 1975, p. 3, lines 92-93, (My translation.)

3 See for example, Mac Mathúna, 1999, Lyle, 1990, 1991

and divine. As noted in the last chapter, these include druids like Máelchend, queen figures like Mór, *filid* like Senchae, and possibly kings such as Conchobar, since either he or Senchae was called the “earthly god” among the Ulstermen. Cú Chulainn is called a *sirite*, shapeshifter, on assorted occasions and the same word is also used of spirits.⁴

All these figures can be seen as shamanic, because the shaman stands for the attainment of the goal of becoming *as a spirit* for his people, inspiring them to transcend the limits of corporeal existence.⁵ Eliade has compared this to the situation in Yoga, where the yogi seems to try “in every way to do exactly the opposite of what is done ‘in the world,’ that is, what men do *as men*, prisoners of their own ignorance.”⁶

In the chapter on initiatory illness, I showed the shamanic novice transcending all human rules of behaviour. At its ultimate stage, the process begun in initiatory illness finds its fulfilment as the shaman becomes a vessel for vast supernatural power in a focussed rather than destructive way. He becomes able to act as a guarantor of the order he transgressed against through the very powers that moved him to transgress. As I noted in the last chapter, Cú Chulainn passes into the ranks of his supernatural opponents, he becomes as a spirit, but does so in defence of Ulster.⁷

The shaman is, paradoxically, a breaker *and* sustainer of boundaries. Nagy has clearly shown that Finn does both throughout his career. “This paradoxical combination of the transcending and the protecting of metaphysical boundaries is very much a part of the role which Finn and his men play. They are only peripheral members of human society inasmuch as they are *fénnidi*, hunters who live in the wilderness. But because their existence is so liminal, Finn and his men can perform a vital service for society.”⁸

If we see the shaman as one who straddles all boundaries, who sustains and sometimes disrupts cosmic order, it makes sense to investigate the possible

4 Mac Cana, 1955-56, Chadwick, 1942, p. 21

5 Eliade 1958a, p. 101

6 Eliade 1958a, pp. 106-107

7 Sayers, 1991, p. 54

8 Nagy, 1981b, p. 303

cosmological significance of the process of his initiation and career. *Aisling* poetry is of particular significance to this issue. Though it occurs in later, Christian contexts, its content suggests that it retains more archaic cosmological ideas.⁹

THE AISLING

In *aisling* poetry, the Goddess of the land is often represented as a deranged and suffering madwoman like Mis, showing that Ireland is in a bad way. The cosmos has been thrown out of order. From a political view, poets such as Aodhagán Ó Rathaille tie their depictions to the Jacobite cause.¹⁰ There is, of course, also a close link between the welfare of the divine monarch and the well being of the land, and the marriage of the king to the goddess of the land. In these poems, the land is in a bad way because she does not have the right spouse. “...Banba is in pain without consort, wedded though she be.”¹¹

She is described in one poem as the “brightness of brightness,” also as a *spéir-bhean*, or “sky-woman.”¹² She can transmit knowledge, and things the poet fears to reveal. When frightened by mention of the Virgin Mary, she retreats to the fairy mansion of Luachair.¹³ In another poem she is described as being reduced to a state where “...the hair of her head falls down in heavy showers! Streams of blood gush forth in torrents from her eyes! Her whole visage is of the appearance of black coal! Her limbs are shrunken, bound and tortured!”¹⁴

The only thing that can restore her is what restored Mis, her right spouse; in this case, a fit ruler for Ireland. Here we have ideas of sovereignty, the goddess of the land, and a deranged, yet spiritually powerful figure, all bound up together.

The hoped for restoration of the madwoman in the poems can be seen as a restoration of cosmic order. In some respects, this is what the restoration of the *hamatsa* represents to the Kwakiutl.

DESCENTS IN TO CHAOS

9 Corkery, 1941, pp. 126-145

10 Corkery, 1941, p. 129

11 O’Rahilly, E., 1909, p. 3

12 O’Rahilly, E., 1909, p. 19, line 1, Corkery, 1941, p. 129

13 O’Rahilly, E., 1909, p. 19, lines 9-16

14 O’Rahilly, E., 1909, p. 9

The Pacific Northwest Native American Kwakiutl culture of the 1800's and pagan Celtic culture had many similarities. Both were tribal and placed great stress on generosity. Needless to say, no culture is perfect, and the ideals of any culture are just that, ideals. However the ideals of 19th century Kwakiutl culture and pagan Celtic culture were positive, and seem to have been adhered to more than they were violated—at least from the anthropological accounts in the former case, and the classical accounts and later literature in the latter.

As the Irish kings were obligated to give great feasts the Kwakiutl chief had to give great *potlatches*. In contrast to the modern situation, wealth and prestige seem to have been measured more by how much they gave, rather than how much they hoarded.¹⁵ Consequently, untempered voracity was one of the worse vices thinkable.

I believe that figures such as Mis and the *hamatsa* in both of these societies helped the people come to terms with life's harsh realities in very particular ways. As should be clear from the earlier chapters, this is *far from all* they did, but it was certainly one of their shamanic functions. Shamans do act as “therapists” for lack of a better word, along with their other functions in traditional cultures. They help members of their tribe make sense of all facets of their lives, and make meaning of the hardships that all beings face.

Ceremonies to return the shaman to the world after initiatory crisis are often elaborate. Amongst the Kwakiutl, in particular, the cannibal dance takes up an enormous amount of time, energy, resources, and sacrifice, to the point of the flesh offerings given by the participants.

We see community involvement in the healing of both Cú Chulainn and Óengus. In the case of Mis, Dubh Ruis is the only one physically present, yet the communities' interest in her is indicated by the fact that the king wants her saved, despite her epic depredations.

Because cosmological themes and parallels to Kwakiutl ideas exist in pieces in a wide range of Irish tales, I will have to cast my net widely to provide examples. As discussed in the introduction, one difficulty of this study is that Irish

15 Walens, 1981, p. 151

literature containing vestiges of pagan and / or shamanistic themes was written by Christian scribes. Therefore, we do not have one large coherent statement of pagan Celtic cosmology and philosophy in the literature. We have to piece it together from diverse sources where the pieces appear.

There are stages to any cosmological ordering process. We find the idea of the cosmos being ordered in particular stages in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, where the land is divided up in different ways by different immigrants. The Rees' have spoken of this as representing different stages of spiritual and societal development.¹⁶ *The Settling of the Manor of Tara* has been interpreted as containing ideas of a cosmological ordering process deriving from a divine source.¹⁷ Emily Lyle has also explored numerous cosmological themes in Celtic and related sources.¹⁸

In a Kwakiutl myth of the “first time”, there is hunger and enmity in the land. The parents of Transformer, the order-bringing divine figure, will not even feed him and their other son. This illustrates the Kwakiutl prime vice of greed. Likewise, a lack of generosity was regarded as a sufficiently severe vice to deprive Bres of the kingship of the Tuatha Dé Danann in the *Cath Maige Tuired*.¹⁹

In the Kwakiutl myth, Transformer then goes forth to set things right in the world.²⁰ He sets up rules for meals, reincarnation, and the continual interchange between this and the other world. Before he does this, there is no harmony between the worlds. Without the organising power of the spirits, the Kwakiutl lived in a world of undependable resources, and constant hunger.²¹

A very important aspect of this tale is that before Transformer, there is helplessness. Hunger and passion govern humans, and they have no certain way of obtaining food. Untempered voracity reigns. After Transformer, there is at least an idea of how the universe works and a workable system of exchange with the spirits.

Helplessness and lack of control also characterise the initial stage of

16 Rees and Rees, 1961, pp. 104-117

17 Best, 1910

18 Lyle, 1990

19 Gray, 1982, pp. 33-37

20 Walens: 1981, p. 125

21 Walens: 1981, p. 127

shamanic initiatory illness as well as schizophrenia.²² This trauma is brought about by what is felt by the sufferer to be inadequate behaviour or helplessness in the face of life situations that are “culturally acknowledged as crucially important.”²³ The inability to control a traumatic life situation is what Mis experiences in the death of her father, as we have already seen.

