Masaryk University
Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

English Language and Literature

Lucie Duzbabová

Celtic Mythology in the Arthurian Legend
Master's Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: prof. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A.

2010

*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

..

Author's signature

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor prof. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A. for her patience and

kind help, as well as for her helpful suggestions and valuable advice.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The Arthurian legend is one of the most important texts in the English literary tradition. It is one of the core texts of medieval English literature and it is also considered to be one of the most powerful texts of the ancient times. Although its most popular version by Sir Thomas Malory called *Le Morte d'Arthur* was printed by William Caxton in 1485 it still attracts a wide readership not only from general public but from the academic circles as well all over the world nowadays. However, it is a story covered with certain mystery; although it has been subject of study of numerous scholars nobody has yet said with certainty whether it is a real story or pure fiction or whether it has its roots in ancient Celtic times or not. According to the legend King Arthur lived in Cornwall in the south-western part of Britain, the place with deeply rooted Celtic mythological traditions and therefore it can be assumed that Celtic mythology left some imprints on the legend. On one hand it cannot be said for sure that the legend has its roots in the pagan Celtic times for the historical records are scarce and often imprecise, on the other hand its Celtic origin cannot be utterly dismissed either for Celtic culture and tradition is deeply interwoven with the history and mythology of Great Britain and Ireland. Although we are not sure of the precise origins of the Arthurian legend there is high probability that it was influenced not only by Christianity but it can be assumed that it was to a certain extent influenced by the mythology of the Celtic people living on the British Isles as well.

The aim of this thesis is to find out whether there are some aspects, themes or symbols of the pagan Celtic mythology that appear in the Arthurian legend and if so, what role they play there and to what extent they influence the legend. Although the legend has been studied countless times by various scholars it has mostly been viewed from the Christian point of view and not much attention has been paid to the possible

Celtic aspects of the story. The legend will therefore be approached not from the traditional Christian point of view but from a less traditional Celtic perspective.

The first part of the thesis focuses on Celtic myths and mythology in general – it deals with the origins of Celtic mythology, the sources and the main themes of Celtic myths. It tries to identify their characteristics: what characters play important roles in them, what mood and atmosphere the stories have, what purpose the stories served and what was their place in Celtic society. Apart from focusing on the texts only, the first part of the thesis deals with the cultural aspect of Celtic mythology as well. It explores the everyday world of the Celts, it shows the origin of Celtic people, their customs and traditions as well as their everyday life and beliefs, which are then reflected in their mythology. The second part of the thesis explores the Arthurian legend and its relationship and connection with Celtic mythology. It focuses on the origins of the Arthurian legend as well as on the historicity of King Arthur and the appearance of the mythological elements in the story.

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on the world of the Celts on the British Isles. It explores the way people in the Celtic times lived, how they made their living, what were the main elements of their cultural and artistic life as well as the main aspects of their beliefs and traditions. The way people live is mirrored in their mythology and literature, and therefore it is important to obtain some information about the way of living of the Celtic peoples before studying their mythology.

The next two chapters deal with Celtic mythology in detail. The third chapter deals with Irish mythology, it shows its themes and motifs as well as the division of the stories into four cycles. The Mythological Cycle contains the earliest Irish myths and describes the first settlement of Ireland. The Ulster Cycle is connected with the province of Ulster and the stories in this cycle are mostly related to the Irish mythological hero

called Cú Chulainn. The next is the Fionn Cycle which is likewise connected with a hero, this time Fionn mac Cumhaill and his men. And finally there is the Kings Cycle focusing on the Irish kings and rulers from different historical periods. The fourth chapter focuses on Welsh mythology, its characteristics and main motifs. The Welsh mythological stories that survived to our days thanks to the work of Lady Charlotte Guest, who translated them into modern English in the nineteenth century, can be found in a collection called *the Mabinogion,* which is dealt with in detail in the fourth chapter.

The following chapter is devoted to the Arthurian legend itself. It explores the origins of the legend and it also focuses on the historicity of King Arthur, tracing him back to the ancient times. Some later adaptations and interpretations of the legend are mentioned in the chapter as well.

Finally, the last chapter deals with the Celtic elements and their role in the Arthurian legend. First it focuses on the roles Christianity and Celtic mythology played in the time of the creation of the Arthurian legend and then it tries to give an answer to the question of the Celtic origin of the legend and focuses on the location of particular Celtic elements in it.

2. Celtic Mythology

Before dealing with Celtic mythology in greater detail, let us consider the word mythology itself. What is it? What does it mean? And why was it so important for the ancient civilizations and why does it still attract the attention of today's researchers as well as lay men? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* mythology is "A body or collection of myths, especially those relating to a particular person or thing, or belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition". In other words it is a collection of mythological stories that tell us something about certain group of people and their culture. Mythology, or the study of myths thus gives us a better picture of the ancient people and their cultures, for myth is "the fundamental form of all knowing, all consciousness" (Brantlinger 29). The study of mythology of a nation can reveal the essential beliefs of the people, their lifestyles, customs and traditions. It is also closely related to any peoples' history and so it is part of the cultural heritage of every nation. Therefore if one studies the history and culture of a nation, one should start with its mythology.

But before we plunge deeper into the study of Celtic mythology it is important to find out first something about the origin of Celtic people, about their everyday life as well as their beliefs and traditions which will help us better understand the stories themselves.

2.1 The World of the Celts

The ancient Celtic world and its culture have always attracted attention of various scholars as well as of the general public. When people hear the word Celtic they usually connect it with such words as mystery and spirituality. As the modern world becomes more commercialized and globalised, the world "Celtic" becomes more and more

popular as well as is the whole Celtic culture. It has already begun at the turn of the last century when the Celtic revival took place especially in Great Britain and Ireland where many people became interested in the Celtic traditions and art as well as in the old Irish literature and poetry . Even today, and especially in the last few decades, the interest in Celtic culture and way of life has been undergoing a kind of revival and rebirth.

The Celtic heritage is still alive in many inhabitants of today's Europe, especially in the parts of the world where the Celtic people used to live and where their culture took the strongest roots such as in some parts of central Europe, in France or in Great Britain and in Ireland where some people still keep using some of the ancient Gaelic languages. The traces of Celtic culture can be found across the whole of Europe for their culture once spread from the Iberian Peninsula to what is modern Turkey. But do we really know whose culture are we celebrating and reviving? Who were the often idealized and modernized Celtic peoples? Do we know where they came from, what they looked like, how they lived or what they worshipped?

2.1.1 The Origin of the Celtic People

The Celtic people transmitted most of their wisdom and stories orally and therefore did not leave many written records about their culture and way of living behind them, however, some answers to the questions concerning their origin and culture can be found in archaeological material and research as well as in the records of ancient Romans and Greeks who were their trading partners and who had the chance of observing their way of life during the invasion of the British Isles. Some of the important Roman sources of our knowledge about the Celts are for example the works of Herodotos, Strabo and most importantly the *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* by Julius Caesar. Finally, a lot of information can be found in the myths and legends of

Celtic people that were found especially on the British Isles and in Ireland. However, it is important to note, as Anne Ross in her work *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* points out, that "much of the literary evidence from which we derive a great deal of information about the Celtic past, was written down in Ireland, at a post-pagan period, under the aegis of the Christian Church" (17) and therefore we cannot be sure about the original form of the myths which might have been slightly reshaped in order to suit the needs and requirements of the Christian period. Due to the scarcity of materials it is nevertheless one of the only few sources of our knowledge about Celtic mythology and culture so we have no other option than to assume their veracity.

The Celts were the inhabitants of the iron-age Europe as well as one of the earliest inhabitants of the British Isles and Ireland. They were usually quite tall fair-haired warriors whose original homeland could be found in the central-European area close to the rivers Rhein and Danube whose name, as James MacKillop in his book *Myths and Legends of the Celts* mentions, was probably derived from the name of the Celtic goddess Danu (11). Later, they moved all over Europe, they settled in Gallia which is today's France and Belgium, some Celtic tribes settled in the Iberian Peninsula and some went even as far as Anatolia in West Asia, which was known as Galatia. Due to the German and Roman expansions around the turn of the millennium the Celts were forced to move further northwards until they remained only on the British Isles and in Ireland. The roots of Celtic civilization can be found as early as around 2000 B.C. but the Celtic people as we recognize them today appeared sometime around 500 B.C. Although some archaeologists claim that we should not speak about Celts before 600 B.C., which is when the La Tene period started and from which there is archaeological evidence of the existence of some Celtic cultural centres. Some historians, however, claim that some Celtic footprints can be found even earlier, around 800 B.C. in the so

called Hallstatt period. The heyday of the Celtic culture is dated between 500 B.C. and 100 B.C. when they were probably gradually replaced by the migrating Germanic tribes as well as by the Romans. The latest evidence of Celtic peoples can be found around 500 AD in some parts of Ireland where, due to the relative isolation of the island, Celtic tradition and culture survived the longest; even relatively long after the continental Celts were conquered by the Germanic and other tribes but then in the fifth century AD when Christianity became fully established on the British Isles as well, the older pagan traditions were gradually forgotten (Clarus 13-18).

2.1.2 Celtic Society

The Celts did not belong to one united nation, and as Anne Ross in her book *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* says: "we are dealing with a scattered barbarian society, not a great nucleated ancient civilization" (16) such as the Greeks or the Romans were; instead, the Celts were distributed among many tribes which even fought each other. The tribes were united only by similar languages belonging to the Indo-European language family and common cultural background. They were great warriors as well as traders; they traded iron, salt, wool and leather with Etruria, Greece as well as with Rome. They had their own silver and gold coins based on the Roman model. The Celts were also quite technologically advanced; they knew how to work with iron so that they could produce better weapons as well as tools and their use of various advanced technologies in agriculture such as the plough made it possible to farm heavier soils so they could farm more land than their ancestors in the past (Rolleston 18-19).

As it has already been said the centre of the Celtic society was the tribe with the family as its central unit. Unfortunately, not much is known about the family

organization and life of the Celtic people. What is known is that the tribes were united into separate kingdoms which were ruled by the kings. According to Nora Chadwick there were five main kingdoms that correspond to the modern parts of Ireland: Ulster, Leinster, Munster, Connaught and Meath (114). The king was believed to be a godlike figure and therefore was very carefully chosen. His initiation was accompanied by various rituals. He for example had to put on the king's coat and when it fitted him he could become the king or he had to touch the so called stone of the fate which allegedly screamed when the right person touched it (MacKillop 84). The initiation ritual of the Celtic kings will be described in greater detail in the third chapter. Although women enjoyed quite a high status in society the king was always of male sex. When he was too old or unable to rule for another reason he was often sacrificed. As Anne Ross points out: "The failing, ageing king would probably meet his death in a ritual manner before the loss of his powers could affect the fertility of his domain" (161).

The society was divided into three main social classes; the druids, bards, historians, physicians as well as artists and skilled craftsmen belonged to one class, aristocracy, warriors and landowners belonged to another class and the common people together with small farmers constituted the last and lowest class (Ross 44).

The Celtic warriors were very brave and warfare was a common preoccupation of the Celtic peoples. One of the interesting things is that it was not uncommon to find some women warriors and rulers among the men which can be illustrated on the examples of the queens Medb and Boadicea (Chadwick 115-116). Celtic women in general were said to be very brave and they had quite high position and rights in the everyday life as well. It was for example common for a woman to divorce her husband, she had also the right to retain all her possessions which she brought to marriage (Mauduit 115). According to Jan Filip a Celtic man could have more than one wife but

only one wife could be the main one (94). If a man had a concubine in his house, his wife was absolved from her guilt of any violent deed except murder for the period of the concubine's stay while the concubine could hurt her only with her nails (MacKillop 96). Moreover, "if the death of a man awoke suspicion, his wife was interrogated and brought to judgement" (Filip 94). However, all in all women enjoyed quite a high status in the Celtic society if compared for example with women in other historical periods.

The Celts were not only traders and warriors; they were also great artists and spiritually oriented people. Among the artistic objects that were found during archaeological excavations can be found jewellery, ornamented weapons or various ritual objects and vessels of which the best-known is probably the Gundestrup cauldron found in Denmark in 1891. The main motives of the Celtic artworks were various geometric ornaments such as spirals that according to Ingeborg Clarus could symbolize either the sun or the woman's cycle (Clarus 42), other important motifs in Celtic art were animals or Celtic gods and goddesses. An interesting fact is that the figurative depiction of Celtic deities had not appeared until the arrival of the Romans. The reason for this, according to J.A. Mauduit, was the fact that the Celtic people considered the anthropomorphic representation of gods as their degradation (165).

The Celts were very spiritual people and the gods and goddesses influenced their life in many respects and therefore the next section will be focused on the role of religion in the life of the Celtic peoples especially on the British Isles.

2.2 The Role of Religion and Mythology in the Life of the Celts

Thanks to the practice of the Celtic priests, known as druids, not to write down anything connected to religious practices or rituals, not many historical records survived to these days. Most of the records and information we have nowadays come either from

the archaeological findings or from the Romans who invaded the British Isles around the turn of the millennium. Although these materials were not written by the Celts themselves, they serve as a rich source of our knowledge of the religious and spiritual life of the Celtic people. Another source from which the information connected to religion and mythology can be taken is the Irish and Welsh vernacular literature written by poets and bards from which a lot can be learned about Celtic beliefs and deities as well.

From all the above-mentioned sources it can be assumed that religion, mythology and spirituality played an important role in the life of the pagan Celts. The Celts were highly spiritual people for whom religion and mysticism had their roles in the everyday life. Said in the words of Anne Ross "the everyday life of the Celts included the supernatural equally with the natural, the divine with the mundane; for them the otherworld was as real as the tangible physical world and as ever-present" (174). The importance of the connection of the world of gods and goddesses with the human world can be clearly seen in Irish as well as in Welsh mythology.

The most important figure in Celtic religion was the priest called druid. Druids were sometimes more important than the king or they were at least thought of being of the same importance on the social ladder. Druids were highly educated people who had spent up to twenty years studying before they were able to perform their duties. Apart from their being the wisest and the most educated people in the village as well as the propagators of the religious ideas; their post included other responsibilities as well. The druids were also the judges, arbiters and educators of the young generation. The basic principles of their teachings according to J.A. Mauduit were to be brave, to worship the gods and not to do wrong to anybody else (159).

The Celtic people were closely tied with the natural world that surrounded them as well as ruled their lives all year round. Their religion was therefore closely connected with nature as well. The rituals were performed usually on the sacred places in the open air in sacred groves, at pools, rivers or under a well-grown tree. There were not many temples or shrines built on the British Isles until the arrival of the Romans. The druids as well as the common people preferred natural sanctuaries over the man-made ones. Celtic people often worshiped not only gods and goddesses as we imagine today, but they also worshipped trees, rivers, hills and various animals, especially birds. As J.A. Mauduit says: "The Celts were rural people. [..] They practised the religion of the soil. They venerated wells, mountains as well as trees" (130)[1]. The most sacred tree was oak, especially an oak with some mistletoe. Mistletoe was a special plant for the Celts and it was often used during religious rituals as well as for medical purposes. It was for example believed that it cured infertility. Not only plants but animals as well played an important part in the Celtic world. Some of the most important animals that were connected to certain gods and goddesses were the horse, dear, boar, dog, snake and salmon and from birds they were above all water birds such as ducks and swans. (Green 81-89).

Another important part of the Celtic spiritual world was the world of the dead. Celts took death as an inseparable part of life and so likewise, they did not separate the world of the living from the otherworld. The otherworld was often located on an island, and it could be entered through a certain cave, a lake or through bogs. During the Samhain festival on the 31st October the border between the two worlds disappeared and it was possible for people to enter the otherworld and the beings from the otherworld could visit the human world too. The otherworld thus became an inseparable part of this world

---

[1] My translation

and therefore it often appears in Celtic mythology as well. The Celts buried their dead in burial mounds and because they believed in some form of life after death they placed in the grave also various objects the dead could use in the otherworld; these included various vessels, jewels, food as well as weapons or sometimes even chariots. (Green 106-111).

The Celtic year was divided into four parts which were in correspondence with the seasons as well as with lunar cycles. The year began, unusually for us, in November with the festival of Samhain when the dead were commemorated. The beginning of the year was in this time of the year because the Celts believed that although on one hand the year-long cycle ends on the other hand it can be viewed as a beginning of the new cycle with the seeds founding their sprouts and everything in nature preparing and gathering strength for a new beginning. The next important festival was Imbolc, celebrated on the 1st February. It was connected with the arrival of spring and with new vital energy as well as with the birth of lambs and fresh sheep milk. The so called dark part of the year was thus ended. During the following festival, Beltaine, which was held on the eve of the 1st May, people celebrated fertility and purified their cattle by driving them between the flames of two fires. This festival was also connected with the first pasture of cattle and symbolized the beginning of something new; the light part of the year began. The last important festival of the Celtic year was Lughnasa probably held in honour of Lugh, the god of the sun. It was held on the 1st August and it was a celebration of the crop similar to modern harvest festivals (Clarus 72-74). Although these were the four most important festivals in the Celtic year, there could be found many other important days such as spring and autumn equinox and summer and winter solstice which were important for the Celtic people as well and are just another example of the interconnectedness of the Celtic people with the natural life cycle.

