

Tuatha Dé Danann: the supernatural community

With these mythopoeic dynamics in mind we will turn to the problem of the Children of Dôn, and more particularly that of their more fully represented Irish equivalents: the Tuatha Dé Danann. Can we regard these as euhemerised pagan cult figures? Or is their provenance more appropriately confined to medieval pseudo-history and epic narrative legend? If we can assert a definite pagan origin for this medieval literary complex, what can this add to our understanding of the pre-Christian belief system involved?

The first point to make is that – with some notable exceptions which will be discussed below – the names associated with the Tuatha Dé Danann are generally not represented among the theonyms attested in Gallo-Brittonic epigraphy. Nor are there any convincing correlates for notable Gaulish gods like Taranis, Teutatis or Esus within the Tuatha Dé Danann, or indeed anywhere else within the medieval Irish corpus.¹¹²³ Furthermore – but again with a small number of important exceptions – there is almost nothing in the way of archaeological or iconographic evidence for ‘the cult of the Tuatha Dé Danann’ anywhere in the Gallo-Roman or Romano-British world. This may lead one to question whether indeed these protagonists of medieval Irish tribal history ever did have a significant place within ‘pagan Celtic theology’, so far as such a phenomenon can be meaningfully discussed. At first sight, at least, the medieval and the ancient evidence would appear to reflect two quite different traditions – casting some doubt over the spurious unity of the ‘druidic’ religion throughout the pre-Christian Celtic-speaking world.

Against this, however, we have the direct testimony of the medieval literary record itself, which states on more than one occasion that the Tuatha Dé Danann were indeed worshipped in pre-Christian times – and continued to be credited with such supernatural potency that the Early Christian scribes were unsure whether their provenance was of heaven or earth. Moreover, it is safe to assume that the reams of metrical lore concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann recorded in medieval manuscripts (usually in the context of the *Lebor Gabála* corpus) were of essentially pre-Christian provenance. Although the scribes of Early Christian Ireland made impressive attempts to arrange their native tribal history into a quasi-biblical schema (see p. 69-70 etc.), there is little indication that figures such as Ind Dagda, Brigid, Balor or Lugh came from anywhere other than the Celtic pagan imagination.

1123 This trio of Gaulish gods received undue prominence due to their claim by the Roman writer Lucan that they represented the familiar trio of Jupiter, Mars and Mercury respectively. There is no evidence, however, that these theonyms were any more than occasional titles given to a number of different local tribal gods. Furthermore, there were numerous other Gaulish and British divinities elsewhere that were identified with these same classical deities. As we have suggested elsewhere, this *Interpreta Romana* rarely resulted in a precise equivalence. Most Celtic gods were not universal, function-specific entities but rather polyvalent, tribal figures who would have combined the roles of lightning god/progenitor, warrior and trickster/magician.

The Tuatha Dé Danann take the form of an extensive community of supernatural beings, apparently organised into a hierarchical network of client-relations and caste divisions that mirrored the social world of their human worshippers. As we have seen, they included both *deé* and *andeé*, who were represented as the artisans and the farmers of this community respectively. Within the former division we find a plethora of poets, blacksmiths, harpers, ‘cup-bearers’, druids, charioteers, warrior-champions, healers, braziers and poet-historians. These we might understand as the cult-figures associated with the specialised functions of society, which (in Iron Age and Early Christian Ireland) would have been closely associated with the warrior aristocracy. Some flavour of the fecund plurality of the lore relating to the Tuatha Dé Danann can be gleaned from this excerpt, recorded the Book of Leinster recension of the *Lebor Gabála*:

...the Eochu Ollathair, the great Dagda, son of Elada, was eighty years in the kingship of Ireland. His three sons were Oengus and Aed and Cermat Coem; the three sons of Dian Cecht, Cu, Cethen and Cian.

Dian Cecht had three sons, Cu, Cechten, and Cian. Miach was the fourth son though many do not reckon him. His daughter was Etan the Poetess, and Airmed the she-leech was the other daughter: and Coirpre, son of Etan was the poet. Crichinbel and Bruidne and Casmael were the three satirists. Be Chuille and Dianann were the two she-farmers.

Three sons of Cermad son of The Dagda were Mac Cuill, Mac Cecht, Mac Griene: Sethor and Tethor and Cethor were their names. Fotla and Banba and Eriu were their three wives.

Fea and Nemaínd were the two wives of Net a quo Ailech Neit.

Flidais, of whom is ‘the cattle of Flidais’; her four daughters were Argoen and Be Chuille and Dinand and Be Theite.

The two royal oxen were Fea and Femen, of whom are the Plain of Fea and the Plain of Femen called. Those were two faithful oxen.

Torc Triath was king of the boars, from whom is Mag Treitherne. Cirba was king of the wethers, from whom is Mag Cirba. Math son of Umor was the druid. Badb and Macha and Anand, of whom are the Paps of Anu in Luachar were the three daughters of Ernmas the she-farmer.