If we look at it more deeply, however, we will see that in a larger sense, all humans must face death and chaos in life. The sense of order can be shattered at any moment by disease, death, or injury. The person diagnosed as psychotic will generally exhibit nothing that any human does not exhibit under *extreme* and *prolonged* threat.²⁴

Since each person continually lives under the threat of possible death or disaster, the shaman in initiatory illness dramatically acts out the state of all humans. The shamanic candidate perceives the fearsome actuality of life with greater intensity and emotional resonance. However, the shaman does more than observe, or even act out—he mediates.

INITIATORY ILLNESS AS A MICROCOSM OF CREATION

I believe that the shaman’s initiation in Kwakiutl, Celtic and other cultures, often represents a microcosm *of the creation process itself*. Eliade writes that “The total crisis of the future shaman, sometimes leading to complete disintegration of the personality and to madness, can be valued not only as an initiatory death, but also as a symbolic return to the precosmogonic chaos, to the amorphous and indescribable state that precedes any cosmogony...”²⁵

Amongst the Kwakiutl, the winter ceremonial is seen as a point when time stops, when the events that brought about creation are re-enacted in both spiritual and physical dimensions.²⁶ The shaman during this time, as the wild cannibal figure, goes through the stages of creation. He is fully absorbed in chaos. He is mad, forsaking all laws of human conduct, becoming one with the devouring power

22 Silverman, 1967, pp. 23-24

23 Silverman, 1967, p. 24

24 Silverman, 1967, p.24

25 Eliade, 1958a, p. 89

26 Walens, 1981, p.28

of the abyss.

Likewise, Mis devours humans and animals brutally and indiscriminately, as the forces of destruction and death come to all, forsaking all laws of man, but also not being limited by them. For example, she can fly and run with incredible speed. By tearing down all limitations, she moves beyond the limits of the rest of humanity.

This must be considered valuable, as the king wants her returned to the world, not just killed. Yet if these powers remain sunk in the chaotic state, she remains a danger to all around her. We see the same thing with Cú Chulainn, when his warrior heat, so useful in battle, must be quenched lest he turn on friend as well as foe.

Wildness tamed and harnessed yields its healing power. This may be inferred when Cu Chulainn experiences his first *ríastrad* and harnesses stags and swans to pull his chariot. Like the wildness of the animals, *his* wildness is harnessed to Ulster's service. In South America, the Wild Woman of the Forest deity became Our Lady of Remedies.²⁷

Tamed and returned to society the *hamatsa*, Cú Chulainn, Mis and others embody creative forces in the end. To become a shaman, the shamanic candidate must *go through the creation process fully*, emerging from chaos. The shaman must be healed. He or she must return from the primal chaos, bringing its potency with them, but at the same time, harnessing that power for society's benefit.

SHAMAN AS GUARANTOR

Because of all this, I believe that we may see the shaman as a guarantor of the creation process. The shaman, in repeating creation's journey from chaos to order in his initiatory crisis, shows that order still flows from chaos. By then becoming the vehicle for continued interchange between spirit and humanity, they show that the exchange still works. The shaman may be seen as a living demonstration of a "covenant" between this world and the Other.

We may see a reflection of this concept in the use of the word *commairge* in

27 Taussig, 1987, p. 189

the *Serglige Con Culainn*. This word can mean a guarantor in a legal sense, or more generally a protector. It can mean that one will not violate an agreement, or that one is pledged to protect others.²⁸

In chapter one, I described the point in the *Serglige* when Cú Chulainn had been in a catatonic state for some time. One of the *Áes Síd*, Óengus, son of Áed Abrat, came to speak with him. Cú Chulainn's companions asked why Óengus was not afraid to come into the midst of the Ulaid.

Óengus responded that if Cú Chulainn were healthy, he would be a great guarantor for Ulster, but, "when he is weak and sick from wounds, he provides you with an even greater guarantee." (*Inid i lobrai 7 i n-ingás dano atá, is móo de as chomairche airthiu.*)²⁹ Óengus adds that he fears nothing because he has come to speak with Cú Chulainn.³⁰

His statement is curious to say the least, as Cú Chulainn is out like a plank. The guarantee Cú Chulainn gives Ulster in this state is only explicable from a shamanic perspective. Traditional cultures see a shaman in his initiatory crisis as more powerful than before because the spirits cause the crisis by coming to him.³¹ Fand coming to Cú Chulainn as wife later is one manifestation of this.

That Cú Chulainn's illness is seen as positive is confirmed by the fact that Emer uses it as a boasting point in *Fled Bricrenn*. She says that Cú Chulainn is "a man who lies wasting away" (*fer seirges i lligu*), in a sequence of statements praising his beauty and prowess in battle. Carey notes that we cannot be positive that Emer speaks of the same illness, but it seems very likely. Carey also notes the clear resemblance of his illness to shamanic initiatory illness.³²

That Emer and Óengus both see Cú Chulainn's incapacity as positive might be interpreted as an idea that the worse off the shamanic candidate is in his distress, the deeper he descends into chaos, the more powerfully his recovery represents the restoration of order. Even while in his distress, the candidate is a repository for enormous power. Thus in this case, the fairy man says that even in his current state,

28 Royal Irish Academy, 1990, p. 141, headword *commairge*, Carey, 1999, p. 191, note 4

29 Dillon, 1975, p. 3, line 93, Literally: "When it is in weakness and sickness from wounds that he is, all the more is [the] guarantee on their [the Ulstermen's] behalf."

30 Cross and Slover, 1969, p. 180

31 Campbell, Joseph, 1988, p. 110

32 Carey, 1999a, p. 193

Cú Chulainn is more a guarantor for Ulster than ever before.

When the initiated shaman passes through the fires of his or her torment to a place of power, and through a spiritual and possibly physical mating, to a place of union and love, they demonstrate the power of the spirits to heal. Even Silverman, the anthropologist who said shamans were “culturally supported schizophrenics,” says their personality is far different from that of the schizophrenic in at least one important way: they are “remarkably resilient.”³³

By this resilience, the shaman demonstrates the power of the human soul to emerge from adversity and helplessness in the face of the life’s chaotic reality as a co-creator with sacred powers. By doing so, I believe the shaman may well represent first a covenant, then an intermediary, between the community and the forces of creation. I think this idea underlies both the Celtic and Kwakiutl tales.

As noted in the introduction, throughout this study I have been comparing narratives from known shamanistic cultures like the Kwakiutl with Celtic narratives. If the tales from shamanistic cultures have similar or identical elements and themes to Celtic tales, as in the examples I have been discussing, then we have another reason to suspect that Celtic culture, particularly before the 7th century AD or so, was also shamanistic.

A passage in the *Serglige* also draws our attention to other examples of guarantor figures in Celtic culture. When Cú Chulainn lies in sickness, he acts as instructor to Ireland’s future king. As discussed in the last chapter, this may represent an incident of Lugh possessing Cú Chulainn’s body while Cú Chulainn embarks on a spirit journey.³⁴

Lugh can be more convincingly associated with trance possession than any other deity besides the sovereignty goddess. Both can be associated with other shamanistic themes, and because both also have to do with sovereignty, they naturally direct us to monarchs as shamanistic guarantors.

SOVEREIGN AS GUARANTOR

Monarchs are generally considered to function as *axis mundi*. They link the

³³ Silverman, 1967, p. 25

³⁴ Carey, 1999a, pp. 193, 197

worlds and embody the divine on earth. Their shamanic and oracular character is generally acknowledged.³⁵ The monarch's power in Celtic and other traditions can also be bound up with the ability to give feasts "awash with alcoholic liquor." In short, enabling people to alter consciousness was a key part of the king's claim to rule, giving the sovereign further shamanic associations.³⁶

Sihler also contests the etymology of the Proto-Indo-European "king" root, **rēǵ*, related to the Old Irish, *do-rig*, "to extend," in favour of a root in **reH iǵ*, meaning "to have mana or spiritual power."³⁷ This etymology will no doubt be hotly debated. Indeed, Indo-European etymologies must be speculative to at least some degree due to the fact that we have no living speakers of ancient Indo-European, let alone Proto-Indo-European. I believe, however, that this etymology is well worth considering given all the other associations between the king and divine power in Celtic and other Indo-European traditions.

In fact, it seems quite clear that the king's *primary* function in shamanistic, traditional and / or ancient cultures has always been to do with maintaining cosmic order through the exercise of his divine power.³⁸ It goes without saying that the king has many other socio-political functions which might take up the majority of his time and attention. However, what a culture holds as symbolically important and *says* is the king's purpose may be quite different from his day to day activities.