The Celts did not worship and celebrate only the natural forces, plants and animals but they had a pantheon of their gods and goddesses as well which is sometimes compared to the Roman one. The pantheon was quite complex and not very clearly organized so that sometimes two or even three gods are blended together and it is quite difficult to distinguish them from each other. Moreover, many gods are mixed with their Roman counterparts, which makes it even more difficult to differentiate them. The whole of this work could have been devoted only to the study of Celtic gods but this is not the main theme of the thesis, therefore only the main figures and their spheres of influence will be mentioned here.

The Celtic people venerated both male gods as well as female goddesses. The male gods were usually connected with individual tribes while the female goddesses had usually closer connections to the natural powers and fertility. As far as our knowledge is concerned there were three main male gods: Taranis, Teutates and Esus. Taranis is the god of the skies. He is symbolized by the lightning and is accompanied by an eagle. According to Ingeborg Clarus he is sometimes also equated with Ogmios, the god of spoken word who is often represented as an old man followed by many people who are connected to his tongue by golden chains (28). Ogmius is also regarded as the inventor of the Celtic script ogham. Teutates is a tribal god that cares about the well-being of his tribe, he is also connected with war and is symbolized by a ram. Esus is often depicted as a woodcutter with an axe and is therefore connected with land, trees and wood, he is often seen together with the mistletoe leaves and is thought to have some connection with the otherworld. There is also Dagda, a universal tribal god whom the Celtic peoples are believed to be descended from. Dagda is also called a "good god" and is often mentioned in connection with Morrígan, the goddess of warriors whom he mates with. He is also connected to the goddess of the earth. Another important god is

Belenus, the patron of health and healing or Cernunos often depicted with dear antlers on his head. (Clarus 28-33).

The Celtic goddesses are usually depicted as being triadic, which is generally quite common practice in the Celtic tradition. In the Celtic lands the cult of the mother-goddess was very strong as it was quite common with all ancient peoples. One of the main goddess-figures is Brigit, the patron of the healing wells as well as the blacksmiths. The other three often mentioned goddesses that can change into one another and blend into one triadic figure are Ériu after whom Ireland got its name, Banba and Fódla. There is also the raven-goddess of war called Medb and Epona, the goddess of horses, mules and donkeys (ibid.).

These gods and goddesses often appear in the mythological stories in which they can be seen side by side with the mortal people whom they help as well as cause harm, they also sometimes mate with the ordinary people and have offspring with them which then often has heroic future such as in the case of Cú Chulainn, the main hero of the Irish Ulster Cycle, which will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter focusing on the Irish Celtic mythology.

3. Irish Mythology

It has already been said in the previous chapter that mythology is a collection of myths. But what does the word myth mean? What functions or purposes does it serve in human history and literature? And how does it differ from legend? Before dealing with Irish mythology in greater detail let us first consider the words myth and legend and their different meanings for they will often appear throughout this work so their meaning should be made clear.

Myth often means different things to different people, but most often it is connected with something non-existing that is made up and therefore is not true at all. People also often interchange the meanings of the words myth and legend. *The Oxford English Dictionary* says about myth that it is: "A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon". According to Miranda Green myth deals with the basic ontological questions connected with our existence, its reasons and what happens after death (7). Legend, on one hand is similar to myth in its meaning, but its function is rather different. It does not explain or give answers to anything; it is rather an account of a Saint's life or a hero's deeds. The definition of legend given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is following: "A collection of saints' lives or of stories of a similar character" and/or "An unauthentic or non-historical story, esp. one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical". Although these two terms should not be confused there are still many overlaps in their usage and they are often used interchangeably. To put it simply, legend often focuses on one person only and serves as a kind of historical record of his or her life and deeds, such as the Arthurian legend does, while myth presents rather explanations of complicated matters

such as the origin of the world or the changing of day and night. Myths gave the ancient people at least some answers to the questions about their existence and about the natural phenomena they could not otherwise explain.

Irish myths rank among the oldest literary pieces in Europe; the oldest Irish literary works originated in the times of Celtic settlement in Ireland. They were transmitted orally and represented the whole world of the Celtic people. They represent a rich source of our today's knowledge about Celtic beliefs, values or their system of gods and goddesses. What is typical of early Irish literature and storytelling is its "tension between reality and fantasy" (Gantz 1). Close relation to nature and natural elements as well as close relationship to the supernatural are also typical features of ancient Irish literature. Another thing typical of Celtic mythology is that it did not have a written form, and all the stories were transmitted orally for the druids did not write anything down despite their knowledge of the ogham writing. The stories started to be written down only after the arrival of Christianity in the sixth and seventh centuries AD by literate monks and scribes in monasteries. Although the scribes made some mistakes and sometimes, influenced by their religious beliefs, misinterpreted or changed some passages of the stories, their work is invaluable for the study of Celtic mythology. Unfortunately, due to the invasion of the Viking raiders in the eighth and ninth centuries, only few of the original manuscripts younger than AD 1100 survived (Gantz 20). The manuscripts that survived to our days are above all *Lebor na hUidre* (The Book of the Dun Cow), *the Book of Leinster*, *the Yellow Book of Lecan* and *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (The Book of Invasions), which date mostly from the twelfth century and include the most important Irish myths (MacKillop 19-20).

The whole collection of the Irish mythological stories has been divided by scholars into four so called cycles. The first cycle is called the Mythological Cycle and deals

with the historical invasions of Ireland and the arrival of the first inhabitants to the island. The central role of this cycle belongs to Tuatha Dé Danann or the people of the Goddess Danu, a group of early Irish inhabitants with divine characteristics. The second cycle is called the Ulster Cycle according to the Irish province of Ulster where most of the stories take place. It deals less with the gods and goddesses and focuses instead on the life and deeds of a superhuman hero called Cú Chulainn. The third cycle is the so called Fionn Cycle focusing on the deeds of the warrior Fionn mac Cumhaill, his son Oisín and their companions. Although this cycle was not much recognized until the twelfth century it has managed to survive among the popular Irish storytellers to these days replacing thus the previously better-known stories of the Ulster Cycle. The last part of Irish mythology is represented by the Kings Cycle (or the Historical Cycle) which records the lives and deeds of the historical Irish kings. It should be noted that this division into cycles is modern and artificial to a certain extent, for, as Jeffrey Gantz points out, the ancient storytellers grouped the stories according to different criteria than modern scholars. They preferred to group the stories rather "by type – births, deaths, cattle raids, destructions, visions, wooings" (Gantz 22) so that they could remember them more easily. The stories of individual cycles thus do not represent one continual story but they often rather tend to blend together, the motifs repeat in several stories and the protagonists often appear in several different stories as well.

The Irish mythological stories have survived to our days mainly thanks to the work of Lady Gregory, an Irish dramatist living at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who translated the myths from old Irish into modern English. W.B.Yeats comments Gregory's contribution to Irish literary heritage in the preface to her collection of myths in the following way: "I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps […] it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland;

for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world." to which he later adds that "Lady Gregory has done her work of compression and selection at once so firmly and so reverently that I cannot believe that anybody, except now and then for scientific purpose, will need another text than this […]" (Yeats in Gregory 331). The work of Lady Gregory is invaluable for she not only made the myths more popular among the readers, but what is more important, she also helped to preserve them for future generations. In the following sections of this chapter we can thus take a closer look at the individual cycles and the stories they contain.

3.1 The Mythological Cycle

The Mythological cycle is the first of the four cycles and contains the earliest Irish myths. The Irish, in contrast to other nations, did not have any myth about the creation of the world which usually represents the basis of a nation's mythology and which is the essential myth. The situation in Irish mythology (and in Celtic mythology in general) is different: the Celts did not have any world-creation myth; instead they created a collection of myths describing the invasions of their island and the arrival of the first inhabitants. This collection of the oldest Irish myths is commonly known as the Book of Invasions or *Lebor Gabála Érenn* in old Irish. Most of the stories focus on the godlike people of the goddess Danu or Tuatha Dé Danann who represented the fifth wave of invaders coming to the island.

There were six successive invasions altogether at the end of which the island was inhabited by the Celtic ancestors of today's Irishmen. In the first invasion came a woman called Cesair, a granddaughter of Noah who fled from the Near East with fifty other women before the Flood. After her death Partholon and his men came to the island; after their arrival they cleared four plains and in addition to this seven lakes

appeared in the countryside. Not only did Partholon's people have to fight the demonic Fomhoires but they also have to begin with the crafts and customs on the island. They brewed the first beer, had their first teacher and first doctor and started the breeding of cattle. Finally, they all died of the plague. The next invaders were led by Nemhedh after whom they were called the Nemedians. Similarly to the Partholans, they also had to fight the Fomhoires and during their time they cleared twelve other plains and four new lakes appeared. After the death of Nemhedh they continued to fight the Fomhoires but they were defeated and after the fourth unsuccessful battle they fled the island. Some of their descendants joined the following wave of invaders known as the Fir Bholg people. They divided the country into five provinces and introduced the concept of kingship. The next invaders who came to the island and fought and defeated the Fir Bholg in the First Battle of Magh Tuiredh were the Tuatha Dé Danann. These godlike people skilled in magic and druidism brought with them four talismans: Lia Fáil or "the stone of fate" which shrieked when the right king sat on it, the sword of Nuadu which could not be defeated, the magic spear of Lugh which was the guarantee of victory and finally the cauldron of Dagda which could feed any number of people. The cauldron is probably the most important of all four talismans for its motif appears at several places in both Irish as well as Welsh mythologies. Moreover, there is a possibility that it served as an inspiration for the Holy Grail of the Arthurian legend which will be focused on more in the last chapter.

Tuatha Dé Danann fought two important battles, in the First Battle of Magh Tuiredh they defeated the Fir Bholg and the in the Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh they faced the Fomhoires whom they finally defeated as well. There were several important figures among the Tuatha Dé Danann that appeared in both battles and thus should be

mentioned here. They often correspond with the old Celtic gods and goddesses and appear in the stories throughout the whole Mythological Cycle (Mac Cana 57-58).

They are Dagda, the warrior, and leader of Tuatha Dé Danann, who is known for his cauldron and his gigantic club with which he marks the border between provinces. He could be the Celtic counterpart to the northern god Thor (MacKillop 167). The next is Bóand, the goddess of the river Boyne and the lover of Dagda who becomes the mother of Óengus Óg, the god of youth, love and poetry. Manannán mac Lir is the god of the sea and is sometimes connected with the Isle of Man. Next comes Nuadu (Nuadu of the Silver Hand) the former king of Tuatha Dé Danann and husband of the goddess Bóand. When he lost one of his arms he could not be the king of his people any longer and was replaced by Bres. Later his arm was replaced with an artificial silver one and he regained his sovereignty. He is also the owner of the magical sword, which is one of Tuatha Dé Danann's talismans. Ogma is another important figure of Irish mythology for he is the patron of poetry and eloquence and the inventor of the ogham script. Donn is another god of Tuatha Dé Danann, the god of the dead and ruler of the otherworld; he is sometimes confused with Dagda. Finally, the last person that will be mentioned here is Goibniu, the godlike blacksmith and patron of Irish handicrafts (MacKillop 167-171).

As has been said earlier Tuatha Dé Danann fought two battles at Magh Tuiredh both of which are recorded in the earlier Irish myths preserved to our times. The First battle was fought against the Fir Bolgh who did not want to share the rule over the island with the new-coming Tuatha Dé Danann. The second battle was against a worse adversary – the Fomhoires. As the Second Battle of Magh Tuiredh belongs among the core stories of Irish mythology it will be briefly described here as well (Mac Cana 58-59).

Tuatha Dé Danann were ruled by the wise and rightful king Nuadu, but after he lost one of his arms in the First Battle of Magh Tuiredh he could not be the king any longer

and had to leave his place to Bres who was of noble birth but it turned out that he was completely unsuitable for the king's throne. In the meantime Nuadu got a new silver arm and could become king again and replaced Bres, who wanted to get the throne back and decided to look for help at the Fomhoires' side where his grandfather Balar 'of the baleful eye' lived. Balar's eye was so big that he needed four men to raise his lid so that he could open the eye whose gaze could destroy a whole army of men. Nuadu was finally helped by Lugh, the master of all crafts and second grandson of Balar. Nuadu made him king of the country and leader of his army. During the battle against Fomhoires, Lugh armed with a sling, drove Balar's eye through his head so that he cast a destructive glance on his own people and Fomhoires were thus defeated and expelled from the country forever (Gregory 47-53).

After the last battle Tuatha Dé Danann ruled the country for some time until the arrival of the Milesians. Although the Milesians were common people, they managed to replace the Tuatha Dé Danann on the Irish throne and started to rule themselves. They are said to have arrived from Spain and were probably the historical predecessors of the Irishmen. After their arrival in Ireland they met three goddesses: Ériu, Banba and Fódla each of whom wanted the island to be called after her. Finally the Milesians chose Ériu whose name has been used for the island until these days. After victorious battles over Tuatha Dé Danann they started to rule over the island and the godlike Tuatha Dé Danann decided to leave the sphere of mortals forever and left for the underground. It is believed that they live under hills and mounds called *sídh* which serve as the entrance gates to their "fairyland" (MacKillop 175-180). Later, the word *sídh* started to be used as another name for the Celtic otherworld.

3.2 The Ulster Cycle

As the title of the cycle already suggests, the stories in this cycle focus on the Irish province of Ulster, whose king is Conchobar, and its relationship with the neighbouring province Connacht, which is ruled by the queen Medb. This cycle is also closely tied with the life and heroic deeds of Cú Chulainn whose name appears in several stories of this cycle. This part of Irish mythology bears thus some characteristics of the heroic literature so popular in the Middle Ages. The cycle is also connected with the names of Conall Cernach and Fergus mac Róich. There are also some important godlike women figures: Macha, Badb and Morrígan, whose common feature is that they can act as one or as three persons. They are also connected with certain animals, Macha with horses and the other two with ravens (Green 37).

The cycle begins with the story *The Labour Pains of the Ulaid and the Twins of Macha* (Gantz 127-129) explaining the name of Emain Macha, the king's seat. It is connected with one of the appearances of Macha, the goddess of horses. In the story she appears as the divine wife of Crunniuc. She is an excellent runner and when her husband boasts about her special ability among other men, although she begged him not to do so, they ask her to prove the truth of it and although she is pregnant she has to take part in a race against the king's horses. After her victory she gives birth to twins. Before she dies in the labour pains she curses all men of Ulster that in the hardest of times they will suffer from labour pains for five successive days and nights. The only exceptions from the curse are women, children, her husband and Cú Chulainn. The place where she died was later named Emain Macha (emain meaning twins in old Irish).

The story of Macha shows certain resemblance with the Welsh story of Rhiannon, the wife of Pwyll. Rhiannon is also connected with horses; she is an excellent horsewoman and afterwards she is accused of the murder of her newborn son she has to

sit at the court's gate every day and carry the visitors from the gate to the castle on her back like a horse. She does not die like Macha but she suffers a lot and when her son is finally found she calls him Pryderi which in Welsh means "the end of my trouble"[2].

The attention is then turned to the life and deeds of the superhuman hero Cú Chulainn. This "invincible hero to whom fate ordains a short life with lasting glory" (Mac Cana 101) is the offspring of the god Lug and Deichtíne, the sister or daughter of king Conchobar. His birth and boyhood are described in stories called simply *Birth of Cú Chulainn* (Lady Gregory 319-342) and *Boy Deeds of Cú Chulainn* (Gregory 342-350). There is an interesting story connected with the hero's name.

Cú Chulainn was originally called Sétanta and he got his new name in the following way: One day he was visiting a blacksmith called Cullan who had a dog guarding his house. When Sétanta came to the house the dog did not want to let him enter so the boy killed him. Cullan was disconsolate because of his dog's death and when Sétanta saw him, he offered to bring up a new dog for him and fulfil the duties of the dog himself in the meantime. Because of his willingness to undo his deed he was called Cú Chulainn (Cullan's dog) (MacKillop 235).

Later Cú Chulainn leaves for Scotland in order to be trained at Scáthach who teaches him the art of fighting. He does not only learn the art of fighting but he also learns the art of loving despite the fact that his future wife Emer is waiting for him at home. During his stay in Scotland Cú Chulainn conceives a child with one of Scáthach's adversaries, an Amazon called Aífe (or Aoife). The son is called Connla and it is Cú Chulainn's fate to fight with his own son face to face in the future. This fight between the two of them, from which Cú Chulainn comes out as a winner, is described in the story *The Only Son of Aoife* (Gregory 519-523).