Goibiniu the smith, Luicne the carpenter, Creidne the wright, Dian Cecht the Leech¹¹²⁴

The fluidity of the tradition is evident from this excerpt, which might be compared with the passage quoted on pp. 461 above. While minor retellings caused distortions within these accounts that were altogether typical of an oral tradition, it is also clear the influence of an established canon was sometimes invoked (witness the uncertainty over the status of Miach, the putative son of Dian Cecht). But texts such as these display a marked preference for *inclusion*: leading to a multiplicity of local or parallel variants, which were often schematised into genealogical relationships, typically in the form of triadic groups. We might compare this with the mythopoeic dynamics of refraction and synthesis apparent from elsewhere within the Celtic-speaking world.

A further feature that might be described as typically ‘Celtic’ is the interpenetration between the human and natural worlds: the ‘king of boars’ and ‘the two royal oxen’ are represented amongst the roll-call of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, as are goddesses with intimate associations with the herds (‘the cattle of Flidais’), the landscape (the ‘paps of Anu’) or the island of Ireland itself (Fotla, Banba and Eriu)¹¹²⁵. We might also note at this stage a number of parallels with the medieval Welsh tradition. The form of the itinerary itself is echoed by the form, and to some extent the content, of both the court-list invoked by the hero in the eleventh century *Culhwch ac Olwen* and the task-list stipulated by his monstrous rival. In these lists we also find magical oxen (who are described as former kings magically transformed) as well as divine craftsmen, ploughmen and sorcerers similar to those associated with the *Tuatha Dé*. Precise cognates for *Math*, *Goibinniu* and *Torc Triath* feature prominently in the Welsh tradition, as of course does the grouping of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (= the dynasty of Dôn) itself.

Clearly, then, the Wales and Irish traditions had shared common ground even in the pre-Christian period.¹¹²⁶ This is worth remarking on, as the Welsh tradition was obviously more directly linked (by language and geography) to the Ancient Gallo-Brittonic world, and may well have preserved some vestiges of the cult legends underlying the epigraphy and iconography described on pp. 640 above. Indeed, there are signs that Wales may have become a leading centre of druidic learning, influential throughout the Celtic-speaking world. We hear of a druidic stronghold on the island of Anglesey, destroyed by the Roman army in the first century AD. We might also recall Caesar’s comment that Gaulish druids were sent to Britain for the higher grades of their training. Taking this evidence as a whole, we might see Wales, and Anglesey in particular, as a significant point of intersection between the insular and continental pagan traditions.

It was perhaps through Welsh channels that a small but significant group of figures from the *Tuatha Dé Danann* tradition find themselves represented in the ritual archaeology of the Gallo-Brittonic world, just as one particularly notable Gaulish god is represented in the insular literatures. An example of former tendency is represented by the Romano-British temple of *Nodens*, built on a prominent spur of land overlooking the Severn estuary, in the Forest of Dean area of modern Gloucestershire. *Nodens*, an otherwise fairly typical Romano-British god of the ‘warrior-healer’ type, is generally assumed to be identical to *Nuada/Nuadu* of the medieval Irish tradition (re: p. 154 etc.). Whether or not *Nuada* was originally thought of as a member of the *Tuatha Dé*, or whether he simply became integrated into their supernatural community over time (as seems to have been the fate of many cult figures in the pre-Christian Ireland, the Romano-British evidence leaves it beyond doubt that this was a being to whom prayers, sacrifices and ardent invocations would have been offered in the ancient world. The same was almost certainly true of at least some of the other members of the *Tuatha Dé*: including *Ogma* (for whom Gaulish parallel is attested in the form of *Ogmios*); *Ind Dagda* (a cauldron-bearing god of the *Succellos* type); and the goddess *Brigid* (undoubtedly related to the *Dea Brigantia* of Roman Britain).

1124 LG IV, §61-62

1125 All three are attested as names of Ireland

1126 It has been proposed that many of the evident ‘borrowings’ from the Gaelic tradition into the Welsh occurred in the Early Christian period, as a result of exchanges of written knowledge between scriptoria on either side of the Irish Sea. This was no doubt true in some cases (e.g. Welsh *siddi* = Irish *síd*), but it is equally likely there are other parallels between the Welsh and Irish traditions that can be explained by common (i.e. pre-Christian) origins.

Perhaps the most striking example of a pan-Celtic deity found within the Tuatha Dé Danann is Lugh Lamfada, equivalent not only to the Welsh Lleu Llaw Gyffes but also to the Lugus the ‘Gaulish mercury’, whose cult was amply discussed in Chapter 5, on pp. 498-502 above. Like his continental counterpart, Lugh was considered to be a master of arts and the originator of various cultural institutions. Although a more rounded figure than his identification with the Roman Mercury would tend to suggest, there is no doubt that this archetypal Celtic hero was generally depicted in a youthful form in both the medieval and the ancient traditions: an avatar perhaps of *Maponos*, the archetypal boy-god. His place at the heart of the ‘Oak-Lightning-Mistletoe’ complex indicates both his ritual background in the mimetic season drama of the proto-Celtic world, as well as his mythological significance as the patricidal hero at the heart of the King and His Prophesied Death scenario. Both of these aspects are visible, to varying degrees, in the extant recension of the Mabinogi.