For in the typical archaic mode of conceiving the organisation of things, the kingdom was so identified with the world that one was coequal and coextensive with the other, the outer margin of one containing also the other, and both schematically symmetrical in their symbolic arrangement...What lay outside these confines belonged to chaos and darkness, and thus to the demon, associated with dessication and death; those outer lands were then the representation of the "King's Enemies," which played a role in the ritual combat or cosmic conflict.³⁹

We can see this idea clearly in Irish examples. *Baile in Scáil* begins when Conn, High King of Tara, was walking Tara's ramparts with his three Druids and *filid*

35 Perry, 1991

36 Arnold, Bettina, February, 2001, pp. 14, 19

37 Sihler, 1977

38 Perry, 1991, pp. 14-20

39 Perry, 1991, pp. 15-16

each night, to prevent the Fomoiré from taking Ireland unawares.⁴⁰ His role is divine, but also shamanistic, since he defends the boundary of his realm against the chaotic Otherworld incursions of the Fomoiré. To do so, he and his druids can obviously see them, and the fact that the tale says he patrols to prevent them taking Ireland “unawares,” may imply that others cannot—at least not as well.

The shamanistic, divine ruler appears in many cultures. For example, the Norse *godi* was believed to concentrate and distribute divine power to such an extent that our word “God” ultimately came from his title.⁴¹ The punning between the words for ale and sovereignty (*derglaith*) in the Celtic tales where Lugh and the goddess dispense both gives sovereignty further supernatural associations.

When we look for a word in Old Irish that refers to cosmic order, *fír* automatically comes to mind. The king upheld *fír*, a word somewhat inadequately translated as “truth.”

Since the sovereign was the ultimate custodian and embodiment of *fír* on earth, their stories are full of *fír*'s importance to the spiritual and even *structural* integrity of the universe. A tale of Cormac's childhood, when King Lugaid was on the throne, illustrates the point.

The sheep of one of Lugaid's tenants got into the queen's woad and ate some of it. King Lugaid ordered that the sheep be surrendered to him as payment for the wode. “*Ní fír!*” said Cormac, emphasised by a mudslide collapsing half the Hill of Tara, “That is a false judgement. The wode was cropped, but will grow again, so the sheep too should be cropped, and their wool taken as compensation for the wode.” The crowd responded, “Thus speaks the son of a *fír-flaith!*” Cormac spoke in the nick of time, for his utterance of truth alone prevented the collapse of the whole hill.⁴²

The concept of *fír* and *fír flaithemon*, the prince's truth, were clearly seen to maintain cosmic order. Truth was also a sustaining principal, if not *the* sustaining principal, in many Indo-European cultures. Dillon has compared this passage from

40 Thurneysen, 1936, pp. 213-214

41 Perry, 1991, p. 181. This was done in part through the ale-feast. I have already discussed the ways in which royal distribution of food and beverages, particularly alcohol, may have been symbolic of the transmission of divine power in chapter 2.

42 Dillon, 1946, p. 140

the *Audacht Morainn*, the *Bequest of Morann* with the following ones from Indian sources:

Let him preserve *fír*, it will preserve him.
 Let him exalt *fír*, it will exalt him.
 For by *fír flaithemon* great kingdoms are ruled...
 By *fír flaithemon* fair weather comes in each fitting season,
 Winter fine and frosty, spring dry and windy,
 summer warm with showers of rain,
 autumn with heavy dews and fruitful.

By means of truth (*satyena*) the wind blows,
 By means of truth the sun shines in the sky,
 Truth is the foundation of speech,
 Everything is founded upon truth.

By means of truth the sun is warm,
 By means of truth the sun shines,
 By means of truth the wind blows,
 By means of truth the earth endures.⁴³

It may be that as Manannán reunited the shattered vessel in *Echtrae Cormaic* by speaking truth, and as Cormac's utterance of truth in childhood upheld the Hill of Tara and all it literally and figuratively stood for, the utterance of truth was believed to support truth in the world, like the Indian *satyakriyā*, the act of truth.⁴⁴

Fír is more than telling the truth, it is the truth of being, righteousness and cosmic order. To allow *gau* or falsehood to have the upper hand was to risk the forces of chaos being unleashed on the earth.

The tale of Conaire Mór, with its many shamanistic components, goes a long way to demonstrating both Conaire's shamanistic identity and the way in which he serves as a guarantor of cosmic order. Like the bards mentioned at the end of chapter three, his role may be best understood by the results when he stops fulfilling it.⁴⁵

Conaire's biography has many shamanistic features from the start. Conceived by a "bird-man," he is informed of his heritage by a bird-troop

43 Dillon, 1946, pp. 127-131

44 Dillon 1947, Kelly, 1976

45 Stokes, 1901, p. 57

associated with his father. *Geiss* is placed on him that he cannot cast at birds, indicating totemic aspects of the relationship. His prosperous reign is described as an *enflaith*, a “bird reign.”⁴⁶ I have discussed the centrality of bird symbolism to shamanism in chapter four.

He is elected through a *tarbfeis*, and the way it is arranged would seem to indicate a shamanistic brand of *realpolitik*, where the druid order selects, and perhaps even selectively “breeds” the next king. When he arrives naked to be chosen king, three druids wait on each of the four roads to Tara with clothes to cover him. Similarly, as he awaits his death at Da Derga’s Hostel, twelve men are stationed around him. Like Cromm Cruaich and the twelve idols that surrounded him, Conaire is one figure surrounded by twelve, which can be seen as the twelve months of the year and the timeless hub they orbit around.⁴⁷

Conaire Mór has an incredibly prosperous reign until he breaks *geissi*. He begins by being lenient to his marauding foster brothers when it was *geis* that he not allow marauding during his reign. He says that “the judgement I have given is no extension of life to me” and charitably sends them to Scotland.

What follows seems inevitable. He breaks *geis* after *geis* and ends up at Da Derga’s Hostel. When his marauding foster-brothers land, he says, “I do not know what it is unless the earth that has been rent, or the Leviathan with its tale that is encircling the earth that is striking with its tail to overturn the world, or the boat of the sons of Donn Désa that has come to land.”⁴⁸

“The violation of *gessa* is such a sure omen of approaching death that it might almost be inferred that a hero is safe from death while his *gessa* remain inviolate.”⁴⁹ In some cultures black magic is often considered to be the *only* cause of sudden or untimely death. For example, in Hungary and amongst ethnic Hungarians in Romania, sudden death often arouses the suspicion of black magic.⁵⁰

Conaire’s and Cú Chulainn’s deaths both bring cosmological disruption, indicating their roles as guarantors. Chaotic forces play prominent roles in Conaire

46 Stokes, 1901, pp. 26-27

47 Rees, 1961, pp. 150-151, 196, 220-222

48 Rees, 1961, p. 329

49 Rees, 1961, p. 327

50 Pócs, March 6th 2002

and Cú Chulainn's deaths. Cú Chulainn's killers, the sons of the Calatin have had one foot and one hand cut off during their seventeen years of training as wizards, and the daughters have been blinded in their left eyes, making them Fomoirian in their aspect.⁵¹ A one-eyed one-legged monstrous figure also appears in Conaire's tale. The Fomoirie generally represent the forces of chaos in the tales.

A final interesting comparison to elements of Conaire's tale, relating shamanistic concepts, bird symbolism, truth and the disruption of cosmic order is to be found in the Iranian *Avesta* and later Persian sources. The term that invites comparison with the Old Irish *fir* is *farr* in Middle Persian, *xvarenah* in the earlier Avestan texts. Like *fir*, *xvarenah* brings the good things in life. One text says, "May there now come to this community right, possessions, prosperity, *xvarenah*, and easeful life."

Xvarenah is associated with both the sun and kingly vocation. "Pāpak one night in a dream saw / that a bright sun from the head / of Sāsan was shining, and it / illuminated the whole world." It often appears in the form of a bird hovering above the king's head. The *xvarenah* is not limited to one of Dumézil's three functions, but where it is associated with a function it is the first.

In the Avestan text, the *Zam Yasht*, the *xvarenah* leaves king Yima in the form of a bird because of *druj*, "the lie." Greppin concludes that *xvarenah* or *farr* must mean more than the "good things in life" but doesn't state the obvious, that the opposite of a lie is truth—the broadest definition of truth as cosmic order, like the Old Irish *fir*.⁵² Like King Yima, Conaire loses his truth to falsehood, and his *enlaith*, his bird reign, and his life, is at an end.