---

[2] See also 4.1.1

The most important story of the whole cycle, however, is *The War for the Bull of Cuailnge* (or *Táin bó Cúailnge*) (Gregory 439-479) in which Cú Chulainn plays a significant role as well. The story begins with king Ailil and his wife, queen Medb, quarrelling over the fact who owns a better bull. The ownership of cattle was a sign of wealth in the pagan times, therefore, the better the cattle, the greater the wealth of its owner. When Medb finds out that Ailill has the white-horned bull Findbennach among his cattle, she gets angry and decides to get another bull, the brown bull Donn, for herself. Donn lives in Ulster and is owned by Dáire mac Fiachna who does not want to give it to Medb. She therefore decides to get it by force and the war between Connacht and Ulster begins. Cú Chulainn stands alone against the Connacht's army for the other men are, because of Macha's curse, unable to fight for five days and four nights. Cú Chulainn is a very skilful warrior and defeats Medb's men quite easily. He is also helped by his godlike father Lug, who guards him for several days and nights so that the hero can have some rest. Finally, the decisive fight comes in which Cú Chulainn has to fight against Ferdia, his friend and colleague from Scáthach. It is sometimes referred to as *The Fight at the Ford* (Neeson 105-135). Both men had sworn never to fight against each other; however, there is no other option for there is no other warrior as skilful as Cú Chulainn and Ferdia is the only one who can face him because they were both trained by Scáthach. They meet at a ford where they fight for four days. At the end of each day Cú Chulainn sends medicaments to Ferdia who sends him food in return. On the fourth day Cú Chulainn uses his lethal weapon Gae Bulga and kills Ferdia. The fight between Ulster and Connacht thus ends with the victory of Ulster. Donn, the bull of Ulster, has, however, fled to Connacht where he meets and fights the white-horned Findbennach. They fight the whole day and night and finally Donn kills Findbennach and runs with his remains on his horns back to Ulster. However, when he reaches home,

his heart splits and he dies as well. Thus the war between Ulster and Connacht ends and peace is made between the two kingdoms.

Another tale of the cycle is called *Death of Cú Chulainn* (Gregory 531-541) and tells the story of the hero's death. Cú Chulainn dies because of three reasons. One of the reasons is his trespassing of a certain prohibition (*geis*), the second reason is the revenge of his enemies and the third is the magic of his enemies' allies. In one of his battles Cú Chulainn killed a magician Cailitín whose wife gave birth to six children who got educated in magic. They are determined to revenge their father and are joined by Erc and Lugaid, both of whom also lost their fathers thanks to Cú Chulainn. Cailitín's children cast a magic spell over Cú Chulainn, who thinks that the country is in danger. On his way to his stronghold, he is stopped by three witches who offer him roasted dog. His refusal would be a trespass of a common prohibition, known as *geis*, not to refuse any offered food, however, by eating the dog with them he trespasses one of his own *geis*, not to eat dog's meat. Violation of any of these prohibitions means a disaster, in this case his own death. When he approaches the stronghold, at first his coachman is killed, then Cú Chulainn's horse and finally Cú Chulainn himself is mortally wounded. He goes to the nearby lake where he washes his body and then ties himself to a pillar stone so that he can die standing. Nobody dares to approach him for three days after which Morrígan in the shape of a crow sits on his shoulder and confirms thus his death. Later, Lugaid cuts off his hand and head both of which are taken to the capital of Temaira. With the death of its main hero the Ulster cycle comes to its end as well.

3.3 The Fionn Cycle

The third cycle of Irish mythology is called the Fionn Cycle, and it is the best-preserved and most voluminous cycle of all four, in addition to this its stories are still

alive in the fairy-tales and in the Irish story-telling tradition. The main heroes of the cycle are Fionn mac Cumhail with his men, his son Oisín and his nephew Caílte mac Rónáin. As Proinsias Mac Cana says the Fionn Cycle "is still a world of heroes [like the Ulster Cycle], but one formed in a different mould and conditioned by different temper of thought" (106), later on he adds that "the stories of the Fian are more akin to the mythological tales than are those of the Ulster Cycle" (109). The tales in this cycle do not focus only on the heroic deeds of Fionn and his men, the Fianna, as it was more or less the case with the Ulster Cycle where all the attention was concentrated on Cú Chulainn, they also show a close relationship with the natural and supernatural world as well (Clarus 137).

Fionn's men, known as the Fianna, are excellent hunters and warriors. The membership of the group was not hereditary and the prospective member of the group had to undergo a very challenging entrance exam. According to Proinsias Mac Cana the applicant had to fight with other nine men while standing up to his waist in the ground and having only a shield and a hazel stick to defend himself. Then he had to run through the woods with his hair braided which had to remain so till the end of the race, moreover, no dead branch could crack under the runner's feet. Then he had to jump over a bough as high as his forehead and run under one as low as his knees. And finally he had to be able to draw a thorn from his foot while running without changing his speed (108). If the applicant was able to do all this, only then was he admitted as a member of the Fianna.

Fionn's birth and childhood are described in the story called *The Coming of Finn* (Gregory 117-123). He was the son of Cumhall and Muirne who was a daughter of Nuadu, the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann. His father was killed in the battle against the sons of Morna and so young Fionn was for security reasons brought up secretly in the

woods by a druid Bodhmall who taught him the love of nature and trained him for a skilful hunter and warrior as well. He gets his name, similarly to Cú Chulainn, only later in his life.

As a young boy he went to the poet called Fionn who was waiting for a Salmon of Wisdom for it was prophesised that he would become immensely wise after he eats it. When young Fionn (called Demhne at that time) brought the salmon to his master, he told him that he had sucked his burnt finger. The wise poet than told the boy that his name would be Fionn and that it was he who was destined to eat the salmon. Later, whenever Fionn wants to summon his special skills he starts to suck his finger (MacKillop 265).

Fionn was, like Cú Chulainn, who was born on the same day as his two horses, often connected with animals, especially with his two faithful dogs, Bran and Sceolan. These were in fact his two nephews. Also his wife Sadbh met Fionn for the first time in the shape of a hind into which she was enchanted by a Dark druid whom she refused to love. When Fionn took her to his home she changed into a beautiful woman and they got married. However, after some time, the druid came again and took Sadbh with him in the shape of a hind again. She gave birth to a child whom Finn found in the woods some time later and who got the name Oisín (a fawn), and later became one of Fianna's best fighters and poets (Gregory 126-128). Here, the motif of the transformation of a human being into an animal appears again, which once more illustrates the interconnectedness between the world of Celtic people and the natural world.

Oisín appears in the story called *The Call of Oisín* (Gregory 288-290) in which he does not resist the temptation of Niam, daughter of the king of Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth. She takes him to her land and marries him. After some time, however, Oisín, although happy with his wife, longs to visit his homeland and meet his father and

peers. He does not know that since the time he left with Niam three hundred years have elapsed. Niam is sad for she knows that they will never see each other again and warns him not to step on the ground in Ireland. Oisín leaves her and when he comes to Ireland he not only does not find his father or his peers, but he also helps some men to raise a large stone during which he touches the ground and immediately becomes a three-hundred-year-old man and dies soon after that.

As has already been said in one of the previous chapters dealing with the Celtic society and religion, the otherworld played an important role in the Celtic life. The motif of the otherworld, here called Tír na nÓg or the land of eternal youth appears in Celtic mythology quite often. The Celts thought of the otherworld as a natural part of their own world which could be entered at several places on special days such as on Samhain. The Celts believed in the immortality of souls and so the idea of a world of the dead neighbouring with their world was an important concept for them which will be further seen as well in the next chapter dealing with Welsh mythology.

Another story in this cycle is concerned with Diarmaid and Gráinne and their unhappy love (Gregory 232-267), "the most beautiful and best-known story of the Fionn Cycle" (MacKillop 274). On the night of her betrothal feast Gráinne meets Fionn, her future husband, for the first time. When she sees him and realizes that he is much older than her, she feels disappointed and decides to act. She gives a sleeping potion to all men present, except Diarmaid whom she persuades to elope with her. Diarmaid, loyal to his master Fionn, does not want to leave at first but later agrees and they flee together to the woods. Diarmaid builds a dwelling there where they can hide before Fionn's men come. When they arrive the lovers manage to escape with the help of Óengus Óg, the god of poetry. They have to flee further till they get to Scotland where they live for some time. One day Fionn is on a hunt for the boar of Ben Bulben, the enchanted half-

brother of Diarmaid, who was predestined to kill Diarmaid, near their place and Diarmaid, in spite of his *geis* not to hunt boars, joins Fionn and his men. Diarmaid tries to kill the boar, but before he brings the animal down, he is seriously wounded by it. He asks Fionn to help him with a draught of water from his hands for Fionn was known to be able to heal people with the water taken by his hands. Fionn intentionally delays his help and so Diarmaid dies before the water reaches his mouth.

The cycle ends with the death of Fionn who, similarly to Cú Chulainn, dies because of the violation of one of his *geis*. One version of the story says that Fionn once jumped over a gorge after which he could spend a night with a fairy called Athmaith. Later, she told him that each year he will have to jump over the gorge again and thus show his strength, and if he does not make the jump, he will break the *geis* and die. When he feels that his days are coming to the end, he goes to the gorge once again to try if he still has enough strength to rule his men. Before he jumps he is given a horn with a drink and the witch that gives it to him tells him that this is his last drink. Fionn then jumps and ends in the abyss where he dies and thus the Fionn Cycle comes to its end as well (Clarus 182-183).

3.4 The Kings Cycle

The last part of Irish mythology is the so called Kings Cycle describing and focusing on "the activities of the 'historical' kings" (Gantz 22). The word historical is put into inverted commas because some of the kings are not historically documented at all and some of them are documented only vaguely. There is not, however, one king figuring in all the stories but it is rather a collection of stories about different kings from different historical periods. The cycle is therefore sometimes called the Historical Cycle. Some of the kings that play quite an important role in the mythological tales of this cycle are for

example Conn Cétchathach, Niall Noígiallach or Brian Bórama (better known as Brian Boru) (MacKillop 76).

The king, always a male, was almost a divine figure in the Celtic society for he could perform certain things that no one else could do. Therefore, in order to become a king the king to-be had to undergo a series of initiation procedures before he could sit on the throne. Not only had the king to be of a good origin and standing, he had to be physically fit, generous and without criminal history, and he also had to comply with the initiation ritual.

It consisted of two parts; in the first part the future king had to ride in a chariot and if he failed he could not become the king, then he had to wear the royal cloak which had to fit him, and after that he had to ride in a chariot between two stones which were only a hand's breadth away from each other. If the stones let him pass he could become the king, and finally he had to touch the Lia Fáil or "the stone of fate" which vocally indicated the right king. The second part of the ritual was the bull-feast at which a bull was killed and the future king had to eat its flesh and drink its broth after which he went to sleep wrapped in the bull's skin. He was then chanted by four druids and while sleeping he should see the man who would become the next king (Mac Cana 119).

The king ruled in a certain region called *tuath* (kingdom) and he lived in Temair (Tara). The quality of his reign was reflected by the state of his kingdom. According to Proinsias Mac Cana the rightful king had to "ensure peace and equity, security of the kingdom's borders, and material prosperity: the trees bend low with the weight of their fruit, the rivers and the sea teem with abundance of fish, and the earth brings forth rich harvests" (119). Therefore, if the king was wounded or too old, he could not ensure the well-being of his country as well as a healthy young ruler could and so he had to be replaced. This could be illustrated by the example of Nuadu, the king of Tuatha Dé

Dannan, who after losing his hand in a battle had to be replaced by Bres. Nuadu could return to the throne only after he was given a new silver hand from the physician and god of healing Dian Cécht (MacKillop 168-169). Moreover, the rightful king also had to wed his kingdom and be united with the sovereignty of the part of the country over which he ruled, this could be the goddess of earth or a personification of Ireland (MacKillop 89).

The sovereignty was often an old repulsive hag who when kissed became a beautiful young lady giving the man who kissed her the right to become the king. One of the examples can be the story of Niall Noíghiallach, the alleged founder of the Uí Néill dynasty. One day he and his brothers went hunting and when they were looking for some water they met a hideous hag who promised to give them water when one of them kisses her. One of the brothers, Fiachra, gave her a small kiss but then came Niall who not only kissed her but offered to sleep with her as well. The hag got immediately transformed into a beautiful young woman, the sovereignty of Ireland. She not only gave Niall the water but she also foretold him that he would become the king of Ireland and his family would reign for several successive generations (MacKillop 92).

The sovereignty of land was always represented by a female goddess who could appear either as a beautiful woman or an old ugly hag as was the case in the above-mentioned story. According to Proinsias Mac Cana "nowhere was this divine image of sovereignty visualized so clearly as among the Celts, and more especially in Ireland"(94). He also adds that the sovereignty is "primarily concerned with the prosperity of the land: its fertility, its animal life and […] its security against external forces" (ibid.). Here, again, in the character of the sovereignty the close relationship between the Celtic people and the natural world is expressed. Thanks to the importance of the goddess of sovereignty for the Celtic people together with her appearance of an

ugly hag, it has been suggested by some scholars, one of whom is also Roger Sherman Loomis, that the goddess of sovereignty could have served as an inspiration for the Bearer of the Grail in the Arthurian legend.

As it can be seen from the preceding pages the range of themes and motifs of Irish mythology is wide with some motifs repeating in several stories. One of the favourite themes in the Irish myths is the transformation of a human being into an animal, which is common in Welsh mythology as well. This happens for example in such stories as *The Fate of the Children of Lir* (Gregory 103-113) in which the children of Lir were enchanted by their stepmother into swans or in the *Wooing of Étaín* (Gantz 37-59) in which Étaín is transformed first into water and then she was turned into a worm and finally into a scarlet fly by a jealous wife of her lover Midir. Animals and nature in general play an important role not only in the everyday life of the Celtic people but naturally in their mythology as well. Very popular is the motif of cattle, which is typical for Irish mythology and which appears in many stories with *The War for the Bull of Cuailnge* (or *Táin bó Cúailnge*) (Gregory 439-479) being the most famous one. Other popular animals often appearing in various stories are dogs, swans and other birds, horses, salmon and insect. From the natural scenery, the most important part is played by the sea which was the primary source of livelihood for the inhabitants of Ireland, rivers appear also quite often in the myths as well as the hills that served primarily as the entrance gates to the Irish otherworld. The otherworld appears in several myths as well, the most well-known is the story *The Call of Oisín* (Gregory 288-308) which was already described in this chapter. Another important motif not only in the Irish myths but in Celtic mythology in general is the cult of the head for the Celts believed that the head was the centre of power and it was therefore considered the most important part of the body. Warriors often took the heads of their dead enemies and used their skulls as

drinking vessels or as talismans (Clarus 49). The head of a dead man sometimes had special abilities such as the head of Sualtim in the story called *The Awakening of Ulster* (Gregory 479-492) in which he goes to Emain Macha in order to bring some men to help Cú Chulainn and when he gets there he accidentally falls on his shield and cuts his head off. Although cut off, the head still calls for help: "Sualtim's shield came against his own head, and cut it clean off […] and the shield dragged after him by its own thongs, and Sualtim's head in the hollow of it, and the head said the same words as before […]" (Gregory 484). Other common motifs that appear in Irish mythological stories deal more or less with everyday events and things such as marriage, fights, cheating or the celebration of the deeds of a hero.

The motifs appearing in Irish mythology are often similar to the motifs and themes found in the mythology of the Welsh Celts, which will be discussed in the following chapter. The connections between Irish and Welsh mythology and the Arthurian legend as well as the role of motifs and symbols from the mythological stories in the legend will be explored further in the final chapter of this work.

4. Welsh Mythology

Welsh mythology is in many respects similar to Irish mythology, yet in some respects it retains its own characteristics. It is not as extensive as the Irish mythological heritage nor is it as well-documented. The old Welsh scribes started to transcribe the myths later than their Irish counterparts and therefore the oldest Welsh manuscripts originate in the eleventh or the twelfth century, that is some five centuries later than the Irish mythological tales. The Welsh material was influenced by the spread of Christianity as well as by the growing popularity of the new genre of the chivalric romance which later replaced the mythological tales altogether. As Ingeborg Clarus remarks: "While the Irish myths still pulsate with the Celtic and pre-Celtic spirit and do not fear any violence or exaggeration, the *Mabinogi* is already touched by the whiff of the beginning of the chivalric age"[3](187). The relatively late documentation of Welsh myths can be ascribed to the unsettled situation in Wales, which was occupied first by the Romans around 78 AD and then in the fifth and sixth centuries by the barbaric tribes of Angles and Saxons who drove the native inhabitants to the Welsh woods and valleys isolating them thus from the other inhabitants of the country. The Welsh were also often attacked by the Picts from the north and the Irish from the west (Jones 2000, 6-8). The theme of travelling often appears in Welsh mythology in general, and it is probably a reflection of the situation of its inhabitants who have to flee before their invaders: "The Welsh folk-tales in *The Mabinogion* often refer to the constant coming and going between Wales and Ireland" (Jones 2000, 8).