Interestingly, the Irish tradition depicts Lugh (like his Norse counterpart Loki) as something of an outsider: a latecomer to the hall of the gods, of mixed tribal descent. He is represented in some sources as feuding with the three sons of Cermat son of Dagda: Mac Cuill (‘Son of Hazel’), Mac Cecht (‘Son of Plough’) and Mac Graine (‘Son of Sun’), a decidedly pagan trio who might be thought of as the representatives of some kind of autochthonous agrarian-sovereignty cult.¹¹²⁷ This mythological rivalry would thus reflect a time when the cult of Lugh had recently entered prehistoric Ireland (possibly with the influx of P-Celtic Gaulish tribes in the Late Iron Age)¹¹²⁸, and was still in competition with native practices such as that represented by the three sons of Cermat. If so, then it offers further evidence of the syncretic character of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and of Celtic pagan theology in general.¹¹²⁹

Another instance where this process of cult-integration is apparent through its partial incompleteness is the case of *Manannán mac Lir*, whose pre-Christian provenance we considered on pp.311 ff. above. Like that of Lugh, the cult of *Manannán* might well have been a relatively recent innovation on the religious landscape of the pagan British Isles, albeit one that almost certainly developed locally (being specifically associated as it was with the Irish Sea and the Isle of Man in particular). The relationship between *Manannán* and the *Tuatha Dé* is decidedly ambiguous in the medieval literature. In one late text he is represented as the over-king of the *Sídhe*, but also somewhat removed from the latter, abiding in his paradisaic island otherworld at Emain Aballach. In a number of ways his identity is conflated with that of Tethra, king of the Fomoiré and traditional enemy of the *Tuatha Dé*.¹¹³⁰ The earliest versions of the Lebor Gabala do not include him among the tribes of the Goddess *Danann*. It was probably only in the Early Christian era that this late pagan figure was retrospectively numbered within this mythological roll-call.

1127 These three grandsons of Balor were represented as consorts of the three ‘aspects’ of the sovereignty of Ireland: Ériu, Banba and Fotla.

1128 Little is known about this influx, the evidence for which is found in certain tribal names located in Ireland by Ptolemy (e.g. the *Menapii*) as well as the appearance of La Tène metalwork in the Irish archaeological record.

1129 Brian, Iuchabar and Iuchar (sons of Delbarth and Danann) are sometimes described by the medieval poets as ‘the three gods of Danu’. We know very little about this triadic grouping, but it might be assumed that they were the original ‘core’ around which the other elements of the *Tuatha Dé* accumulated.

The identity of a people in the pre-Christian Celtic-speaking world was defined by its local and ancestral gods, which were among the ‘three immovable things’ according to one early medieval Irish triad. But in contrast to the intolerant monotheism of a later age, there was never any sense that any one of these supernatural beings existed to the exclusion of any others. What mattered was rather the relationship of these gods to one another, representing as it did a codification of inter-tribal, inter-regional and inter-caste relationships of the world of their human worshippers. As new elements emerged in prehistoric Irish society (e.g. the Manx-based fishing communities who worshipped the god *Manannán/Manawydan*), these would need to be integrated into the existing meta-tribal schema. We can assume that the magico-legal task of defining and reworking these relationships was originally the province of a druidic priesthood. But the same work was continued to some extent in the Middle Ages by various poets, story-tellers and tribal historians whose intellectual culture we find reflected in works like *Lebor Gabála* and the *Mabinogi*.

It is interesting, but perhaps not surprising, to find a close association between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the *áes dáno*, the artisan class of Medieval Ireland. This connection exists most obviously at the level of homophony (*dáno* = Dana/Danann), but more significantly in the fact that the roll-call of the Tuatha Dé as they appear in Old Irish literature almost always seem to enumerate representatives of the same group of professions that are conventionally associated with the *áes dana* in the tracts of *brehon* law, i.e. poets, wrights, blacksmiths, braziers, jewellers, leeches, judges and druids.¹¹³¹ There is a sense in which this artisan caste (which would have included the bardic storytellers who composed the mytho-historical works under consideration) seem to have identified with the colourful yet faintly disreputable ‘tribes of the Goddess Dana’. For a group whose allegiances and activities must at times have placed them in an ambivalent relation with the dominant warrior aristocracy, as we can conclude was the case with the cultural faction behind the production of the *Mabinogi*, an affinity with this displaced yet magically-powerful mythical community would not have been inappropriate.

1130 Rees and Rees, p.39

1131 Druids are consistently mentioned in the Early Irish law tracts, suggesting that such a group continued to exist in medieval Irish society well into the Christian period, albeit with their status much reduced. Frustratingly, we know next to nothing about these medieval Irish druids. It has been suggested that they may have lived primarily alongside the *fiána* subculture of ‘brigands and satirists’ discussed on pp. 111, 117 above. See McCone, 1990, pp.203-232.