Moving on from the idea of king as guarantor of the cosmic order, I want to look at another device traditional cultures use to maintain right relationship between human and divine realms: sacrifice.

SACRIFICE

There is no question that sacrifice was important to the ancient Celts. There

51 Rees, 1961, p. 331

52 Greppin, 1973, pp. 232-234, 237-241

is some evidence in the archaeology for sacrifice on a limited scale.⁵³ In the literature, the triple-death theme suggests ritual death.⁵⁴

A Latin prayer attributed to St. Sechnall from the *Antiphonary of Bangor*, says “Christ hath each one of us saved and released, He is our sacrifice, He is our priest. Victims of olden time—so the law willed—shadowed God’s mysteries, now are fulfilled.”⁵⁵ On one level, this statement refers to the eucharistic symbolism in the Mass and draws on sacrificial themes throughout the Bible. However, it does not seem outwith the realm of possibility that it might *also* refer to Celtic sacrificial practices. Human sacrifice certainly appears in Old Irish tales so the memory of at least the idea of sacrifice, if not its actuality, had been preserved.

A Middle Irish poem attributed to St. Columba makes the statement that “Christ is my druid.” On one level, in context, the author is rejecting druids and divination. Because he has Christ he needs no diviners. However, one might speculatively ask if it might not also refer to Christ as sacrifice, implying a self-sacrificial role for the druids?

For the shaman, in a sense, each journey is a sacrificial death—leaving the body for the spiritual benefit of the tribe. Possession is still more dramatic in this respect. Each eviction from the body is a sacrificial death for *both* shaman and deity. This is explicit in some North Indian rites during possession by the Snake King.⁵⁶

Some possessions end with the *khūn*, which literally means ‘blood,’ but in this context means something more like ‘murder,’ that is, the removal of the Snake King from the oracle’s body. The *khūn* is a chant, only performed if “it is absolutely necessary to remove the Snake King *and return the oracle to life.*” It ends with the lines “If life is in the edge of the nails or cells of the hair / Arise, awake, be conscious.”⁵⁷

The shaman’s initiatory death, his repeated deaths in possession and the recurrent deaths of the Gods through him become irrevocably bound with the

53 Green, 1997a, pp. 72-87

54 See Frykenberg, 1984, p. 115, note 26, Sayers, 1992

55 Atkinson, 1908-9, p. 111

56 Wadley, 1976, pp. 232-251. The villages referred to are in the Mainpuri District of Uttar Pradesh.

57 Wadley, 1976, pp. 246-247

primordial sacrifice of God in creation, a sacrifice we find re-enacted throughout many Indo-European traditions.

“Insofar as the creation myth depicted the first death as sacrifice, so also are all deaths understood as sacrifice. In truth, death is the last sacrifice that one can offer, a sacrifice in which one becomes the victim rather than the sacrificer.” The resurrection, where the body goes to the elements, then begins fresh creation. Lincoln identifies this ideology as not just Indo-Iranian but Proto-Indo-European.⁵⁸

The cosmos is fuelled by sacrifice. In one of the Upanishads, the dead man whose component parts “return to the elements,” his speech to the fire, breath to the wind, eye to the sun, and so forth, is spoken of *exactly* as the Rig Veda speaks of the first victim of sacrifice, whose substance created the universe.⁵⁹ Each death therefore, is a participation in God’s primal sacrifice. As we have seen above, no figure is seen to stand in for gods in Celtic tradition as much as the shamanic figures.

SELF SACRIFICE

Given this, it would not be entirely surprising if druids might have taken on a self-sacrificial role, as Ann Ross theorised.⁶⁰ This is all purely speculative, of course, however, given the shamanistic significance of sacrificial symbolism, particularly ideas about the shaman as “wounded healer,” it is worth considering. The man found in Lindow Moss who Ross and others believe to have been sacrificed was certainly a member of the upper classes, possibly a druid.⁶¹

One can only conjecture that perhaps druids, as shamanic figures, would have been the logical ones to make a “long journey” for the people in times of great need. A spiritually powerful person’s death would be considered more effective than the proverbial virgins and children. Their life force might be seen as stronger, and their blood, from a line dedicated to the gods, might be seen as more effective.

The “ordeal” methods of altering consciousness, discussed in chapter two, can be related to sacrificial symbolism. Rituals such as binding, fasting and praying

58 Lincoln, 1977, p. 257

59 Lincoln, 1977, p. 249

60 Ross, 1989, pp. 95-100

61 Ross, 1989, p.41

in freezing water create pain. The shaman undergoes this pain, at least in part, to benefit his tribe. One might see the shaman's sacrificial role as altruistic, however, some have seen the shaman's ongoing practice as a mode of warding off the psychological dysfunction that first manifested in their initiatory illness.⁶²

Continuing ecstatic practice, even those, or *especially those*, of a sort that create physical stress, with its concomitant release of endorphins and other "happy chemicals," would serve a sound purpose in keeping psychological demons at bay. The general idea in shamanic cultures that a shaman who ceases shamanic work will be destroyed by spiritual forces may relate to this.

A possible example of a shamanistic kind of self-sacrifice is the way in which Finn is said to chew his thumb to reawaken his *imbas*. One story describes the first occasion as follows: He put the thumb he'd burnt on the salmon of wisdom in his mouth, and "to ease the pain, put it between his teeth, and gnawed the skin to the flesh, the flesh to the bone, the bone to the marrow and when he had tasted the marrow he received the knowledge of all things." Often, in future, he washed his face before he does the rite, which compares to seers' preparatory rituals in other cultures.⁶³

What are we to make of this procedure? Of course, it is impossible to know for sure, but one potential meaning may be implied by the symbolism. If we look at what Finn does literally, it is a nice trick—but one could only do it once. Finn did it repeatedly. He chewed his thumb like a piece of raw meat, as the sacrificed pig flesh is chewed in the *imbas forosnai* ritual. The implication may be that he is chewing sacrificed flesh, that Finn is a living sacrifice to the spirits.

The idea that the shaman is a living sacrifice is common to most shamanic cultures. In his dismemberment experiences, physical ordeals, and arduous rites to heal others, he is continually in the "sacrificial posture." Finn symbolically reduces his thumb to marrow to kindle *imbas*, or illumination. Similarly, enlightenment in shamanistic cultures is bound up with ideas of reducing things to their essentials. Shamans are dismembered by spirits and reduced to bare bones in journeys.⁶⁴

62 See Devereux, 1980, Halifax, 1982

63 See Nagy, 1985, pp. 22, quoting O'Donovan, 1859, p. 293, note 4

64 Kalweit, 1988, pp. 94-110

The shaman occupies the most liminal place of all—he is considered neither alive nor dead. We get this sense about Finn. In one tale, Finn is made old by a supernatural figure. Another gives him a rejuvenating drink, but his hair remains grey. The supernatural being offers to change it, but Finn chooses to keep it, and ever after, a “deathly chill” remains on his person and his children stink of death.⁶⁵

THE SHAMAN AS ONE DEAD WHEN ALIVE AND ALIVE WHEN DEAD

As noted in chapter two, words for trance, sleep and death overlap in various cultures. The shaman is one who dies repeatedly, one who, like Finn, always has an aura of death about him. Eliade says, “it is clear that *it is the shaman himself who becomes the dead man*” and that the shaman’s journey is a ritual death and rebirth.⁶⁶ As the shaman is somewhat dead when alive, he is also somewhat alive when dead.

Cú Chulainn continues to take a liminal role after his death. It is very interesting that he returns to die by the very stone where he was attacked by Otherworld women in the *Serglige*. Thus Airbe Roír, a place with a standing stone by the lake near Mag Muirthemne, is the place of both his “spiritual death” in initiatory illness and his physical death.⁶⁷

I believe it is also significant that Cú Chulainn binds himself to the standing stone, given my earlier discussion of binding in shamanistic contexts. Binding has many symbolic layers of meaning that I do not have the space to go into here.⁶⁸

Earlier I noted that Cú Chulainn bound himself tightly beneath his battle gear to “keep his head” when in *ríastrad*, but more than this, to be bound to a pillar stone is to appear as a living *axis mundi*. Bound to the stone, dead but vertical, he seems neither fully alive nor fully dead, neither fully of this world nor fully of the Other.