Other themes that often appear in Welsh mythology are similar to the themes that could be found in Irish mythology as well. One of the recurrent themes is the transformation of a human being into an animal. This can be found in numerous tales

---

[3] My translation

such as *Math, the Son of Mathonwy* (Guest 80-107) in which Math, lord of Gwynedd has to have his feet in the lap of a virgin, and he is permitted to leave it only in the case of a war. His nephew Gilfaethwy falls in love with Goewin, his foot-holder and with the help of his brother Gwydion starts a war between Math and Pryderi so that Gilfaethwy can take hold of Goewin. When Math returns and learns about it, he marries Goewin and enchants the two brothers into animal shape; they have to live as a stag and a hind for one year, as a wild boar and a wild sow for another year and the third year they have to live as a pair of wolves. Each year they have an offspring which Math turns into human shape and gives them animal names symbolizing their close relationship with nature. This interconnectedness of the human and the natural world is for Celtic mythology typical in general. Animals play an important role in the mythological narratives; the most typical animals in Welsh mythology are above all the swine, horses, dogs and birds such as owl or eagle.

Another common theme of the myths that appeared in Irish mythology as well is the celebration of a hero's deeds, in this case the deeds of Pwyll in *Pwyll, Prince of Dyved* (Guest, vol. III 11-38) in which Pwyll spends a year in Annwn, the Welsh otherworld where he helps its king Arawn to get rid of his enemy and as a reward, can be called the king of the otherworld himself. Another hero whose life and deeds are described in the stories is Kulhwch (or Culhwch) in *Kulhwch and Olwen* (Guest, vol. II 63-115) in which he has to complete a series of tasks Olwen's father set him before he could marry his daughter. He is helped by magic and also by Arthur and his men.

Another theme that appears in Welsh mythology is the kidnapping of little children soon after their birth. This happened for example to Rhiannon, the wife of Pwyll and her son Pryderi who disappeared immediately after he was born as well as to godlike

Mabon, known as the 'Divine Youth' who was taken from his mother Modron ('The Divine Mother') only three days after his birth (Mac Cana 32-33).

The magic cauldron is another motif that is common for Celtic mythology in general. It appears in the story of *Branwen, Daughter of Llyr* (Guest, vol. III 39-60) which can be found in the second branch of the *Mabinogi* and which will be dealt with later on. This tale also contains the motif of a living and speaking head which was described in *The Awakening of Ulster* (Gregory 479-492) in the previous chapter.

Finally, the motif of the supernatural forces and gods helping or causing harm to the mortals is also present in most of the stories studied in this chapter.

4.1 *The Mabinogion*

The most important source of Welsh mythology is the collection known as the *Mabinogion.* The tales found in this collection come from an old oral tradition and were recorded only in the late eleventh and early twelfth century by "a talented author who was [nevertheless] less interested in preserving sources than in producing an effective piece of literature" (Mac Cana 18). The unknown author had, however, a formidable task of creating the collection from scarce and scattered mythological material which was not an easy task to do and it has to be admitted that although the stories may contain some of his inventions, they are still the only extant source of our knowledge of Welsh mythology.

The copies of the texts of the *Mabinogion* have been preserved in two manuscripts dating back to the fourteenth century; the *White Book of Rhydderch* (about 1325) and the *Red Book of Hergest* (between 1382 and 1410). The texts were translated into English by Lady Charlotte Guest in the nineteenth century. There are twelve stories altogether that are more or less mutually interconnected and arranged into four parts

called branches. The four branches consist of four main stories of *Pwyll, the Prince of Dyved*; *Branwen, the Daughter of Llyr*; *Manawyddan, the Son of Llyr* and *Math, Son of Mathonwy* all of which are more or less connected with the character of Pwyll and his family (MacKillop 306-307).

The origin and meaning of the name *Mabinogion* has been a subject of dispute among the Celtic scholars which resulted in several possible theories. One of them, proposed by James MacKillop, says that the name is derived from the old Welsh word *mabynogyon* which could mean the stories about the godlike Mabon (MacKillop 306). Another theory says that it is derived from the word *mab* meaning a boy or a child and that the stories should be accounts of a hero's childhood (Procházka 438) which seems to be quite unlikely. Another theory, seeming to be the most probable of all, was suggested by Jiří Konůpek in the epilogue to the Czech edition of the *Mabinogion*. It explains the name *Mabinogi* as being derived from the name used for the assortment of tales the applicant for the position of a bard, called *mabinog* had to know by heart (Vilikovský 144).

The use of the terms *Mabinogion* and *Mabinogi* has also been debated among authors and scholars dealing with Welsh mythology. It has been finally agreed that it is possible to use both terms, although some authors use only the term *Mabinogion*, while others tend rather towards the term *Mabinogi*. In this work both terms will be used: when the whole collection of Welsh mythological stories will be referred to, the term *Mabinogion* will be preferred and when the attention will be turned to the individual branches of Welsh mythology, the term *Mabinogi* will be used.

4.1.1 First Branch of the *Mabinogi*

The first branch of the *Mabinogi* consists of stories connected to Pwyll, the prince of Dyved. The story of Pwyll consists of two almost unrelated parts. The first part focuses on one of the common motifs of Celtic mythology which is the co-existence and cooperation of the world of the mortals with the otherworld and their mutual relationship.

It begins with Pwyll hunting when he meets a strange pack of dogs chasing a hind. The dogs are all white with red ears - a typical sign of the beings from the Celtic otherworld. Pwyll tries to scare the dogs away when a stranger approaches and introduces himself as Arawn, the king of Annwn, the Welsh otherworld. He then asks Pwyll if he wants to exchange their kingdoms for a year and help him to get rid of his enemy Hafgan. Pwyll agrees and so the kings exchange their appearances and kingdoms for a year. After that time Pwyll kills Hafgan and both kings can return back to their own kingdoms. As a reward for his service Arawn gives Pwyll the title of the king of the otherworld (Guest, vol. III 11-38).

This part of the story deals mainly with the themes of the otherworld and its relationship with the world of the mortals. This theme, as has already been shown in the previous chapters, was one of the most important ones in Celtic mythology in general. Celtic people certainly believed in some form of life after death which is naturally reflected in their mythology. The Celts believed that the world of mortals cannot exist without the otherworld and vice versa. As Ingeborg Clarus points out, ghosts sometimes need the help of a mortal being and mortals learn the true meaning of their being through the contact with the inhabitants of the otherworld (189). This view is further supported by Andrew Welsh who in his article *Doubling and Incest in the Mabinogi* argues that Pwyll is in fact a double of Arawn, the king of the otherworld, and that

through meeting with Arawn, "Pwyll [is brought] together with a better aspect of himself" (352) which helps him "to hold to the rule of a better self" (ibid.) for Arawn had shown him that he could be a better ruler than he was before.

This better self is also symbolized by a test he is not aware of and that is to remain chaste while living in Arawn's kingdom and not to have intercourse with his wife for the whole period of his stay. Pwyll resists any temptations and remains restraint, as far as the queen is concerned, for the whole time. It can be argued, however, that this was a later artificial addition made by the Christians, for as Ingeborg Clarus suggests, the concept of marital chastity and chastity as such was not spread among the pagan Celtic people at all (Clarus 189) and it therefore could not be taken as a symbol of personal virtues by the Celts themselves. The restraint probably symbolizes the absence of fertility in human sense in the otherworld (ibid.)

The second part of the first branch tells the story of Pwyll, his wife Rhiannon and their son Pryderi. It begins with Pwyll again, this time sitting on the magic hill of Arberth which was known as a place where one could see miracles. While sitting there he sees a beautiful woman riding a horse. She is called Rhiannon and nobody is able to catch up with her. Later it turns out that she came to meet Pwyll and ask him to marry her. He readily agrees and they have a wedding feast a year later. There are, however, troubles to come. At first Rhiannon cannot get pregnant and later, when she gives birth to a child it disappears the very night after its birth. Rhiannon is unhappy and in addition to her grief she has to be punished for the alleged murder of her child of which she was accused by her maids. Her task is to sit at the gate of the castle and to offer every newcomer to carry him on her back to the castle.

At a different place in Wales lives a man called Teyrnon who has a mare that gives birth to a colt every year on the first of May. But every time the colt disappears nobody

knows where to. One night when Teyrnon watches over the mare the colt disappears again and he finds a little boy instead. He takes care of him and after some time the boy starts to remind him of Pwyll. Teyrnon takes the boy to the castle and it turns out to be the lost son of Pwyll and Rhiannon. The son is given back to his parents, and he is given the name Pryderi (the end of my trouble)[4] for this was what Rhiannon uttered when she saw him for the first time: "'[…] the boy is the son of Pwyll, 'said Teyrnon. 'I declare to Heaven,' said Rhiannon, 'that if this be true, there indeed is an end to my trouble'" (Guest, vol. III 36).

This part of the story turns the attention away from the otherworld and focuses more on the world of the mortals instead. However, some elements of the supernatural and magic appear in it as well. The magic can be found in the opening scene when Pwyll sits on the hill of Arberth where he meets Rhiannon. Such hills were not only the places inhabited by fairies but they could also be the entrance gates to the Celtic otherworld opening to the mortals usually on Beltene (1st May) or Samhain (1st November) so people could meet with the beings from the otherworld (Clarus 190).

Rhiannon is one of the otherworld beings; a brilliant horsewoman faster than anyone else who tries to catch her. Therefore, she is often connected with Epona, the Celtic goddess of horses and fertility. Epona became known on the British Isles only after the arrival of the Romans in 43 AD but her cult spread quickly in the Celtic environment where horses were widely used and worshipped as well (MacKillop 47). The connection between Rhiannon and Epona can be illustrated on the following examples as suggested by Jessica Hemming in her essay *Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in "Pwyll"*. The first reason for Rhiannon's connection with horses and eventually with Epona is that she is a splendid horsewoman who, although riding quite slowly cannot be

---

[4] The Welsh expression is *vy'm pryder i* = my trouble (Guest 36)

caught by another rider; then, after being accused of her child's murder, she has to sit at the court's gate and carry all visitors to the court on her back like a horse and finally, her son is probably abducted by the same creature which steals Teyrnon's colts and is found in a stable together with the last colt stolen from Teyrnon (Hemming 20).

4.1.2 Second Branch of the *Mabinogi*

The second branch of the *Mabinogi* called *Branwen, the Daughter of Llyr*, focuses on the life of the family of Llyr, especially its three members: the giant Bendigeidfran (or Bran), his sister Branwen, and their brother Manawydan. The story begins with the marriage of Branwen and the Irish king Matholwch. At their wedding feast Efnisien, the half-brother of Branwen, mutilates Matholwch's horses for he does not agree with the marriage. Matholwch gets angry and Bendigeidfran gives him new horses and a magic cauldron as a sign of their friendship and good relationship. The cauldron is magical for it can bring to life warriors killed in a battle. This is proved later in a battle between the Irish and the Welsh caused by the ill-treatment of Branwen on Matholwch's court.

Matholwch is reconciled and returns to Ireland together with Branwen. At first everything takes its normal course and their marriage is happy. After some time, however, Matholwch's men start to bear a grudge against Branwen because of their humiliation at her court during the wedding feast and they send her to the kitchen where she has to undergo her punishment. When Bendigeidfran learns about it, he immediately comes with his men to Ireland. He is so huge that he can wade the sea alongside the boats. Finally, the two countries face each other in a fierce battle in which the Irish have an advantage of the magic cauldron which brings their dead warriors back to life. The Welshmen start to win through only when Efnisien, the originator of all the distress jumps to the cauldron together with the Irishmen and stretches inside so that the

cauldron explodes. The Welsh then return back home together with the head of Bendigeidfran who was killed in the battle. Before he died he ordered his men to cut off his head and to bury it at White Mount in London so that it can protect their country against invasion. The head had a special ability to remain alive and it kept company to the men who travelled with it to London for the whole journey. Branwen returns home as well but after realizing that two counties were destroyed because of her, she dies of inconsolable grief. The tale goes on saying that only five pregnant women survived in Ireland and later gave birth to five sons, who became the new rulers of Ireland and their offspring peopled the country (Guest, vol. III 39-60).

There are some motifs of Welsh mythology that appear in the story and that could be foregrounded here. Two of them are important for they are recurrent in Celtic mythology and it can be assumed that they were of special significance for the Celts. One is the magic cauldron that was given by Bendigeidfran to Matholwch as a symbol of their friendship and the other is the cut-off head of Bendigeidfran that was speaking although already separated from the body.

The magic cauldron has already appeared in Irish mythology as the possession of Dagda who brought it to Ireland as one of the four talismans of Tuatha Dé Danann. It seems that the concept of a magic cauldron was of special importance for the Celtic people on both sides of the Irish Sea. The cauldron usually comes from a different world and then helps the people in need; it feeds the hungry and gives life back to the dead. Ingeborg Clarus argues that the cauldron could be a symbol of the Celtic belief in the immortality of soul and the rebirth of man (221), she also says that: "new life or a new level of consciousness are impossible to accomplish without previous meeting with

death through which man discovers the limits of his life, his mortality as well as the possibilities of his spiritual transformation"[5] (ibid.)

The cut-off head which is able to think and speak after it has been separated from the rest of the body could be another symbol for the Celtic belief in the immortality of the soul. The head, as has been already said in the previous chapter, was of great importance and worship for the Irish Celts as the centre of a person's power. The situation in Wales was naturally similar. Head-hunting was widespread among the Celts and as Clarus points out "it was a common habit to cut-off the head of the defeated warrior and to carry it away attached to one's saddle"[6] (49). Miranda Green adds that the cut-off heads of defeated enemies were often used as a symbolic protection against enemies (103). The motif of the cut-off head with supernatural abilities is thus one of the core themes of Celtic mythology and culture in general.

4.1.3 Third Branch of the *Mabinogi*

The third branch of the *Mabinogi* is called *Manawyddan, the Son of LLyr* and as the title suggests this branch tells the story of Manawyddan, the brother of Branwen and Bendigeidfran who both died in the previous branch. After Manawyddan together with Pryderi, the son of Pwyll, returns back from Ireland they settle in Dyved, which belongs to Pryderi. Manawyddan is still without a wife so Pryderi offers him the hand of his mother Rhiannon, a widow since the death of Pwyll (described in the fourth branch of the *Mabinogi*). Pryderi marries Kicva (Cigfa) the daughter of Gwynn Gloyw. They live happily together until one day when they are sitting on the hill of Arberth, the magic place where Pwyll met Rhiannon for the first time. While they are, together with Manawyddan and Rhiannon, sitting on the hill, the whole country is covered with a

---

[5] My translation
[6] My translation

thick fog. When the fog fades away, the country is turned into an inhospitable place; the people, houses, villages, as well as everything else disappears. Pryderi and the others decide to start hunting and soon they leave for England where they make their living by making saddles. They are very successful but soon, however, they are driven back to Dyved by the other saddlers who want to kill them for they are more successful than them. Back in Dyved they hunt again, and one day while hunting a white wild boar (his white colour symbolizes his otherworld origin) appears and starts to attack their dogs. While chasing him Pryderi comes to an unknown castle inside which he touches a golden goblet after which he can neither move nor speak. Rhiannon comes later in search of him; she touches the goblet as well and remains imprisoned there with Pryderi.

Manawyddan and Kicva then make their living as shoemakers for some time after which they start to grow wheat. They have three fields of wheat, two of which are destroyed during two nights before they could get the crops in. The third night Manawyddan stays up in order to find out the cause of the damage. He finds out that it is done by mice and catches one of them. He wants to kill it by hanging and sets off for Arberth. He is stopped by three men who ask him not to kill the mouse; the last of them is a bishop who offers him twenty-four pounds if he lets the mouse alive. It turns out that he is Llwyd, a friend of Gwawl who was rejected by Rhiannon in the first branch of the *Mabinogi*, and whose family tried to destroy Pryderi's country as well as Manawyddan's crop as revenge. The trapped mouse is his pregnant wife and he therefore wants her to be free. Manawyddan agrees on condition that Llwyd frees Pryderi and Rhiannon and gives Dyved its original appearance. Llwyd readily agrees and the two couples reunite and live happily again (Guest, vol. III 61-79).

There is quite a lot of magic in the story with the hill of Arberth playing an important role here again, similarly to the first branch of the *Mabinogi.* There are, however, some mythological motifs here as well. One of them is the fertility of land which played an important role in Celtic mythology in general. Fertility was one of the most important concepts for the Celtic people who were hunters and farmers. Their living was dependent not only on the fertility of their women but also on the fertility of their animals and land. Fertility was secured by various rituals such as the ritual carried out on the festival of Beltaine on the first of May when cattle was driven between two burning stacks of wood (Green 79). Fertility was usually connected with the mother-goddess which was for example in Irish mythology symbolized by the bond of marriage between the king and the sovereignty of the land (Green 71). This may be symbolized by Manawyddan's marriage with Rhiannon who is sometimes classified as one of the fertility goddesses (Clarus 193) or as Miranda Green points out by the growth of the wheat and the cultivation of the arable land which could also serve as a mythological explanation of the beginning of agriculture in Wales (45). There can also be found quite a good description of the life of craftsmen in the story.