In physical, as in spiritual death, he is a safeguard of Ulster. The enemy troops are reluctant to approach, and when Lugaid cuts off his head, Cú Chulainn’s

65 Nagy, 1981b, p. 305

66 Eliade, 1964, p.95, also see pp. 84-85. (Italics Eliade’s.) See also Campbell, Joseph. 1991c, pp. 259-260

67 Carey, 1999a, pp. 193-194

68 Eliade, 1964, pp. 419-420

sword cuts off Lugaid's hand.⁶⁹ Therefore Cú Chulainn, even when dead, continues to seem somewhat alive.

He also returns after death in a *siaburcharpat*, a "spectral chariot," and makes a *siaburchobrae*, "spectral speech." It will be recalled, however, that Cú Chulainn is identified as a *siabra in life* as well. In some respects, the shaman's lot is not seen to change at death. In death as in life, Cú Chulainn "bridges the gap between life and death and between the past, to which he belongs, and the future, which he predicts."⁷⁰ He predicts Christ's coming, and his life story is "synchronised" with Christ's in some sources. With Christ, he predicts another visionary, sacrificed hero.

Other shamanistic figures in Celtic literature speak of being simultaneously alive and dead. The "three reds" travelling to Da Derga's Hostel say "Though we are alive, we are dead."⁷¹ Taliesin says, "I am old, I am new...I have been dead, I have been alive...I am Taliesin."⁷² I spoke of Marbán as a shamanic figure in chapter three. His name is based on *marb*, "dead." Nagy suggests this may be in a Christian sense of "dead to the world."⁷³ I would suggest it may also be in a shamanic sense. In the *Imacallam*, Ferchertne says that one of his tasks is "To go into death's hills where I may find great honour."⁷⁴ Examples could be multiplied further, but I think I have made the point.

The association of being one-eyed with supernatural power in Celtic literature may also relate to symbolism of being simultaneously alive and dead. Examples include the incident in the *Cath Maige Tuired* where Lugh casts a spell on Balor and the Fomoiré by hopping on one leg while covering one eye.⁷⁵ Many figures have one eye yanked out by a bird in particular, as the Hawk of Achill pulls out Fintan's eye.⁷⁶ St. Brigit performs the operation on herself to avoid marriage.⁷⁷

Cú Chulainn becomes effectively one eyed in his *ríastrad*, since one sinks

69 Carey, 1999a, p. 194

70 Nagy, 1997, p. 225

71 Rees, 1961, p. 128

72 Rees, 1961, p. 242

73 Nagy, 1997, p. 308

74 Stokes, 1905, pp. 28-29, my translation based on Stokes

75 Gray, 1983, pp. 58-59, par. 129

76 Hull, 1932, pp. 27, par. 20-21, my translation

77 Torma, 1997, p. 12

far into his skull and the other bulges out. An interesting comparison is to be found in figure 17, (p. 271).⁷⁸ This is a carving of Odin as the hanged man, sacrificed on the World Tree. Like Cú Chulainn in *ríastrad*, his mouth gapes, and he shows only one eye. Odin can be linked with Lugh as well, and the one eye open, one closed or missing theme is certainly common to them both.

It is worth noting that one of Cú Chulainn's epithets is *úathbásach*, or "horrifying." I noted in chapter three that Thurneysen takes *úath* back to an archaic Irish root in **oth*, which can in turn be related to the Old Norse *ōðr*, meaning raving or possessed. The name Odin also derives from this root.⁷⁹

We can see the resemblance to Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* in this image. The eyes give him an ambiguous quality, neither dead nor alive, seeing into the physical world with the open eye and into the spiritual with the closed: the two sights.

The Bantu Kimbanguist cult sings of its founder, "Tata Simon [Kimbangu] is not dead; / One eye is closed, / One wide open."⁸⁰

Shamans exist "betwixt and between" in life and death. The fact that shamans can hold contradictory polarities is also a source of their power. I earlier mentioned Nagy's idea that Finn had great power because he was simultaneously a breaker and maintainer of boundaries.

In one story mentioned in chapter four, Finn drinks from a well of falsehood and a well of truth. Nagy assumes that the *fios thoighe Cuanna*, "knowledge from the house of Cuanna," that Finn gains, has come from the well of truth.⁸¹ But perhaps this knowledge has come from drinking of *both*, from holding both polarities.

In Finn we have a sacrificial shamanic figure, one seen as dead in life. Similarly, great yogis are also thought of as dead. Their bodies are buried rather than burned, because they have already immolated the personal self in the fires of *tapas*, they have been sacrificed already. The sacrificial posture is the essence of their yoga. Yoga means to "yoke," to unite polarities of divine and human, flesh

78 Puhvel, 1987, p. 195, figure 10. Odin as the hanged man from the Stave church of Hegge, Norway. (Courtesy of the Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo. Photograph by M. Blindheim.)

79 Puhvel, 1987, p. 193

80 Simbandumwe, 1992, p. 165

81 Nagy, 1981b, p. 305

and spirit, life and death. Therefore, the practitioner's sacrificial posture may be seen as what unites polarities.

POWER AND POLARITIES

The remainder of this chapter (excluding my diagrams and conclusions at the end) is a *speculative* work in progress. Proving the ideas that follow will be the work of future research. However, part of my purpose in writing this thesis is to look at the potential meanings of Celtic shamanistic behaviour and symbolism, as well as showing that the “bare bones” of such symbolism and behaviour exists. Therefore, I include what follows to touch on possible deeper meanings that I believe are present in the tales and worth exploring. The reader should just be aware that my ideas are very much at the theoretical stage here.

Ann Ross refers to the symbolism of the torc, the Celtic neck ornament that denotes status and power. Torcs are in the form of an open circle with two knobs, spheres, or other decorative terminations at the ends of the open circle. Some take a form more like a noose, and Ross believes they once represented the sacrificial noose.⁸²

If Ross is correct, torcs might be symbolically akin to the “sacred thread” worn by Brahmins. It is fixed with the words “You are the sacred thread, with the sacred thread of sacrifice I initiate you.”⁸³ The torc's symbolism may relate to shamanic symbolism of binding, touched on in chapter two.

There may also be an echo of the idea that wearing a torc represents symbolic sacrifice in *Cànain nan Eun*, discussed in chapter two. In the story, the Prince of Spain sacrifices his three children and bathes Alasdair in their blood to restore him after an initiatory type episode as a wild man. When he and his queen go to mourn over the bodies they find the children are alive again. The story then notes that “the children were wearing their necklaces,” though these necklaces are not mentioned before or after.⁸⁴ There is no question that the likeliest explanation for this is that the “necklaces” are the red scars where their throats have previously

82 Ross, 1989, p. 113

83 Panikkar, 1977, p. 128

84 Mackay, J.G., 1931, p. 177

been cut. But I think it might also be conceivable that the children were ritually rather than physically sacrificed as symbolised by “necklaces,” possibly torcs.

This is all speculative, of course, and cannot be firmly justified from the evidence, but the idea of the torc as sacrificial symbol has interesting cosmological implications. If the torc is a sacrificial symbol, it would mean that the symbol of ultimate authority was the symbol of ultimate sacrifice. This goes along with what we know about status in Celtic culture, that generosity rather than wealth itself was, at least in part, what gave status.

What else might the torc symbolise? On the most obvious level it is an object with terminals or knobs at either end—poles at either end of an open circle. It most obviously calls to mind opposites or polarities somehow “held” together. Again, this is speculative, but interestingly, the idea that spiritual power derives in part from the ability to hold polarities—that is, to bear different or opposite states of being or ideas simultaneously in one’s awareness without difficulty—does seem to be implied in a variety of Celtic sources relating to shamanistic figures.

For example, Máelduin’s trinity of foster brothers, discussed in chapter two, who tag along on his *Immram*. One was lost essentially to presumption, (stealing the torc from the place with the cat, and the other two to islands of sorrow and joy respectively. At the end of the journey, Máelduin has apparently transcended personal pettiness to the extent that he can forgive his father’s murderers—he has successfully moved beyond polarities.⁸⁵ In this he is similar to Celtic deities in many of the tales.

GREY AREAS

In Celtic sources, particularly in the mythological cycle of tales, we do not see a tidy opposition of good versus evil. We certainly see chaotic forces, like the Fomoiré, who seem to represent disorder, and sometimes evil. Yet these same forces represent fertility.

At the end of the *Cath Maige Tuiread*, the Tuatha Dé Danann make a treaty with the deposed half-Fomoirian king Bres, because they cannot cultivate the land

⁸⁵ Stokes, 1888

without Fomoirian assistance.⁸⁶ Could this relate in some way to a perception of necessary oscillation in the cycles of life? Prior waves of immigrants were wiped out by the Fomorians and illness, yet the Tuatha Dé survive. Can it be that this indicates that they are the first to successfully come to terms with this reality?

They defeat the forces of chaos in battle, as they manifest in a *specifically evil* way, i.e. Balor of the evil eye, and so forth, but they also realise that they need them to ensure the fertility of the land. Union and loss may be viewed as necessary oscillations. The soil itself is made from things which are dead and broken, crushed seashells, dead leaves, plants, and so forth. The death and rebirth theme contained in harvest myths world wide is well attested.

But it seems to me that the *Cath Maige Tuiread* goes beyond this. The beings most responsible for the defeat of the Fomorians are deities who partake of their chaotic power. The Dagda is generally depicted as benevolent, yet he is a figure of contrasts. Known by epithets that indicate great wisdom, he is also uncouth, called “The Rebirth of the World,” his club kills with one end and revives with the other.⁸⁷

The Morrigan, the “Great Queen,” sometimes referred to as wife of the Dagda is most often referred to as a war goddess, yet place names like the “Paps of the Morrigan,” refer to a more maternal aspect.⁸⁸ Her poem at the end of *Cath Maige Tuiread* does not indicate a love of chaos, but is a celebration of the return of order. “Peace up to heaven, heaven down to earth, earth below heaven, power in each, a cup very full, full of honey, mead in abundance, summer in winter...peace up to heaven.”⁸⁹

Most prominently, Lugh, a product of the union of Cian with a Fomorian woman, Ethlinn, is the only one who can slay Balor of the Evil Eye, his own Grandfather. He does so by utilising a one legged, one eyed trance posture. In essence, he does so by acting as a Fomoirian.⁹⁰

86 Gray, 1982, p. 69, par. 155-161

87 Gray, 1982, p. 49, par. 93, Green, 1992, 75

88 Carey, 1982-1983, p.274

89 Gray, 1982, p. 71, par. 166.

90 Gray, 1982, pp. 59-63, par. 129-136

SAMILDÁNACH

This is not the only time Lugh skilfully handled polarities. Gray gives several examples in her article on Lugh and Cú Chulainn. One relates to kinslaying.⁹¹ Lugh's father, Cían, was killed by his kinsmen, the sons of Tuirenn. Lugh learned what had happened from the earth where the murder occurred. Cían's murderers denied their guilt, but agreed to pay compensation. Lugh gave them a list of apparently innocuous items; three apples, seven pigs, three shouts on a hill and so on. Cían's murderer's were stunned to get off so cheaply, and happily accepted.

Then Lugh revealed that the items were magical treasures owned by formidable opponents. He intended to have these items for the battle against the Fomoiré, *and* have the murderers' lives in the process. He succeeded in blood vengeance, but got others to perform it, remaining free of the crime of kinslaying.

Gray contrasts this to the way Cú Chulainn fails to deal with a similar dilemma in a way that resolves the conflicts well. When he is faced with his son, whom he has bound by his own *geissi* in such a way as to create insoluble future problems, Cú Chulainn cannot gracefully resolve the contradictory demands of honour and kinship. When placed in a world where right and wrong merge, he is lost.⁹² Where Lugh fights fire with fire, Cú Chulainn burns.

The way Cú Chulainn dies is revealing. He dies in part because he cannot resolve polarities. It is *geis* for him to pass a hearth without eating some of the food and *geis* for him to eat dog. Of course, hags cooking by the road offer him dog.⁹³

This all seems to lead us to the idea that in Celtic tradition, effective power comes from being able to encompass polarities. Spiritual gnosis as well. The stanzas of early Welsh Gnostic Poetry resemble Zen koans. They present opposites and disparate images. Connections between elements in gnostic poetry are not rational, but relate more to "visionary or mystical experience."⁹⁴

Poems like, "Mountain snow, the stag is on the strand; / the old man misses his youth; / an ill countenance hampers a man," don't seem to invite a "solution," as much as invoke the same kind of contemplative space generated by a zen koan, a

91 Gray, 1989-1990, p. 46

92 Rees, 1961, p. 331

93 Rees, 1961, p. 327

94 Tymoczko, 1983, p. 10

space generated by the pull *between* polarities.

The diversity of materials in these poems would leave the audience with a sense of the intricacy of the world and the complexity of life, an idea of the enormous knowledge to be mastered and the difficulty of doing so. The world is easy to understand in its particulars, like each line of poem is easy to understand, but mysterious overall. By implication, the poet who could master the complexity and see the hidden patterns became mysterious himself.⁹⁵

Lugh stands as an example of one who successfully did so, a “super-shaman” of a golden age. He is a guarantor of cosmic order, as Cú Chulainn is, but fills the role more through skill than suffering. As master of all arts he is “equivalent to all the *áes dána* in Tara—who themselves represent the entire society.”⁹⁶ Lugh becomes the microcosm that *is* the macrocosm.

Cú Chulainn does so through his initiatory illness and restoration, yet he also shows the pitfalls of the path. A more human, through still discernibly shamanic figure, he struggles with the conflicts Lugh resolves with ease. As Gray suggests, “the ability to transcend conflict, reconciling the irreconcilable, marks the divine, as contrasted with the mortal within these myths.”⁹⁷

Lugh gives us the sense that ultimate power comes from the ability to hold *all* possibilities, to navigate the true course gracefully between good and bad, right and wrong, chaos and order. By encompassing the skills and powers of the Fomoiré and Tuatha Dé, the powers of this world and the Other, he presents an all skilled, and shamanic, ideal of sovereignty, wisdom and *dán*, co-creative power.

Shamanic cultures typically conceive of a golden age, where shaman’s powers were greater and their personalities stronger and better able to withstand the force of the spirits. Later generations of shamans demonstrate more frailties, more petty, personal issues, and less equanimity in their dealings with the spirits. Lugh, Cú Chulainn and later sources may reveal Celtic evidence of these ideas.

Most traditions acknowledge that remaining close to the sacred requires hard work and sacrifice. Like Finn chewing his thumb from bone to marrow, and

95 Tymoczko, 1983, p. 6

96 Gray, 1989-1990, p. 41

97 Gray, 1989-1990, p. 50

from marrow to inner marrow to access his *imbas*, illumination takes effort, and usually begins to come in a series of moments, not all at once and for good. Human frailties make the process difficult to sustain, perhaps more for the shaman than for others, because of the intensity of his contact with the Otherworld.

“Such an exalted and silent concentration of the divine is not easily borne. Withdrawing it from man is an ironic act of grace on the part of the gods:

*‘As a weak vase isn’t always able to receive it,
Only at intervals can man bear divine fulness.’*⁹⁸

THE SHAMAN AS GUARANTOR OF COSMIC ORDER

SHAMANIC CULTURES	CELTIC CULTURE
Shamans occupy a liminal, paradoxical role in that they are breakers and sustainers of boundaries	Figures such as Mis, Finn and Cú Chulainn are breakers and sustainers of boundaries
This liminal quality means they can fulfil a vital protective role in their community.	Cú Chulainn and Finn fulfil a vital protective role in their community.
In cultures such as the Kwakiutl, the shaman's descent into chaos in initiatory illness symbolises a return to the pre-cosmogenic chaos. Their restoration represents the emergence of order from chaos.	There is strong evidence that Mis, queen figures, and Cú Chulainn's descent into chaos in initiatory illness symbolises a return to the pre-cosmogenic chaos and that their restoration represents the emergence of order from chaos.
The shaman, in repeating creation's journey from chaos to order in his initiatory crisis, shows that order still flows from chaos. He becomes a living covenant between the worlds.	The use of the word <i>commairge</i> in the <i>Serglige</i> indicates that he is seen as a guarantor of cosmic order. Other figures seem to fulfil this role as well.
As the Kwakiutl <i>hamatsa</i> is the son of a chief or a chief himself, and acts as a guarantor of cosmic order, many kings or chiefs fulfil this shamanic role.	Celtic sovereigns like Cormac and Conaire fulfil the role of guarantor of cosmic order. Other features in their biographies are also shamanistic.
If the guarantor ceases to fulfil his role things descend into chaos.	When Conaire and Cú Chulainn cease fulfilling their roles as guarantors, things descend into chaos.
Themes of sacrifice and self-sacrifice are pervasive when one looks at the role of shaman as guarantor.	Themes of sacrifice and self-sacrifice are pervasive in Celtic tradition in relation to the shaman's role as guarantor.
The idea of the shaman as a living sacrifice to the gods is pervasive in shamanic cultures.	The idea that shaman's are living sacrifices to the gods is reflected in many Celtic sources.
The idea that shamans are dead in life, and alive in death, that they exist between states, appears in most shamanic cultures.	Shamanic figures such as Finn, Cú Chulainn, Marbán and others have qualities that suggest that they are somewhat dead in life and somewhat alive in death.
The idea of someone being a living sacrifice is symbolised in Indian tradition by the "sacred thread" worn by Brahmins.	It is possible that the idea of someone being a living sacrifice may be symbolised in Celtic tradition by the torc worn by druids and nobles.
Shamans are often thought to have power in part because they can hold polarities, they can encompass contradictory ideas and impulses.	Shamanic figures such as Lugh have power in part because they can hold polarities, encompassing contradictory ideas and impulses.

CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that there are many cosmological themes in Celtic sources that may pertain to shamanism. In this chapter, more than any of the others, I have had to cut much material due to space. I would have liked to include a great deal more exploration of the possible cosmology that Celtic shamanic figures may have acted as guarantors of.

Works on possible Celtic cosmological structures that I Believe would shed greater light on shamanistic themes include Sayers work on cosmological themes, Lyle's work on the "three strains of music," and their relationship to the year's structure, and Read's work on time and sacrifice in the Aztec cosmos.⁹⁹ Melia's work on Adamnán's initiation as "shaman saint," also seems to bear an interesting relationship with the shamanistic initiatory processes described in the *Kathopanisad*.¹⁰⁰

Shamanic themes of death and rebirth, the triple binding, three day burial and rituals such as the *Caerlin of the Mill Dust*, discussed in detail by MacilleDhuibh, are also important subjects for future research. Eliade's work on the shamanistic figure of Zalmoxis, a Dacian deity who undergoes ritual burial, will provide extremely useful comparisons with Celtic sources.¹⁰¹

There is clearly much further work to be done on Celtic cosmology and the shaman's possible role in it.

99 Sayers, 1985, 1986, Lyle, 1990, 1991, Read, 1998

100 Melia, 1983, Helfer, 1967-1968

101 MacilleDhuibh, 1993, Eliade, 1972



Figure 17

Odin as hanged man.

Stave Church of Hegge, Norway, (Courtesy of Universitetets
Oldsaksamling. Photograph by M. Blindheim.)

Puhvel, 1987, figure 10, p. 195

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

THE SHAMANIC BIOGRAPHY

I have diagrammed specific shamanic themes in the previous chapters, comparing them as they occur in Celtic cultures with the ways in which they appear in more generally recognised shamanic cultures.

Below, I look over the full biographies of shamanic figures in Gaelic culture to see how they relate to shaman's biographies in other cultures in twenty-two points of comparison.

Campbell has done much work in defining the stages of the hero's biography. Shamanic heroes generally follow this trajectory as well but I also include elements below that relate to shamanic functions.

Ó Cathasaigh has also addressed the question of the "heroic biography," with reference to the 1963 English translation of Jan de Vries 1959 work, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*.¹ He notes that the *Echtrae Cormaicc* corresponds to Campbell's "monomyth," which can be described as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.²

Below, I give shamanic biographies of Lugh, Cú Chulainn and Finn mac Cumail in outline form. I could easily do the same for Cormac (especially given Ó Cathasaigh's prior work), Conaire Mór, Óengus, Pwyll, Taliesin and various others, but in the interest of space, I have limited myself to these three. More details on each shamanistic element can be found in the chapter diagrams.

¹ Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, pp.3-7

² Campbell, Joseph, 1963, p. 30

LUGH

Lugh is the archetypal shaman in Celtic sources. Where the other figures below are more human shamanic figures, Lugh's biography is more that of the mythic shaman of the golden age.

SHAMANIC BIOGRAPHY	LUGH'S BIOGRAPHY
The future shaman's birth or conception may be unusual in some way.	Lugh's conception has supernatural features and represents the union of Fomoiré / Tuatha Dé polarities.
The shaman goes through initiatory illness.	There is no clear description of initiatory illness in Lugh's case—but that stage of Lugh's life is not described. He appears "fully fledged" at Tara.
Shamans may have a spirit spouse.	Lugh is associated with the sovereignty goddess.
The shaman goes through other training with humans and spirits.	There is also no clear description of this in Lugh's case—but again, sources do not describe that stage of Lugh's life.
The shaman gains powers through supernatural encounters. These may involve combats with spirits.	Lugh fights beings such as Balor. His adoption of a Fomoirian stance may imply his taking Balor's power.
Shamans win victories in these battles.	Lugh defeats Balor.
Shamans return from their adventures with the power to bestow boons on their people.	Lugh acts as king and uses his many gifts in the service of the Tuatha Dé.
Shamans have magical equipment.	Lugh is described with the vessel that gives sovereignty and other equipment in <i>Báile in Scáil</i> .
Shamans enter trance.	Lugh's use of a probable trance posture and his oracular role implies chance.
Shamans undertake spirit journeys.	Lugh has so many spiritual encounters it is difficult to tell which could be described as journeys. He is <i>in</i> many other people's spirit journeys, however.
Shamans may use their power to kill.	Lugh uses supernatural power to kill.
Shamans may use their power to heal.	Lugh uses his power to heal Cú Chulainn.
Shamans may use their powers to reveal.	Lugh is often in prophetic role.
Shamans may have spirit teachers.	Lugh acts as a spirit teacher, but there is no mention of him having one.

Shamans have totems with whom they are associated.	Ravens are particularly associated with Lugh. His name may mean "lynx."
Shamans may act as oracles.	Lugh is strongly associated with oracling.
Shamans may be thought to possess many or all skills by virtue of their possession by spirits and access to infinite power.	Lugh is called <i>Samildánach</i> , "All-Skilled"
Shamans are valuable to their people.	Lugh is seen as so valuable the Tuatha Dé attempt to prevent him fighting Balor in case he dies.
Shamans often act as a guarantor of cosmic order.	Lugh clearly acts as a guarantor of cosmic order.
The shaman may be seen as a living sacrifice to the gods, simultaneously dead and alive.	Lugh's one eyed trance posture may imply that he is simultaneously dead and alive.
Shamans are typically creatures of contradiction, occupying liminal roles.	Lugh has many liminal qualities.
The shaman becomes as a spirit.	Lugh is clearly a divine being who also possesses human qualities.

CÚ CHULAINN

To my surprise, Cú Chulainn probably has the most complete shamanic biography I have found in Celtic sources, from initiatory illness to his final death / not death. A cursory look at his stories would seem to reveal a standard warrior figure, however, closer scrutiny reveals a highly shamanic figure. It seems curious to say the least that one of the least obviously shamanic figures, not a druid or *filid* or king, presents such a perfect shamanic archetype when examined more closely.

This is clearly a topic for future research. At this juncture, I can only speculate on reasons why Cú Chulainn seems to be the archetypal Irish shaman. One reason might possibly be the very fact that he is a consummate warrior. If the hypothesis discussed at the end of the last chapter is correct, it might be that the person who could hold the most extreme polarities was seen as being the most powerful. Cú Chulainn is a great killer and a great enough healer that he can even heal a deity, the Mórrígan. Killing and healing are of course two of the most extreme polarities.

Another possible example of Cú Chulainn holding an extreme polarity may be the *ríastrad*. It is described as the most gory transformation possible, and no other Irish literary figure has a *ríastrad*. If this relates, as I discussed in the last chapter, to the idea of a shaman as one simultaneously dead and alive, we have another extreme polarity to add to the list—killer / healer, alive / dead. I could go on, but that is the gist of the idea.

Cú Chulainn also shrinks from absolutely nothing in the service of Ulster, even slaying his own son and dying himself. His bravery and self-sacrifice for the tribe could be seen as the supreme shamanic qualities. The shaman in many cultures is seen as a wounded healer, sacrificing himself for the people.

There are other possible reasons. As I noted in the introduction, I believe that tales may build up around historical individuals over time as a pearl grows around a bit of grit in an oyster.