4.1.4 Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*

The fourth branch of the *Mabinogi* tells the story of Math, the son of Mathonwy. Math is the king of Gwynedd and is known for his special habit: he has to sit with his feet in the lap of a virgin, whose name is Goewin. He, however, does not have any other physical relationship with her. The only exception when he is allowed to leave her lap is the state of war. Math's nephew Gilfaethwy falls in love with Goewin and together with his brother create a plan how to make Math leave Goewin alone. Gwydion, the brother of Gilfaethwy, starts with the help of magic a war between Math and Pryderi. He uses

magic in order to steal Pryderi's pigs that were of great value for him, because in those times in Wales pigs were rarity. In the meantime Gilfaethwy takes advantage of Math's absence and rapes Goewin. When Pryderi finds out that he was tricked by Gwydion's magic he declares war on the neighbouring kingdom in which he finally dies.

When the victorious Math returns home he finds out that Goewin cannot be his foot-holder any longer for she was raped of her virginity, so he gets angry and transforms the two brothers into animals. They then have to live for three successive years in the shape of animals. First year they live together as a stag and a hind, then as a wild boar and a wild sow and finally as wolves. They also have to mate with each other and bear offspring every year. When their punishment is fulfilled they are transformed back into human shape. Math, however, has to look for a new foot-holder and is offered Gwydion's sister Arianrhod. In order to become a new foot-holder she has to pass a test of virginity: she has to step over a magic stick, but when she does so she drops a little baby on the floor and loses something else when she leaves the room. The first child is a boy called Dylan who immediately leaves for the sea. The other object turns out to be another child that remains in the care of Gwydion who declares to be his father.

Later, when Arianrhod meets his son she refuses to give him a name; she is however tricked by Gwydion and the boy is called Lleu Llaw Gyffes (the bright one with the skillful hand) for these are the words that Arianrhod uttered when she saw him working. Later, she refuses to give him his arms but she is tricked by Gwydion again and Lleu gets his arms. Finally, she tells him that he can never marry any woman living on earth. Gwydion uses his magic once again and with the help of Math they make Lleu a wife of flowers called Blodeuwedd. They fall in love with each other and live happily until one day when Blodeuwedd meets Gronw Pebyr who becomes her lover. They make a plan how to kill Lleu and although it is not so easy they almost succeed. Lleu is wounded

and in the shape of an eagle flies away. He is later found by Gwydion and transformed back into human shape. Gronw is in turn killed by Lleu and Blodeuwedd is changed into an owl; the outcast among birds (Guest, vol. III 80-107).

The last branch of the *Mabinogi* is, together with the first branch, the longest of the four parts. The first and the fourth branch, as Andrew Welsh in his essay suggests, can also be taken as mirror stories; the first branch tells a story about initiation, growth and development (especially of Pwyll), while the fourth branch gives us a picture of the darker sides of human life, such as rape, incest and adultery (Welsh 360). The fourth branch offers several motifs that can be discussed here. One of the motifs recurrent in the Welsh mythology and Celtic mythology in general is the motif of transformation, in this case the transformation of Lleu Llaw Gyffes into an eagle, Blodeuwedd into an owl, and above all the transformation of the two brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy as a punishment for their crime. Their transformation is also connected with the theme of incest, for in their animal shapes they have to mate with each other and bear offspring every year. Incest can be also found, although only implicitly, in the relationship between Arianrhod and her brother Goewin who never denies that he is the father of Lleu Llaw Gyffes.

Lleu is an interesting character as well. Not only that he is the result of the incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister, but he is also almost a godlike figure. At first he is denied to have a name as well as his weapons and he cannot marry any woman living on earth. He is also difficult to be killed which has to be done in a very special way and only under certain circumstances. Thanks to his godlike characteristics as well as his name connected with the light he is often identified with Lug, the Irish god of the sun (Clarus 199).

Another theme that appears in the story is the fertility and the vital force of the earth, so important for the life of the Celtic people; this is symbolized by the maiden's lap in which Math has to place his feet in order to be able to live and reign in his country. According to Miranda Green this could be taken as a parallel to the Irish ritual wedding between the king and the Irish land (47).

4.1.5 Other Stories of the *Mabinogi*

Apart from the stories described above, the *Mabinogion* contains other stories of Welsh mythology as well. Of the other stories that are not part of the four branches of the *Mabonogi* but belong to the mythological material as well, the most important, for the purposes of this thesis, are the following: *Kulhwch and Olwen*, *The Dream of Rhonabwy* and *Peredur*. The reason for the selection of these three stories is that all of them contain the earliest mention of King Arthur.

The oldest and at the same time the best known of all three is the story of *Kulhwch and Olwen.* Kulhwch is the cousin of Arthur. He was born in a run for pigs which is where he got his name from (Kulhwch = the pigs' run). When his mother died his father remarried and Kulhwch's stepmother did not like him. She told him that he will marry only the daughter of the giant Ysbaddaden called Olwen ("the white footprint", for wherever she steps she leaves four white clovers behind her). Kulhwch goes to Arthur's court to ask his cousin for help and he agrees. They are travelling for a year and when they finally find Ysbaddaden's castle they are warned that nobody has returned alive from the castle yet. Kulhwch proposes to Olwen but she can only marry with the permission of her father. This is, however, not easy to obtain because Ysbaddaden wants Kulhwch carry out forty tasks among which was to find Mabon, the lost son of Modron, who was kidnapped three days after his birth and no one has heard about him

since then, then he has to bring the blood of the black witch which Ysbaddaden needs to be able to shave his beard before the wedding. The last task Ysbaddaden gives him is the most difficult task of all: Kulhwch has to bring the scissors, the razor and the comb that are on the top of the head of Twrch Trwyth, a wild boar that was once a king but for his deeds was transformed into this shape. Finally, with the help of Arthur, Mabon, animals and magic, Kulhwch finds and catches the boar and brings all the things to Ysbaddaden whose beard is shaven together with his ears. Ysbaddaden agrees with the marriage of Kulhwch and Olwen although he knows that, according to the prophecy, he must die on the wedding day. Kulhwch and Olwen get married and live happily ever after (Guest, vol. II 63-115).

This story full of magic is significant for it is the first place where the name of Arthur is mentioned in Welsh literature. Although he is not like the Arthur that appears later in the Arthurian romances, even his men are different, it is, nevertheless, significant as the first literary mention of him.

Among the mythological motifs that appear in the story is for example the first haircut of a boy which Kulhwch asks Arthur for and through which he enters the world of the adult warriors. This ritual was a very important symbol of a boy's transition from childhood or adolescence into adulthood. The man that cut his hair was something like his godfather who showed him the world of adults as well as gave him advice for his future life and kept an eye on him for some time (Clarus 207).

Another important motif is the swine that appears in the shape of Twrch Trwyth. Here the boar symbolizes on one hand the power and vigour of the king but on the other hand it is a symbol of the old and dark times that have to be overcome so that something new and pure can come to its place (Clarus 212). This is further symbolized by the

"ritual wedding of Kulhwch and Olwen, the 'sun' and the 'moon'[7], the lights of day and night. This wedding should bring forth new life and new wisdom"[8] (Clarus 217).

The Celtic people probably felt that the old-world order is changing and that their world is gradually replaced by a new, more modern one. They might have subconsciously felt a need to replace the old-fashioned thinking by something fresh which might have been achieved only by defeating and changing the "old, bad thinking". This is represented here by the fight of Kulhwch with the wild boar or the black witch. Once the old-world thinking and ideas are overcome and retreat to the background, the new age of humankind can come to its place. This is the time when the new age of chivalry together with King Arthur comes and enters the scene.

---

[7] The name Olwen can be interpreted as "white footprint" which could symbolize the moon or moonlight (Clarus 209)
[8] My translation

5. The Arthurian Legend

"The legend of King Arthur is our [British] most pervasive secular myth. Out of few facts, not all of them certain, grew a story elaborated in impressive detail and dimension, and it is apparent that the evolution of that story is not yet finished" (Lacy 271).

Some works of art are said to be immortal and this is certainly true of the Arthurian legend. Many things have already been written about it since the creation of the first story concerning the legendary King Arthur. It is still popular in our times not only among scholars who devoted their lives to the study of this part of medieval literature but it also attracts a wide range of readership, starting with young teenage readers and ending with the "Arthurian" experts. To put it simply, the legend has not lost its attractiveness and still is able to kindle the interest of scholars as well as the lay public. There are numerous literary and film adaptations of the legend together with many computer games fostering the interest in the theme among the youngest members of today's society. Many aspects of the legend have already been researched yet there can still be found topics and aspects of the whole cycle that have not been looked into yet or touched only briefly. Moreover, there are still many obscurities concerning its origins and especially the origins and historicity of King Arthur, the main protagonist of the stories. The interest in the legendary mythical king, living with his beautiful wife Guinevere in Camelot, fighting together with his knights of the Round Table against their enemies and finally being killed by his illegitimate son Mordred, has never faded and will be probably alive in the third millennium as well.

5.1 The Origins and First Literary Mentions of the Arthurian Legend

The Arthurian legend is one of the best-known and oldest stories of the British Isles. Although it is one of the core texts in British literary history its origins are overcast with mist and mystery. The legend has not only uncertain origin, it has also numerous authors or rather compilers or assemblers each of whom added something else to the legend so that it has evolved for many centuries. Moreover, the historicity of King Arthur, the main hero of the whole cycle, has been questioned by various scholars over the centuries; however, they have not decided yet whether he was a real historical figure or just a legendary fictional character. "Did King Arthur ever really exist? The only honest answer is, [according to Kenneth Jackson] 'We do not know, but he may well have existed'" (Loomis 1959, 1). Furthermore "[…] the difficulty lies in distinguishing what is, if anything, history from what is legend" (ibid.).

The sources of our present knowledge about King Arthur are numerous, yet not all of them are credible and we cannot be sure to what extent we can trust them, as the facts are often entangled together with fiction. It is not possible to establish the precise date of the origin of the legend for it has evolved for many centuries until these days. Its roots can be traced as late as the pagan Celtic times although the main Arthurian era is usually set in the fifth and sixth centuries AD the time when the historical Arthur allegedly lived.

The first literary mentions of King Arthur can be found in *Historia Brittonum,* an early historical account of the history of Britons and the work of a ninth-century Welsh historian Nennius, where Arthur is portrayed as a skillful warrior. Nennius gives an account of twelve battles in which Arthur fought against the Saxons. On the other hand, the earlier chroniclers and historians such as Bede or Gildas did not mention Arthur at

all. His name appears again in the *Annales Cambriae*, Welsh chronicles of about the tenth century.

The first full account of the life of the legendary King Arthur is recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (*Histories of the Kings of Britain*) written in the twelfth century. Geoffrey wrote his book in Latin and based it largely on the work by Nennius. It is thought that it could have been written with the patriotic intentions as "a kind of national epos" (Jones 1914, 66), Geoffrey probably felt a need to write a British history with a national hero figuring in it whom the British, oppressed by the Normans, could raise their heads to. Geoffrey introduces Uther Pendragon as Arthur's father, who conceived, with the help of the magician Merlin, Arthur with Igraine, the wife of Gorlois, the duke of Cornwall. Gorlois and Igraine have also a daughter called Anna, who later becomes the mother of Gawain and Modred. When Arthur is fifteen, he becomes the king himself. He is a brave and just king and fights with his knights in numerous battles against the Saxons, Scots and Picts; his most famous battle is at Bath, which is Geoffrey's version of the battle at the Mount Badon. Later, he marries Guinevere and conquers many countries and lands such as Ireland, Iceland, Denmark or Norway. When he fights against the Roman leader Lucius he leaves the command of his kingdom to his nephew Mordred who, when given the opportunity, betrays him and takes his wife as well as his throne. This makes Arthur come back and fight his final battle against Mordred at Camlann. Mordred is killed but Arthur is seriously wounded and leaves for Avalon to be healed there. The popular belief says that Arthur is still alive and waiting until the right time comes and he will return to Britain.

It can be said that Geoffrey created the basis of the well-known story of the Arthurian legend. He also contributed to the "enrichment" of the Arthurian legend by introducing the magician Merlin to it. His work became very popular in his times: "The

popularity of Geoffrey's History was immediate and immense; it is indeed difficult to find a parallel to it before the age of printed books" (Jones 1914, 85).

Its popularity gave rise to numerous adaptations and translations, the best-known are probably the works by Wace who translated the Latin text of Geoffrey of Monmouth into French verse calling it *Roman de Brut* and Layamon's translation into English called simply *Brut*. Wace's work is quite a significant contribution to the Arthurian Legend for it was he who introduced the concept of the Round Table. The significance of the work of both poets does not lie only in the fact that they translated the Arthurian legend into their vernacular languages but their work also marks, as Lewis Jones points out, "the transitional stage between the Arthur of history and traditional legend and the Arthur of pure romance" (89).

The stories about Arthur and his knights quickly spread on both sides of the English Channel and became increasingly popular not only in the country of their origin but became popular in other countries on the continent as well, which was true especially in France.

In the latter part of the twelfth century Chrétien de Troyes, a popular French writer, wrote another version of the Arthurian legend in which he celebrated above all the ideas of chivalry and courtly love, starting thus the tradition of the French Arthurian romances. He gave the legend a new shape because he introduced the character of Lancelot together with the concept of the Holy Grail that both became characteristic parts of the Arthurian cycle. Another change introduced by Chrétien de Troyes is that King Arthur is no longer the main protagonist of the legend, he is present but not directly involved in the action and remains rather in the background of the story. "The King only rarely initiates action and even more rarely participates directly in it. Yet his court remains the ideological and geographical center of the characters' world" (Lacy

69). The focus thus shifts more on the deeds of Arthur's knights and the quest for the Holy Grail.

Later, the story of Arthur and other knights, especially Lancelot and the magician Merlin was further elaborated in the so called Vulgate cycle of the Arthurian romances and most importantly in Thomas Malory's work *Le Morte d'Arthur* published in the fifteenth century and retelling the entire story of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. He based his stories on various sources but the main source of inspiration were the French romances. "The 'whole book' is the collection which grew up by means of successive additions of romances often unconnected with each other" (Vinaver in Loomis 1959, 544). Malory writes his own version of the Arthurian story focusing not only on Arthur but also and even more on his knights, Perceval, Gawain and Galahad. The centre of Malory's attention is especially Lancelot, who is given quite a lot of space in the whole book and whose adulterous love for queen Guinevere is one of the main motifs of the whole legend. Malory also introduces the, nowadays already legendary, sword Excalibur that was given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake and which Bedivere throws back into the lake after Arthur's final battle, as well as the magical scabbard which makes its owner invincible. Malory's work was a significant contribution to the development of the Arthurian legend and it can be said that his text is the most widely read among people all over the world nowadays. Although written in the fifteenth century his book is very readable for "his 'style' is sufficiently near to the English of to-day" (Jones 1914, 114). Moreover, he [Malory] "tells his story directly and often powerfully, in a vigorous and appealing style and with a strong sense of dramatic cause and effect" (Lacy 131).

The introduction of the printing press to Britain by William Caxton in 1476 contributed to the spread of literacy as well as to the popularity of the Arthurian legends

not only in Britain but on the European continent as well. Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* was printed by William Caxton in 1485 and since then it has spread to various parts of the world and has become the basic source for the study of the Arthurian legend. Such a famous work cannot be without its critics who criticize him for "accentuating knighthood and military action while deemphasizing or misunderstanding courtly love" (Lacy 131) and some others say that he "has mishandled much of the material, such as the Tristan story" (ibid.) and that he "has added irrelevant details, and that he has disrupted the intricately interlaced structure of the French" (ibid.). However, in spite of the criticism Malory's work is generally considered to be "the pinnacle of the Arthurian literature, the masterly culmination of the medieval legend and the greatest single source of inspiration for future writers who would be drawn to King Arthur" (Lacy 131) and will always be a valuable and inherent part of the whole Arthurian field of interest.

5.2 King Arthur in History and Legend

Although the Arthurian legend has survived to our times and is widely popular among readers and scholars not only in the English speaking parts of the world but in other countries as well, the origin and historicity of its main hero, the legendary King Arthur, are still questioned and covered to a certain extent with mystery. Was he a real historical figure living in the fifth and sixth centuries in Britain, at his castle Camelot and fighting the Picts and Scots? Or is he only a legendary literary figure created for the nationalistic purpose so that Great Britain could have its own national hero? These questions have occupied the minds of numerous historians for many decades and yet they have not agreed on the fact whether there was a real historical Arthur or not. As Lewis Jones remarks: "Neither date nor place of birth can be assigned to him any more

than a place of burial, while undiscovered yet is the seat of that court where knights, only less famous than himself, sought his benison and behest" (2).

The historical records are scarce, often incomplete, inaccurate and obscure. There is no single source of historical evidence saying that such a person as King Arthur definitely existed or not. Lewis Jones in his introductory chapter says that "Arthur remains but a shadowy apparition, clothed in the mists of legend and stalking athwart the path of history" (2). Our only sources of information about the legendary King Arthur are fragments found in different historical and literary sources which may help us create our own picture of the whole issue.

As has already been said in the previous sub-chapter, King Arthur or simply a person called Arthur is first mentioned in *Historia Brittonum,* an early historical account of the history of Britons and the work of a ninth-century Welsh historian Nennius, who gives an account of twelve battles in which Arthur fought against the Saxons. Arthur is mentioned here not as a king but as a *dux belorum* which could be translated as a war or military leader. Of all battles mentioned here, the most famous is the twelfth battle on Mount Badon which was allegedly very successful for Arthur. As Norris Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe say: "By Nennius's time, it has become a battle of Arthur's, his crowning triumph. But the Arthur who triumphs is incredible, slaying nine hundred and sixty men single-handed" (Lacy 15). Although Arthur could really fight in this battle the number of the killed enemies seems to be very unrealistic. Moreover, Lewis Jones in his book *King Arthur in History and Legend* points out that it is difficult if not entirely impossible to locate the exact places of the twelve battles described by Nennius: "An even more difficult problem than the determination of Arthur's rank is the identification of the twelve battlefields mentioned in Nennius's record" (19). It is therefore difficult to say whether Nennius's history can be taken seriously or to what degree it can be relied

upon. On the other hand, according to Lewis Jones, it is "the fullest notice of Arthur's military exploits to be found in any chronicle before that of Geoffrey of Monmouth" (14).

The earlier historians and chroniclers such as Gildas, a monk living in the sixth century, or Bede, an Anglo-Saxon historian living in the eight century and the author of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, do not mention anyone named Arthur in their works at all. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle does not mention him either. Gildas, however, speaks at least of Mount Badon but thanks to his reluctance to mention any names, the participation of King Arthur in the battle of Mount Badon cannot be confirmed: "Gildas's testimony is sufficient warrant that some time during the first decade of the sixth century a battle was fought against the Saxons at a place called Badon Hill, in which Brittons were the victors" (Jones 1914, 22) However, Gildas "makes no reference whatever to Arthur's achievements in this, or any other, encounter with the Saxons" (ibid.). The battle at Badon as well as Arthur's name are also mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae*, Welsh chronicles of about the tenth century. And according to Norris Lacy the mention of Arthur in the *Annales* can be taken as credible: "Since everybody else mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae* seems to have been real, the mention of Arthur and Medraut [his enemy] suggests that they were, too" (17). Another author who gives us a fuller account of Arthur's life and deeds in his twelfth-century work *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (*Histories of the Kings of Britain*) is Geoffrey of Monmouth whose work was dealt with in greater detail in the previous section of this work.

As far as the historical point of view is concerned the scholars are divided between those who support the idea of a real Arthur and those who completely reject it. Even the archaeological evidence is not very helpful in this case for in this field of historical

research names are mentioned only rarely so the only way to find out some evidence of Arthur's life is to look at the archaeological findings in his assumed birthplace in Tintagel in south-west England or at his alleged tomb in Glastonbury abbey. Although we do not know whether Arthur was really born in Tintagel, the archaeological excavations in that place showed that it used to be occupied by a sizeable group of people (Lacy 47-8). The case of Glastonbury is interesting as well, for the supposed tomb of Arthur and his wife Guinevere was found there in the twelfth century during the reconstruction of the abbey. It is, however, more difficult to prove it historically for until the twelfth century none of the early historians or chroniclers ever mentions the place. It can be only assumed that the human remains found there could belong to Arthur and Guinevere but they as well did not have to, this still remains to be found out in a possible further research.

Historical records locate the Arthurian period in the fifth and the sixth centuries AD, the time of the Saxon invasion to Great Britain that was settled by the Britons at that time. According to Keneth Jackson "the anti-Saxon effort was led for a time by someone called Artorius who made a strong impression, a 'commander of genius' probably based in the southwest, within striking distance of the major Saxon settlements" (quoted in Lacy 31). There are, however, some scholars who speak of Arthur as a northern war-leader and still others disclaim his connection with any real historical figure altogether. However, as Lewis Jones suggests "It will not do […] to dismiss summarily all Arthurian traditions as so many old wives' tales. They are too widespread and persistent not to have some basis of solid fact underlying them" (5).

In fact, in British history do appear several figures that could have possibly been either the historical Arthur or could at least serve as models for the Arthurian legends. After Britain broke away from the Roman Empire, at the beginning of the fifth century,

its inhabitants, the Britons, had to face the invasion of foreign tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes, collectively called the Saxons, coming from the Germanic lands. Britain was governed at that time by a high king known as Vortigern. He invited more Saxons to his land because he believed that they would help him fight the Picts who, however, later united with the Saxons and raided the lands of the Britons instead of helping them fight their enemies. After the death of Vortigern, Britons were looking for new leaders that would fight the Saxons and during that time Ambrosius Aurelianus came to the British Isles. He was a skillful war-leader fighting the Saxon invasion and allegedly, according to Gildas, taking part in the battle at Mount Badon as well. He was probably in the service of king Rhiotamus and could be one of the possible candidates for the model for the Arthurian legend. Rhiotamus was probably a king of Britons, a successor to Vortigern: "They call him not only the 'King of the Britons' but Rhiotamus. This latinizes a British form *Rigotamos*, which would have meant 'supreme king' or 'supremely royal' (Lacy 8). He as well could serve as a model for the figure of Arthur.

There is also another person who could serve as a model for Arthur and that is Lucius Artorius Castus who was a Roman army commander in the second century AD. Although there is a time gap between his activity and the Arthurian age, he could have been remembered by the people and serve as a model for another commander who came after him and who could be nicknamed "second Artorius" (Lacy 35).

The historical records thus do not help us much in finding out the real identity of the legendary King Arthur. His origin and life will thus probably remain a mystery forever. This, on the other hand helps to foster the interest in the Arthurian legend and the whole Arthurian topic as such and it might bring new and interesting findings in the future.

5.3 Modern Adaptations and Interpretations of the Arthurian Legend

The popularity of King Arthur and his court and the knights of the Round Table did not end with the printing of Malory's book in the fifteenth century. Although the interest in the topic was less intensive during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it did not die out and the legend remained popular until these days. The interest in the Arthurian legend underwent two significant revivals, one in the nineteenth century and the other in the second part of the twentieth century. Since the middle of the twentieth century there have appeared numerous literary as well as film adaptations of the Arthurian legend and Arthur has appeared in other works of art as well. It seems, however, that there is still place for new interpretations and adaptations of the Arthurian topic. Why is it so popular and has so many readers and admirers even in the modern times? Norris Lacy offers an answer that "This legend attracts us by its combination of high seriousness and good fun" (271). Moreover, it offers its readers "a clear sense of moral direction and include an evocation of a past 'golden age' when the world seemed to work as it was supposed to work, or at least, if it did not, Arthur had both the vision and the power to put it right" (ibid.).

The most famous adaptations of the whole legend are, among other less well-known works, probably the books by T.H. White and Marion Zimmer Bradley together with the film versions of the life of the legendary king and his knights. T.H. White inspired by the Arthurian legend wrote a fantasy novel called *The Once and Future King* in 1958. It is based on the original storyline of King Arthur's life but it was written in a modern style, influenced by the horrors of the Second World War. Another modern literary adaptation appeared in 1982 when Marion Zimmer Bradley published her novel *The Mists of Avalon.* Influenced by postmodernism and the 1970s wave of feminism, Bradley treats the Arthurian material from a more feminist point of view than other

authors. She tells the story from the perspective of the female characters, which shifts the traditionally central male characters rather to the background of the story. The work focuses more on the characters of Morgaine, Guinevere, Igraine and Vivian with the main protagonist being Morgaine, Arthur's half-sister and powerful sorceress. Bradley not only orientates her focus on the female characters but she also, as Norris Lacy points out, "emphasizes the unsettling effect of a society poised between Druidic and Christian ideologies" (178) warning thus the readers against the fanatic belief and devotion to any religious institution especially Christianity which tends to prefer men over women, who are often seen as marginal figures alongside their male partners. Bradley's work was turned into a film of the same name in 2001.

Many other film adaptations of the Arthurian material have been made as well, among others can be for example named John Boorman's *Excalibur* shot in 1981 based closely on Malory's interpretation of the legend or the humoristic interpretation of the Arthurian topic called *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* made by the directors Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam in 1975. Last but not least can be mentioned the most recent Arthurian movie called simply *King Arthur* that was shot by the American director Antoine Fuqua in 2004 showing its audience the Arthurian legend from quite an innovatory as well as controversial point of view.

6. Instances of Celtic Mythology in the Arthurian Legend

As has been already shown in the previous chapter the legend of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table has developed for many centuries and occupied the minds of many readers as well as many scholars till these days. It has been studied from various points of view, yet some aspects found in the legend are still the subject of scholarly debate and remain to be clarified. This work will not clear up the whole problematic of the Arthurian legend; it will only try to bring some light into the matter, especially into the issue of the traces of Celtic mythology and culture in the legends of King Arthur. More specifically, it will try to find some instances of the Celtic heritage in the medieval stories.

6.1 Christianity versus Mythology

The Arthurian legend is often thought of as a Christian story. This is however true only to a certain extent. Although the story contains many Christian symbols and the heroes behave like true Christians, it has most probably developed from pagan Celtic roots which will be shown later on several examples. Although the Arthurian legend is not a direct descendant of the Celtic parents, they are rather "remote relatives" (Loomis 1933, 418), there is a certain relationship that can be found between them. This is further supported by the research of a well-known American Arthurian scholar Roger Sherman Loomis who says: "The Grail legend is a composite of a hundred Celtic tales and motifs, often quite independent of each other, and woven into a lovely and mysterious, but quite inharmonious tapestry" (Loomis 1933, 419). It can be assumed, on the basis of this short quote, that there is some connection between the world of Celts and the world of the Arthurian legend, yet the links are often not visible at first sight and must be searched for.

Celtic mythology has been already dealt with earlier in this work; however, its main features can be repeated here. Mythology played an important part in the lives of the Celts and mirrored their harmony with and interest in the natural world, their connection with the world of the dead as well as their belief in many different gods and goddesses who often accompanied mythological heroes such as Cú Chulainn on their journey through life. Some of the features and motifs of Celtic mythology survived in the stories and traditions of the descendants of the Celtic people and thus found their way into the Arthurian legend although it was written several hundred years after the heyday of the Celtic culture on the British Isles. Its main features have been so deeply rooted in the culture of the people living in Wales and Ireland that it could not have been so easily replaced and forgotten with the arrival of Christianity. This was true especially in Ireland where "Christianity of the people was merely on the surface [and] much pagan superstition remained, even among the professing Christians, and the druids still and long after retained great influence" (Joyce 51). This was further supported by the law system as well; the law was exercised by the judges called *brehons*, and was based mainly on the laws of nature and Christianity could enrich it but not interfere with it (Moody 32).

People remembered and retold the old pagan stories and kept their old traditions even long after Christianity became the new dominant religion in Wales and Ireland. Christianity in early Ireland and Wales thus remained different to a certain extent from its continental counterpart. This happened due to the relative isolation of both countries from other countries which enabled the surviving pagan Celtic world influence the new coming Christian culture. For example, it was quite normal for a Celtic man to have more than one woman at the same time which was later manifested in the Arthurian legend through the relationship between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, whose love

would have been accepted and tolerated in the old pagan society but which was taken as unacceptable in the Christian world.

The main story of the legend of King Arthur was composed during the twelfth century first by Geoffrey of Monmouth who gave it the basic shape, then by Chrétien de Troyes who introduced Lancelot and above all the concept of the Holy Grail into the story and who at the same time, in the words of Jean Frappier, "allowed the paganism of a very old myth to remain but created around it an atmosphere of Christian spirituality" (Frappier in Loomis 1959, 190), and finally it was consolidated by Malory's version of the story in the fifteenth century which is probably the most widely known among readers nowadays. Although the stories are dated back to the High and Late Middle Ages, the times of the supremacy of Christian faith in Europe, it is supposed by numerous scholars that "an ancient myth of Celtic origin forms the basis for the story" (Frappier in Loomis 1959, 177). On condition that the above quoted words are true let us try to cast a closer look at some of the examples of the presence of Celtic elements in the legends.

6.2 Celtic Elements in the Arthurian Legend

The Holy Grail

At first let us look at probably the most important and at the same time the most mysterious concept of the whole Arthurian legend, the Holy Grail. It was introduced into the Arthurian legend by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century and since then it has been one of the most important motifs of the legends. Why is it so? How did it become part of the story and what is its purpose in the story, what does it symbolize there?

Today it is thought of as a cup, a Christian symbol of the Last Supper of Christ. The vessel was given by Pilate to Joseph of Arimathea who later filled the cup with Christ's blood and took his body from the cross and put it into a grave. The character of Joseph of Arimathea was introduced into the story only later by Frenchman Robert de Boron in his romance *Joseph d'Arimathie* composed at the end of the twelfth century. However, the connection between the Saint Grail and the body of Christ had already been there before the emergence of Joseph of Arimathea and has its origin probably in the French text *Conte del Graal* (The Story of the Grail) by Chrétien de Troyes who first introduced the Holy Grail (or *grail*) as a vessel containing the body of Christ (*cors*) at the beginning of the twelfth century.

The existence of the Holy Grail as it is known today was most probably caused by a misinterpretation of the French word *li cors*. The old French word *li cors* could mean either "a body or corpse" but there was another meaning of the form *li cors* and that was "a horn" which could either refer to the magic drinking horn of Bran or the cauldron of Rhydderch, magic vessels from Welsh and Irish mythology that gave plenty of food and drink to anyone who asked for it or needed it (Loomis 1991, 58-62). The confusion of the two words could easily happen for the horn of plenty was not much known in France at those times but the concept of the sacred body of Christ was widespread: "The French were totally unfamiliar with the conception of a sacred drinking horn and were certain to misunderstand the word *cor*, nominative *cors*, when used in such associations" (Loomis 1933, 431).

The Grail can also be connected to one of the magic talismans that Tuatha Dé Danann brought with them when coming to Ireland. As has already been said they brought with them four talismans: "the stone of Fál which shrieked under a lawful king; the spear of Lugh which ensured victory; the sword of Nuadu from which none could

escape; and the cauldron of the Daghda from which none would go unsatisfied" (Mac Cana 58). The cauldron as such was of special importance for the Celtic people for it appears at various places in their mythology. In Welsh mythology it for example appears as the cauldron of wisdom in the *History of Taliesin* in which Taliesin, called by his original name Gwion Bach, has to stir a magical drink of wisdom made by the witch called Ceridwen who made it for her ugly and dull son. However, after Gwion puts his finger with three drops of the beverage into his mouth, he becomes wise and has to run away in order to escape the angry witch. During his flight he transforms himself into different animals and finally becomes a grain. When the witch, in the shape of a hen, eats him she gets pregnant and gives birth to a child whom she throws into water. It is a boy and he is saved by a fisherman and when he grows up becomes a famous bard called Taliesin. (Guest, vol. III 117-143). The cauldron appears in Welsh mythology as well, as the cauldron of Bendigeidfran (or Bran) which has the ability to return life to men killed in a fight or in a battle and which was already described in the chapter dealing with Welsh mythology.

The cauldron, either as a symbol of plenty or wisdom, thus seems to play an important role in the world of the Celts, for it was a special object which satisfies many but cannot be owned by everyone. Similarly to the magic cauldron of Dagda, the Irish god of Tuatha Dé Danann, "the Grail cannot be bought nor acquired by means of power. It can be found only by him, who has been chosen by heaven"[9](Clarus 233). In the Celtic tradition it gives food only to those who are worthy of it; a parallel to this can be seen in Galahad in the Arthurian legend, who is the only person who can get near the Grail for he is the only unblemished knight of the Round Table, because he is the "true servant of Christ […] [who] possesses the virginity of the white lily together with the

---

[9] My translation

virtue of the burning rose: qualities of the Holy Ghost" (Malory 1962, 425) and therefore is the only successful knight in the quest for the Holy Grail.

The quest for the Holy Grail can be seen not only from the Christian point of view as a crusade aimed at getting the holy vessel but it can be perceived as a quest of the humankind for the restoration of peace and beauty in the world. As John Mathews argues: "The quest of Arthur's knights is very much our own quest for the wholeness" (56). It has its roots in Celtic society, for as has already been mentioned in chapter three, the Celts believed in the unity of king and land and when a king was wounded this unity was disturbed and therefore he could not rule any longer and had to be replaced by a new king so that the prosperity of land was ensured. This can be illustrated for example on the story of Nuadu, the king of Tuatha Dé Danann who had to be replaced on the throne by Bres after he lost one of his arms in a battle. When he finally obtained a new hand made of silver he could return to the throne and replace Bres who was a weak and mean ruler (MacKillop 171-172). The health and well-being of the king was for the Celtic people a symbol of the prosperity of the whole land. The parallel with the maimed king clearly offers itself here for the knights of the Round Table have to find the grail and heal the maimed king in order to restore the prosperity of their land (Matthews 54-56).