Say Cú Chulainn was once a real person with shamanic powers, perhaps primarily a warrior like many Jívaro shamans. Over time, beginning within his own lifetime, various impressive stories might have begun to circulate about this tribal

hero. They might have incorporated elements of his Otherworld adventures and battles that he himself told.

After his death, such tales would continue to circulate and become increasingly exaggerated and mythic. Over time, stories of lesser known shamanistic figures might have been “hung on the peg” of Cú Chulainn. If nothing existed about a particular shamanistic figure other than say, one incident or story, it would make literary sense to add that incident to the corpus of Cú Chulainn stories.

Just as storytellers often bring immediacy and personal relevance to tales by saying, “and it happened right over there,” they might also have attached stories from various sources to Cú Chulainn, since the audience is always more keen to hear stories about characters they already know and love.

Those are a few possibilities, however if they are only that, and firmer conclusions will require a great deal more thought.

CÚ CHULAINN

SHAMANIC BIOGRAPHY	CÚ CHULAINN'S BIOGRAPHY
The future shaman's birth or conception may be unusual in some way.	Cú Chulainn is sired by Lugh in a three stage process unparalleled in Irish literature, suggesting that he may be Lugh's avatar.
The shaman goes through initiatory illness.	Cú Chulainn has initiatory illness.
Shamans may have a spirit mate.	Cú Chulainn has a spirit mate.
The shaman goes through other training with humans and spirits.	Cú Chulainn is trained by Scathách, a female of supernatural aspect.
The shaman gains powers through supernatural encounters. These may involve combats with spirits.	Cú Chulainn encounters and battles spirits repeatedly. He has more pleasant interchanges with Fand.
Shamans win victories in these battles.	Cú Chulainn wins many battles with supernatural beings.
Shamans return from their adventures with the power to bestow boons on their people.	Cú Chulainn performs many services to Ulster.
Shamans have magical equipment.	Cú Chulainn's helmet is magical
Shamans enter trance.	Cú Chulainn goes into trance.
Shamans undertake spirit journeys.	Cú Chulainn has many spirit journeys.
Shamans may use their power to kill.	Cú Chulainn uses supernatural, and supernaturally enhanced physical power to kill. In some ways he acts like a <i>berserker</i> , warriors known to practice shamanistic rites.
Shamans may use their power to heal.	Cú Chulainn heals the Mórrígan.
Shamans may use their powers to reveal.	Cú Chulainn perceives spirits during life and prophesies after death.
Shamans may have spirit teachers.	Cú Chulainn's charioteer, Lóeg, acts as a spiritual mentor at times, Lugh also takes on a mentor role when he replaces his son in battle.
Shamans have totems with whom they are associated. They may gain its power by consuming or killing it.	Cú Chulainn takes his name from the dog he killed. He is also associated by birthday with his horses.
Shamans may act as oracles.	Possession is implied in Cú Chulainn's <i>ríastrad</i> . He probably oracles Lugh in his instructions to the future king in the <i>Serglige</i> .
Shamans may be thought to possess many or all skills by virtue of their possession by spirits and access to infinite power.	Cú Chulainn has many skills, both of combat and the learned disciplines.

Shamans are valuable to their people.	Cú Chulainn is the champion of Ulster, and is seen as so valuable that the Ulaid try to stop him fighting on a couple of occasions in case he dies.
Shamans often act as a guarantor of cosmic order.	Cú Chulainn clearly acts as a guarantor of cosmic order. He is called a <i>commairge</i> , and things fall apart at his death.
The shaman may be seen as a living sacrifice to the gods, simultaneously dead and alive.	Cú Chulainn's <i>ríastrad</i> and continued effectiveness after death imply that he is not fully alive in life nor fully dead in death.
Shamans are typically creatures of contradiction, occupying liminal roles.	Cú Chulainn has many liminal qualities.
The shaman becomes as a spirit.	Cú Chulainn is called a <i>sirite</i> , shapeshifter, and other words used of spirits rather than humans.

FINN MAC CUMAILL

Finn mac Cumail's Shamanic qualities have been examined in detail by Nagy, as well as the shamanic qualities of the *bruidheans* he travelled to.

SHAMANIC BIOGRAPHY	FINN'S BIOGRAPHY
The future shaman's birth or conception may be unusual in some way.	Cumall, Finn's father, is <i>rigfennid</i> and has a magical bag, so Finn comes from a shamanic heritage. Finn is immediately fostered after his birth in the wilderness, and his mother, Muirne is shown as a liminal, ambiguous, being. In some stories of his birth, he is thrown or dropped in water, and emerges with a salmon, eel or both in his hands. ³
The shaman goes through initiatory illness.	Finn has many initiatory experiences which lead him into physical peril and a state of being symbolically semi-alive and semi-dead, but the initiatory illness is not as clear as in Cú Chulainn's case.
Shamans may have a spirit mate.	Finn has a son, Óisín, by an Otherworld woman.
The shaman goes through other training with humans and spirits.	Finn's training as <i>fénnid</i> in general has liminal, supernatural qualities. His apprenticeship to Fionn Éces also has supernatural elements. He also learns from Cuanna on an Otherworld journey.
The shaman gains powers through supernatural encounters. These may involve combats with spirits.	Finn battles the Fomoiré and other spirits. He gains imbas initially through contact either with the salmon of wisdom or by shutting his thumb in a <i>síd</i> mound.
Shamans win victories in these battles.	Finn wins various victories.
Shamans return from their adventures with the power to bestow boons on their people.	Finn acts in the service of his people.
Shamans have magical equipment.	Finn has Manannán's crane bag, formerly property of his father.
Shamans enter trance.	Finn goes into trance.
Shamans undertake spirit journeys.	Finn has many spirit journeys.
Shamans may use their power to kill.	Finn uses supernatural, and supernaturally enhanced physical power to kill.
Shamans may use their power to heal.	Finn can heal anyone who drinks water from his hands.

³ Nagy, 1985, pp. 88-98, 111

Shamans may use their powers to reveal.	Finn often reveals by using the <i>imbas forosnai</i> .
Shamans may have spirit teachers.	Finn is taught by Fionn Éces and also learns from Cuanna.
Shamans have totems with whom they are associated. They may gain its power by consuming or killing it.	Finn gains <i>imbas</i> from consuming the salmon of wisdom.
Shamans may act as oracles.	Possession may be implied when Demne gains the name Finn, which may be more of a title. When he eats the salmon of wisdom, his teacher Fionn Éces, told that the boy's name was Demne, says, "it is <i>you</i> who is <i>the</i> Finn in truth,"
Shamans may be thought to possess many or all skills by virtue of their possession by spirits and access to infinite power.	Finn is many skilled as <i>filid</i> , warrior, etc., and his name may derive either from <i>find</i> , bright, luminous, or <i>ro-finnadar</i> , all-knowing or very knowledgeable.
Shamans are valuable to their people.	Finn is considered valuable as <i>rigfennid</i>
Shamans often act as a guarantor of cosmic order.	Finn is a liminal protector of boundaries.
The shaman may be seen as a living sacrifice to the gods, simultaneously dead and alive.	Finn has qualities of being both alive and dead. After certain Otherworld experiences his body has a deathly chill. Self sacrifice is evident in his method of the <i>imbas forosnai</i> .
Shamans are typically creatures of contradiction, occupying liminal roles.	Finn has many liminal qualities.
The shaman becomes as a spirit.	Finn is in many ways like an Otherworld being.

I hope that I have proven that there are a wealth of shamanistic themes in Celtic literature and that the understanding of shamanism can be furthered by adding Celtic culture to the list of more generally recognised shamanistic cultures. I also hope I have shown that obscure points of Celtic myths may be elucidated by viewing them through a shamanistic lens, and the shamanistic worldview may well make the most coherent sense of primal Celtic spirituality as a whole and some elements of later Celti spirituality.

Last but not least, I hope that I have provided strong evidence that there were figures functioning fully as shamans in early Celtic culture, figures reflected in the later literature. I hope that this thesis may make it possible for a wider range of scholars from fields as diverse as Celtic studies, anthropology and psychology to research shamanic themes in Celtic tradition more safely *and* more soundly.

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Primary texts relevant to the study of Celtic shamanism are drawn from the following editions. The full details are under the editors' and translators' names in the Bibliography. I have also included the names of collections of primary texts used frequently.

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