There is another character appearing in the stories of the Holy Grail that shows its connection with the land and with the Celtic mythology as well. This is the Bearer of the Grail, who is portrayed either as a beautiful girl or as a loathly damsel or an ugly hag. There is a parallel with the hideous hag representing the sovereignty of Ireland who after being kissed changes into a beautiful woman and the man who was so brave to kiss her could become the king of the land such as Niall Noígiallach, the founder of the Irish dynasty of Uí Néill (MacKillop 92). According to Irish mythology the king had to

marry the sovereignty of land in order to be able to reign the country. The importance of the role of the sovereignty for the Celtic people is obvious and therefore her task could be easily transformed into the role of the Bearer of the Grail in the Arthurian romance.

Morgan le Fay

Another woman that was inspired by Celtic mythology is Arthur's half-sister Morgan le Fay. She first appears in the text of *Vita Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth as the ruler of the island of Avalon (also known as the Island of Apples) where she is known for her healing abilities. In the later Malory's text she is not only Arthur's sister but also a powerful sorceress who tries to cause harm to her brother and his kingdom throughout most of his life but who finally helps him after he is mortally wounded in the battle with Mordred and takes him with her to the island of Avalon where he is said to be living till these days and waiting for the right time to return back to Britain.

She is a powerful woman, once an enemy of her brother Arthur, once his helper. She has also many lovers but when she wants to seduce Lancelot, she is refused which only strengthens her hatred of Arthur and his court (Malory 1962, 120-121). This story has a clear parallel in the relationship between the Irish hero Cú Chulainn and the Celtic goddess of war Morrígan who tries to seduce him and when refused with the hero's words that he does not have time for women becomes his enemy (MacKillop 112).

There is also a close analogy between Morgan and Modron, the mother of Mabon from the Welsh story of Kulhwch and Olwen, who was stolen from his mother when he was only three days old and since then nobody has seen him and it is one of Kulhwch's tasks to find him and bring back. Modron is the daughter of Avallach, wife of Urien and mother of Mabon and Owein. Similarly, Morgan is the daughter of Avalloc and has a son Yvain with Urien (Loomis 1945, 190). Their similar family relations can imply that

there is a link between these two women. This further leads to the connection with Matrona, a Celtic goddess from which the Welsh Modron was derived. Matrona was "The Divine Mother" goddess who was also the goddess of the rivers, giving for example the name to the French river Marne (Mac Cana 33).

There is also a certain possibility that Morgan could have been derived from another goddess of Celtic origin and that is Morrígan, the goddess of war who often appears as a triple goddess in the shape of Badb, Macha, or Morrígan (MacKillop 112). However, although the similarity of Morgan's name with that of Morrígan would suggest their connection, there is little evidence for their relationship and therefore it cannot be taken into consideration here.

Avalon

The attention can be now turned to the place where Morgan le Fay lives and that is the mythical Avalon or the Island of the Apples as Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Vita Merlini* calls it. This mythical island has its roots in the Celtic mythology as well. The island of Avalon where Arthur was taken after the battle of Camlan is a magical and mystical place shrouded in mist where fairies live. It probably has its counterpart in the Celtic otherworld that was often placed on an island, especially in the case of the Irish Celts (MacKillop 151). As has been already mentioned in chapter three the otherworld played an important role in the life of the Celtic people for they believed in the immortality of their souls and the otherworld was only a kind of transition place between their old life and a new one (Green 105). They imagined it as a land of eternal youth where "sickness and decay are unknown. It is a land of primeval innocence where the pleasures of love are untainted by guilt. Its women are numerous and beautiful […]. It is filled with enchanting music from bright-plumaged birds […]. And it has

abundance of exquisite food and drink, and magic vessels of inexhaustible plenty" (Mac Cana 123). The Celts believed that such a land can be found either under the ground in the so called *sidh*, or on an unknown island far away in the sea or under the sea (MacKillop 148). The mortals could sometimes enter it, especially during Samhain when the gates of the otherworld opened and the inhabitants of both worlds could visit the world of their neighbours. The mortals had to be careful, however, for the time in the otherworld runs differently; they often spent there even several hundred years and when they returned back to the world of the mortal people, they suddenly became very old and died. This was for example the case of Oisín, one of the heroes of Irish mythology, who after meeting a beautiful girl called Niam goes with her to Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth and the kingdom of her father. They live there together happily for some time but when Oisín returns back to his homeland he does not obey Niam's warning not to touch the ground and after he does so he turns into a three-hundred-year-old man and dies soon (Gregory 288-290). In Irish mythology there can be found another similar tale telling a story of Bran mac Febail and his men who set out to find the Land of Women described to them by a mysterious woman from the otherworld as a land full of joy and eternal summer. It seems that it is Emain Ablach, the Land of Apples, which is the realm of the sea-god Manannán mac Lir. They embark on a ship and after some time find the land and spend some time there. What they think is a year is in fact several years and when one of the men returns back to Ireland and steps ashore, he immediately becomes a heap of ashes as if he had already been dead for many years (MacKillop 139-141).

Avalon shares many signs with the Celtic otherworld. It is a mythical island where women live and where the wounded Arthur is taken in order to be healed. According to the legend he is not dead but living in Avalon and waiting for the right time for his

71

return to Britain. This resembles Oisín's or Bran's story for they all spend some time in the land of eternal youth without getting older.

The name of the island is often connected with Emain Ablach, or the Land of Apples, the kingdom of Manannán mac Lir. As Loomis points out the Irish word *ablach* means 'rich in apple trees' and this might be the origin of the name Avalon (Loomis 1959, 66). It is also sometimes connected with the name of Avallach, the father of Modron who has been associated with Arthur's sister Morgan. It is called the island of Avallach which in Welsh is the ynys avallach or Ynys Affalon (ibid.). The island's connection with Avallach and his daughter Modron could further support the association between Modron and Morgan.

Moreover, the role of apples in Classical mythology as the fruit symbolizing fertility, immortality, love and eternal youth, as pointed out by A.H. Krappe in his article *Avallon,* could have further supported the connection between Avalon and the kingdom of the Irish god Manannán mac Lir.

King Arthur

What about the character of King Arthur himself? Did he have any Celtic roots? The historicity of Arthur has been already discussed in chapter five of this work; let us now look at the mythological roots of the main character of the Arthurian legend.

Arthur's name appears in some of the Welsh poems originating in the sixth or seventh century but written down only during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries after Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was written in 1136 (Jackson in Loomis 1959, 12). What is more important is the fact that his name, together with the names of some of his knights can be found in several stories of Celtic origin such as *Kulhwch and Olwen*, *Rhonabwy's Dream* or *Peredur* that are part of the Welsh

Mabinogion. In the story of *Kulhwch and Olwen* Arthur is the helper of his nephew Kulhwch who needs his aid in order to be able to fulfill the tasks Olwen's father Ysbaddaden gave him when he proposed to Olwen. Arthur agrees and they together set out for a journey and finally, with the help of Arthur and magic, Olwen manages to do and get all the things Ysbaddaden asked for. Not only Arthur but some of his knights, namely Kay and Bedivere, here as Cei and Bedwyr, appear in the story as well. However, neither Arthur nor his men are the same as the readers know them from later stories.

Arthur's role in *Rhonabwy's Dream* and in *Peredur* is none too significant, he is a character that is rather in the background of the stories, yet his presence is important for it is one of the first literary mentions of Arthur on the British Isles.

The story of Peredur is significant rather for its connection to the story of the grail. It has been suggested by T.W. Rolleston that Peredur might be the model for the character of Perceval in the earliest versions of the grail legends (Rolleston 130). Peredur, similarly to Perceval is a son of a widowed mother and although his mother does not wish so, he joins the knights at Arthur's court. After some time he comes to visit two men who turn out to be his uncles. At the house of one of them he witnesses a strange thing: two young men enter the room carrying a bleeding spear, and they are followed by two maidens carrying a plate with a severed human head. Peredur, likewise Perceval, fails to ask about the meaning of all that which causes that his lame uncle could not be healed. Later, Peredur finds out that the head belonged to his cousin and that he was killed by the spear which also wounded one of his uncles (Ellis and Lloyd 72-137). The resemblance between the two stories is probably not a mere chance, it can be assumed that the two heroes must be related in some way and that the Welsh story of

Peredur was used later by Chrétien de Troyes as a source of inspiration for the grail legend.

King Arthur himself could have his counterpart in Celtic mythology as well, as suggested by Proinsias Mac Cana in his *Celtic Mythology*. He tries to compare Arthur with Fionn mac Cumhaill, the main hero of the Fionn Cycle, but the only similarities he shows are that both Fionn and Arthur are successful warriors followed by a group of their warriors or knights, both are wise rulers and both have visited the otherworld (Mac Cana115). However, it is not possible to claim that King Arthur has his counterpart in the Irish Fionn mac Cumhaill only on the basis of this information. It is an interesting idea yet it still needs to be further researched.

The only parallel in the stories of these two rulers that could be taken as significant is the love triangle both heroes are caught in. The love relationship between Fionn, his future wife Gráinne and her lover Diarmaid, which has already been described in chapter three of this work, could have served as a source of inspiration for the situation of King Arthur and his wife Guinevere who, although being married to Arthur, loves one of his best knights, Sir Lancelot, who no matter how loyal he tries to be to King Arthur, shares her feelings. The motif of a love triangle consisting of an aging man, his younger and good-looking rival and the woman both of them love is, as Miranda Green points out, a typical element of the old Celtic myths (26) and appears in several other stories such as *Deirdre and the Sons of Uisnech* (Neeson 137-180) which tells a story of Deirdre and Naoise who fall in love but have to elope together for Deirdre should become the wife of king Conchobar. They live in Scotland for some time and when they return home Naoise is killed and Deirdre has to live with Conchobar and finally kills herself as well. Another story of a love triangle can be found in Irish mythology as well. It is called *The Wooing of Étaín* (Gantz 37-59) and it tells a story of Étaín, Midir and his

wife Fuamnach who hates Étaín and in order to get rid of her, transforms her into the shape of a purple fly but despite of that Midir and Étaín eventually find the way to each other again. James MacKillop adds that the roots of the love triangle tradition can be traced even further into history to the Roman mythology in which the love triangle between the war-god Mars, the goddess of love Venus and her lover Adonis can be found (274).

Mordred

Not only King Arthur but also his son Mordred seems to have his roots in Celtic mythology. Mordred appears already in Geofrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittanniae* and since then he has been described as being Arthur's illegitimate son whom he conceived unknowingly with his half-sister Morgause. Later, Arthur hears a prophecy saying that he will be destroyed by a male child born on the first of May and so he decides to get rid of all boys born on that day by putting them on a ship sailing to the sea. Mordred is however saved and later returns to his father's court in order to get hold of Arthur's throne as well as his wife in the king's absence. Finally, they face each other in the fatal battle of Camlan in which both are lethally wounded, Mordred dies and Arthur is taken to Avalon by Morgan in order to be healed there.

The birth of Mordred on the first of May can be seen as a parallel to the birth of the Welsh bard Taliesin, who was already mentioned in this chapter, and who was also born on May Day. He tastes the magic beverage of the witch Ceridwen for which she wants to kill him. She then chases him in various shapes and finally eats him as a little grain in the shape of a hen. Ceridwen gets pregnant and Taliesin is reborn; but because of his beauty she is unable to kill him and sends him to the sea instead. Taliesin is saved by a

fisherman who brings him up and later becomes a famous poet and bard (Guest, vol. III 117-143). Here, another parallel with Mordred's birth-story can be seen.

As has been suggested by Amy Varin in her article *Mordred, King Arthur's Son* there is another story of Welsh origin that can in a way be seen as a parallel to the story of Mordred. It is called *Math, the Son of Mathonwy* and it has already been dealt with in the chapter concerning Welsh mythology, let us therefore sum it up here only briefly. It tells the story of Math and his two treacherous brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy who rape his foot-holder Goewin in whose lap Math has to rest his feet in order to be able to reign the country. When looking for a new foot-holder Math is offered Gwydion's sister Arianrhod who when tested for her virginity gives birth to two sons, Dylan and Lleu Llaw Gyffes. Dylan leaves for the sea immediately after his birth and Lleu is raised by Gwydion who proclaims to be his father (Guest, vol. III 80-107).

The parallel between Mordred and Lleu can be, according to Varin, seen in their incestuous origin for both were conceived by a brother and a sister, there is also a similarity between Mordred being sent to the sea and Dylan's departure for the sea after his birth. She also suggests Mordred's similarity with Lui Lavada (or the Irish god Lug) from the Irish Mythological Cycle who was prophesied to kill his grandfather Balor which then really happened and which could have been taken as a model for the story of Arthur and Mordred (Varin 171).

Although one cannot be wholly sure of Mordred's origin, it can be assumed that he has at least some Celtic roots for as Roger Loomis points out: "The legend of Mordred is saturated with Celtic lore" (Loomis 1997, 341). Moreover, in several Welsh triads there appears the name of Medraut which has been claimed to be the possible model for Mordred as well (Loomis 1959, 47).

Gawain

There is another character of the Arthurian legend that is probably of Celtic origin and therefore will be discussed here. It is Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's best knights. He is sometimes connected with the Welsh Gwri, the son of Pwyll and Rhiannon (Loomis 1997, 331) or with Gwalchmei who appears in the Welsh story of Kulhwch and Olwen where he is regarded as Arthur's nephew similarly to Gawain in the Arthurian legend (Lacy 320). Gawain's Celtic origin might also be supported by his appearance in the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[10], which belongs to the Arthurian cycle and where the famous beheading game is played between Gawain and the Green Knight. The Green Knight comes one day to Arthur's court and proposes a beheading game: if one of the knights dares to behead him he will return the blow a year later. Gawain accepts and cuts off the Knight's head who picks it up and leaves. A year later Gawain comes to the Green Chapel, the Green Knight's abode, where he spends three days at the end of which he should be beheaded himself. Instead, the Green Knight only wounds him slightly on the neck as a symbol for Gawain's imperfection because he secretly kept the magic sash the Green Knight's wife gave him.

The beheading game is not a new concept appearing only in Gawain's story. It can also be found in the Irish story called *Bricriu's Feast* (Gantz 219-255) which could have served as a source of inspiration for the story described above. Gawain's counterpart here is Cú Chulainn, the hero of *Bricriu's Feast* who accepts the challenge of one of the guests at the feast held by Bricriu and beheads him agreeing that he would be beheaded the next day. The following day Cú Chulainn puts his head on the block of wood waiting for the deadly blow. He is however saved and becomes the bravest man in Ireland.

---

[10] Stone, Brian. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

The popularity of the motif of beheading can be traced back to Celtic mythology in which the cult of the head played an important role. The head was taken as a symbol of human power and spirituality and therefore it was the most important part of the body. It was usual for warriors to behead their dead enemies and to keep their heads as a talisman and symbol of the warrior's strength and bravery (Clarus 49). The beheading game can thus be seen as another Celtic element in the Arthurian legend.

Excalibur

The roots of Arthur's famous sword Excalibur can be traced back to Celtic mythology as well. Arthur's legendary weapon appears already in the Welsh story of Kulhwch and Olwen where it is called Caledfwlch which was later renamed by Geoffrey of Monmouth to Caliburn (or Caliburnus) (Parry in Loomis 1959, 84) to be later reshaped into today's form Excalibur.

There are in fact two swords that are connected with King Arthur. One of them is the sword he gets by pulling it out of a stone, which made him the rightful king of the country and the other one is Excalibur which he gets from the Lady of the Lake and which he returns to her after being wounded at the battle of Camlan. In some versions of the legend the two swords are identical, but in most versions they are different.

As has already been said Excalibur was given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake and then thrown back into the lake by Bedivere after Arthur was wounded in the battle with Mordred. The lake plays an important role here which has its origin in the Celtic times when lakes, streams and rivers were special places. It is well- known that the Celts were closely connected with the natural world around them and therefore they worshipped various gods and goddesses connected with the land, hills, rivers and lakes. Water was of special importance for the Celtic people for "Water was perceived as both the life-

giving as well as life-taking element. It was often the central theme of many myths and cults of the Celtic people"[11] (Green 73). The divinities connected with water of all shapes were always goddesses: it was for example Bóand after whom the river Boyne is called, Sinann, the daughter of the god of the sea Manannán mac Lir, after whom the river Shannon is called or Sulis who was connected with the healing springs of Bath (MacKillop 38). The presence of the Lady of the Lake in the Arthurian legend could thus be explained as being derived from the Celtic tradition and as being an echo of one of the Celtic water-goddesses.

The motif of casting the sword back into the lake has its roots in Celtic culture as well. The Celts believed that rivers and lakes were the sources of vital powers and they highly respected them and worshiped them. Therefore, they often used lakes as storage places for their treasures, they also brought votive gifts such as weapons, jewelry or even chariots to them (Green 73-75). A similarity between the act of returning of Excalibur back to the Lady of the Lake and the Celtic tradition of votive gifts and worship of water can be seen here.

The origin of the other sword that was pulled by Arthur out of the stone, or rather the origin of the stone, could be found in the ancient Celtic times as well. The stone with the sword in it plays an important role in determining the future king. This can be compared with Lia Fáil or "the stone of fate", one of the four talismans of Tuatha Dé Danann which they brought to Ireland. According to mythology this magical stone was able to shriek loudly when a person supposed to be the king was sitting on it. A certain parallel can therefore be seen between the role of the shrieking stone of Tuatha Dé Danann and the stone with the sword in the Arthurian legend.

---

[11] My translation

The other talismans of Tuatha Dé Danann appeared in a way in the Arthurian legend as well. Apart from the stone of fate, Tuatha Dé Danann brought with them the magic sword of Nuadu which could not be defeated and can remotely serve as an inspiration for Excalibur as well, then they brought the cauldron of Dagda that could feed any number of people and has its parallel in the Holy Grail and finally there was Lugh's spear which was undefeatable and could have been taken as a model for the bleeding spear in the grail castle as has already been suggested by R.S.Loomis (Loomis 1991, 79).

This chapter was aimed to find some elements of Celtic mythology and culture in the Arthurian legend and although there is still place for some uncertainties and speculations, some things remain certain. One of them is the fact that the legend of King Arthur is an interesting piece of literature because its authors were able to skillfully combine both the elements of the old Celtic world with the medieval Christian world and thinking. Another fact is that several instances and traces of Celtic mythology can be found in the legends of King Arthur. Although they are often not visible at first sight, it must be admitted that the legend was influenced by the Celtic tradition and that it borrowed several concepts from it.

The later influence of Christianity and chivalric romance was only natural development for after the arrival of the Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes to the British Isles the dominant Celtic culture was marginalized and gradually replaced by a new, predominantly Christian, concept of thinking which finally overshadowed it. Thanks to the monastic scribes and scholars the old myths have nevertheless remained alive and could find their way to other literary works as well as be preserved to our days.

7. Conclusion

The world today is full of technological innovations, machines and computers that should make our life easier and faster, but they make it also more stressful and remote from everyday life, other people and above all, the world of nature all around us. People start to forget what it fells like to walk on a meadow full of blooming flowers or through autumnal forest ablaze with colours and country air. We also start to forget what our ancestors believed in and what their life values were. There are, however, some people who start to feel the need to return back to their roots, to find out more about their ancestors and their world, their beliefs, customs, rituals and gods. They start to be bored with the virtual reality of today and turn back to nature and move to the countryside and try to live in harmony with nature. The growing popularity of eco-farms and various alternative communities are a proof of this development. The revival of interest in Celtic culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is another example of the need of modern people to return back to their roots; people again start to celebrate winter and summer solstice as well as spring and autumn equinox as a reminder of the past Celtic customs.

The Celtic people knew all we try to learn and restore today. They lived in harmony with the natural world around them; they worshipped trees, forests, hills, seas and rivers. They venerated gods of such places and offered them gifts in the form of weapons, jewellery or animals. Although they might seem to be the so called "primitive" people from our "civilized" point of view, they were, however, people of great wisdom with close ties to nature, in whose culture women were almost equal to men; they were also successful warriors, traders and skilled artists; in addition to that they were able to work with iron thanks to which they became quite technologically advanced. All that is known about their culture comes either from archaeological

material or from their mythological stories that survived to our days thanks to the work of monastic scribes after Christianity spread on the British Isles. Although they sometimes misinterpreted or made changes in the old pagan stories for they either did not understand what they were transcribing or because it did not suite their Christian beliefs, their work is invaluable for without them we would not know much of what is known today of the lives and beliefs of the Celtic people. As there are not many historical records concerning the life of the Celts on the British Isles, their mythology is a valuable source of information from which we learn many facts about the life of the Celts. It mirrors the values, beliefs and customs of the people; it shows the importance of the otherworld for example, the head-hunting cult, the role of women in their society, their interconnectedness with the environment, it also shows us the life of warriors as well as the life of ordinary people. The stories are interesting even today, several hundred years after they were written down and even longer after they were composed. It is not only because they are source of information about the life of the Celts, they are also full of wisdom and they bring us closer to the natural and spiritual world that is so distant for contemporary people.

Not only does the world and myths of the Celtic people attract the attention of today's people. The sustained interest in the Arthurian legend is remarkable. The first mentions of Arthur come from Nennius's work from the ninth century, later elaborated by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century and most importantly by Chrétien de Troyes and Thomas Malory in the fifteenth century. It is interesting to see that their stories have remained popular till these days and that they still attract a wide range of readership as well as the attention of the academic circles. What lies behind the immense popularity of the legend? Is it its chivalry, courtly love or the need to escape from our civilization to the fairytale-like world of knights and their ladies? Maybe it is

the mysteriousness of the legend that attracts the attention of people, or the "very inability to explain it adequately" (Lacy 272). It has been studied by various scholars from various points of view, yet we are still not sure whether the legendary King Arthur was a real historical figure or not, whether Glastonbury, Tintagel or Avalon were really places connected with his life and deeds or whether it is only a product of the imagination of several writers. This work tried to answer some of these questions as well as to give an answer to the question of the relationship between the legend and Celtic mythology.

The Arthurian legend, although being composed mainly during the Middle Ages, shows some similarities with the Celtic mythological stories. Thanks to their relative isolation the Celts living in the area of today's Great Britain and Ireland were able to keep their traditions and beliefs longer than the continental Celts. Even long after the arrival of Christian faith to the realm of the insular Celts the druids and storytellers kept the Celtic myth alive so that it could find its way into other stories as well; it can be said that this was the case of the Arthurian legend for the research has shown that it has been influenced by the old pagan myth to a certain extent. The mythological elements present in the legend are often not visible at first sight but after a closer look certain similarities between the legend and Celtic mythology emerge. One of the examples is the connection between the Holy Grail and the mythical cauldron of the Irish god Dagda, both of which can feed many people but cannot be owned by everyone. The cauldron as such played an important role in Celtic mythology in general, which is illustrated by its appearance in the Welsh story of Taliesin as the cauldron of wisdom or as the cauldron of rebirth of Bendigeidfran in the story of Branwen as well as by the Gundestrup cauldron found in the nineteenth century in Denmark. Another example of the similarity between Celtic mythology and the Arthurian legend is the character of Morgan le Fay,

the sister of Arthur and a powerful sorceress who shares many similarities with the Celtic goddess Modron whose origin could be found in Matrona, the Celtic goddess of rivers. Morgan le Fay's home on the island of Avalon has its roots in Celtic mythology as well, being derived either from Emain Ablach, the Land of Apples and the kingdom of Mannanán mac Lir or from the Celtic otherworld with which it shares several characteristics. King Arthur's son Mordred shares similar fate with the Welsh hero Taliesin as well as with Lui Lavada from the Irish Mythological Cycle. Similarly, Gawain is sometimes connected with Gwri, the son of Rhiannon and Pwyll or with Gwalchmei who can be found in the story of Kulhwch and Olwen as Arthur's nephew. Finally, there is the sword Excalibur that has its counterpart in Celtic mythology as well. It already appears in the Welsh tale of Kulhwch and Olwen as Arthur's sword Caledfwlch renamed later by Geoffrey of Monmouth to Caliburn from which there was only short way to Excalibur.

This work could not, however, give answers to all questions concerning the legend of King Arthur and its Celtic roots. It has, nonetheless, tried to contribute to the clarification of this problematic field and to find at least some similarities between the two areas. Yet, there is still vast space for further research of the area and although it has been researched by many scholars so far, none have come with any final version of the story of the origin of the legend as well as the historicity of King Arthur yet. It is therefore possible that although we try, we will never be able to uncover the imaginary veil and solve all the mysteries surrounding the legend and its origin. Maybe, it should remain so, for mystery belongs to the legend and to its possible Celtic roots as well.

Bibliography

Works Cited and Consulted:

Arthurian Chronicles: Represented by Wace and Layamon. London: J.M. Dent, 1912.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *Mlhy Avalonu*. Trans. Dana Vlčková. Praha: Knižní klub,

    2001.

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*. New

    York: Routledge, 1990.

Campbell, Joseph. *Proměny Mýtu v Čase: Vývoj Mýtů od Raných Kultur až po*

    Středověké Legendy. Trans. Hana Loupová. Praha: Portál, 2000.

Chadwick, Nora. *The Celts*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.

Chrétien de Troyes. *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. W.W. Comfort. London: Dent, 1975.

Clarus, Ingeborg. *Keltské Mýty: Člověk a Jeho "Jiný Svět"*. Trans. Jan Hlavička.

    Praha: Vyšehrad, 2001.

Dumézil, Georges. *Mýty a Bohové Indoevropanů*. Trans. Ivo Budil. Praha: Institut pro

    středoevropskou kulturu a politiku, 1997.

Filip, Jan. *Celtic Civilization and Its Heritage*. Praha: Academia, 1976.

Gantz, Jeffrey. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *Histories of the Kings of Britain*. Trans. Sebastian Evans.

    London: J.M. Dent, [19--?].

Green, Miranda. *Keltské mýty*. Trans. Michal Kovář. Praha: Lidové noviny, 1998.

Gregory, Lady. *Irish Mythology*. London: Bounty Books, 2004.

Guest, Lady Charlotte. *The Mabinogion*. Vol. 2. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902.

 ---. *The Mabinogion*. Vol. 3. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902.

Hemming, Jessica. "Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in Pwyll."

    <u>Western Folklore</u> 57. 1 (1998). 30 Aug. 2010

    <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1500247?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Jackson, Kenneth Hurlstone. *A Celtic Miscellany*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

    Books, 1971.

Jones, Graham J. *The History of Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales, 2000.

Jones, William Lewis. *King Arthur in History and Legend*. Cambridge: University

    Press, 1914.

Joyce, Patrick Weston. *A Concise History of Ireland*. Dublin, 1920.

Krappe, A.H. "Avallon." <u>Speculum</u> 18. 3 (1943). 5 Sept. 2010

    < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2853706?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffrey Ashe. *The Arthurian Handbook*. New York: Garland

    Publishing, 1997.

Loomis, Roger Sherman, ed. *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: a Collaborative*

    History. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959.

---. *The Grail: from Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. Princeton: Princeton University

    Press, 1991.

---. *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*. Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997.

---. "Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses." <u>Speculum</u> 20. 2 (1945). 30 Aug. 2010

    <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2854594?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

---. "The Irish Origin of the Grail Legend." <u>Speculum</u> 8. 4 (1933). 5 Sept. 2010

    < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2855884?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

---. "Arthurian Tradition and Folklore." <u>Folklore</u> 69. 1 (1958). 6 Sept. 2010

    < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259210?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Mabinogi: Keltské Pověsti. Trans. Jan Vilikovský. Praha: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění, 1965.

The Mabinogion. Vol. 1. Trans. T.P. Ellis and John Lloyd. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929.

The Mabinogion. Vol. 2. Trans. T.P. Ellis and John Lloyd. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929.

Mac Cana, Proinsias. *Celtic Mythology*. London: Hamlyn, 1973.

MacKillop, James. *Keltské Bájesloví: Průvodce Keltskou Mythologií*. [*Myths and Legends of the Celts*] Trans. Václav Pelíšek. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2009.

Malory, Thomas, Sir. *Artušova Smrt*. Trans. Jan Caha. Praha: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury, hudby a umění, 1960.

---. *Le Morte d'Arthur: King Arthur and the Legends of the Round Table*. Trans. Keith Baines. London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1962.

Matthews, Caitlín. *Keltské Duchovní Tradice*. Trans. Milan Hencl and Ivan Tichý. Praha: Alternativa, 1996.

Matthews, John. *King Arthur and the Grail Quest: Myth and Vision from Celtic Times to the Present*. London: Blandford, 1994.

Mauduit, J.A. *Keltové*. Trans.Liana Veselá. Praha: Panorama, 1979.

Moody, Theodore W. and Francis X. Martin. *Dějiny Irska.* Trans. Milena Pellarová. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 1996.

Neeson, Eoin. *Irské Mýty a Legendy*. Trans. Ivana Daňhelová. Brno: Ando Publishing, 1995.

The Oxford English Dictionary. 20 June, 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

Pearce, Susan M. "The Cornish Elements in the Arthurian Tradition." <u>Folklore </u>85.3

   (1974). 7 Sept. 2010 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260070?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Procházka, Martin and Zdeněk Stříbrný. *Slovník Spisovatelů: Anglická Literatura,*

   Africké Literatury v Angličtině, Australská Literatura, Indická Literatura v

   Angličtině, Irská Literatura, Kanadská Literatura v Angličtině, Karibská

   Literatura v Angličtině, Novozélandská Literatura, Skotská Literatura, Waleská

   Literatura. Praha: Libri, 1996.

Puhvel, Jaan. *Srovnávací Mytologie*. Trans. Václav Pelíšek. Praha: Lidové

   noviny, 1997.

Rolleston, T.W. *Ilustrovaný Průvodce Keltskou Mytologií*. Trans. Jan Sládek. Brno:

   Jota, 1996.

Ross, Anne. *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts*. London: Carousel Books, 1972.

Scott, Michael. *Irish Myths and Legends*. London: Sphere, 2008

Staudte-Lauber, Annalena. *Keltové*. Trans. Ivana Kraus. Praha: Pragma, 1996.

Stone, Brian. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Varin, Amy. "Mordred, King Arthur's Son." <u>Folklore</u> 90. 2 (1979). 5 Sept. 2010

   < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259595?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Welsh, Andrew. "Doubling and Incest in the Mabinogi." <u>Speculum </u>65. 2 (1990). 5 Sept.

   2010 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/2864296?origin=JSTOR-pdf>.

Williams, Mary. "King Arthur in History and Legend." Folklore 73.2 (1962). 23 June

   2010 < http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258608>.

Summary

The aim of this thesis was to find out whether there are some elements of Celtic mythology present in the Arthurian legend. Although the legend has been studied countless times by various scholars, yet we are still not sure whether the legendary King Arthur was a real historical figure or not, whether Glastonbury, Tintagel or Avalon were really places connected with his life and deeds or whether it is only a product of the imagination of several writers. This work therefore tried to answer some of these questions as well as to give an answer to the question of the relationship between the legend and Celtic mythology.

The first part of the thesis focuses on Celtic mythology in general; it deals with its origins and it tries to identify the main characteristics of the myths: what characters appear in them and what purpose and place did the myths have in Celtic society. Apart from focusing on the mythological texts only, the thesis deals with the cultural aspect of Celtic mythology as well. It explores the world of the Celts; it shows the origin of the Celtic people, their customs and traditions as well as their everyday life and beliefs. The second part of the thesis is devoted to the Arthurian legend and its relationship and connection with Celtic mythology. It focuses on the origins of the Arthurian legend and the historicity of King Arthur but above all it tries to locate some mythological elements in the legend.

This work tried to find some similarities between the Arthurian legend and Celtic mythology and although it seems that Celtic mythology influenced the Arthurian legend to a certain extent, there still remains space for further research in this field. This work only tried to contribute to the uncovering of the imaginary veil of mystery surrounding the Arthurian legend and its Celtic roots.

Resumé

Cílem této práce bylo zjistit, zda se v britské legendě o králi Artušovi objevují prvky keltské mytologie. Legenda o králi Artušovi už byla mnohokrát studována různými badateli, nikdo však ještě nedokázal s jistotou říci, zda byl legendární Artuš skutečnou historickou postavou žijící a působící na místech jako Tintagel či Glastonbury, nebo zda se jedná pouze o výplod představivosti několika autorů. Tato práce se proto pokusila zodpovědět některé otázky týkající se legendy o králi Artušovi, zejména pak její vztah s keltskou mytologií.

První část práce se zabývá keltskou mytologií všeobecně. Snaží se ukázat její hlavní charakteristiky a témata, stejně jako její místo v keltské společnosti. Tato část práce se nezabývá pouze zkoumáním mytologických textů, ale snaží se též přiblížit čtenáři kulturní aspekty keltské mytologie. Snaží se popsat nejen původ keltských obyvatel dnešní Velké Británie, ale zabývá se také každodenním životem Keltů, jejich zvyky, tradicemi, náboženstvím a uměním. Druhá část práce je potom věnována Artušovské legendě a jejímu vztahu s keltskou mytologií. Zabývá se nejen vznikem a původem samotné legendy ale také se pokouší odpovědět na otázky související s původem krále Artuše. Zejména se však zabývá vztahem keltské mytologie a Artušovské legendy, ve které se snaží odhalit mytologické prvky.

Ačkoliv se zdá, že existuje určitá souvislost mezi Artušovskou legendou a keltskou mytologií, nabízí se zde stále prostor pro další výzkum v této oblasti. Tato práce se snažila alespoň částečně přispět k odhalení pomyslné roušky tajemství, jíž je legenda o králi Artušovi stále opředena i po mnoha letech vědeckého zkoumání.