THE ENCHANTED ISLANDS: A COMPARISON OF MYTHOLOGICAL TRADITIONS FROM IRELAND AND ICELAND

A Pro Gradu Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Vertailen tutkielmassani keskenään kelttiläistä ja skandinaavista mytologiaa. Molemmilla maailmankatsomuksilla uskotaan olevan juuret samassa indoeurooppalaisessa lähteessä ja ne ovat olleet historian aikana jatkuvasti tekemisissä toistensa kanssa. Tästä johtuen niiden uskotaan olevan samankaltaisia rakenteeltaan ja sisällöltään.

Tutkielman lähtökohtana on, että mytologioiden samasta alkuperästä huolimatta ne ovat kehittäneet omat, toisistaan riippumattomat maailmankuvat. Analyysin päälähteitä ovat englanninkieliset käännökset keskiaikaisista teksteistä, kuten ”Book of Invasions”, Proosa-Edda ja Runo-Edda, sekä Crosslay-Hollandin ja P.B. Ellisin kirjaamat myytit. Kriittisen tarkastelun kohteena ovat myös muun muassa Hermin, Eliaden ja MacCullochin esittämät teoriat mytologioiden synnystä ja tarkoituksesta.

Teorioiden ja tekstien vertailu antaa ymmärtää, että molemmat mytologiat kantavat samankaltaisia indoeurooppalaisille isäkulttuureille tyypillisiä maskuliinisia elementtejä, mutta eroavat toisistaan mytologiaranteiden perustana olevilta elämänfilosofioiltaan. Kelttiläinen mytologia oli muodoltaan ikuinen jatkumo, skandinaavinen perustui maailman väistämättömään tuhoutumiseen. On myös todennäköistä, että kelttiläinen kulttuuri on saanut vaikutteita sitä edeltäneeltä maatrialkaariselta kultilta.

Asiasanat – Keywords mytologia -- keltit, mytologia – Pohjoismaat, indoeurooppalaiset kansat, irlantilaiset, islantilaiset	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ancient Europe was a home of many tribes, cultures and their beliefs. Before Christianity reached the most obscure corners of the continent, mythologies had a firm grip over the early European societies. They flavored the land and its people. The later conversion to Christianity did not destroy completely the previous, older cults. In some areas the old stories were erased almost totally, but every now and then a Christian monk, a true follower of a new faith, felt the need to preserve those mysterious legends of his ancestors. That was the case in Ireland and Iceland, where the two major mythologies, the Norse and the Celtic, were written down.

These two mythological traditions traveled for centuries across Europe and they took their final form at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. It is quite remarkable that the myths of two big and influential pagan groups were preserved on two islands in the western corners of Europe. The geographical location of two islands, as well as the historical and cultural contacts between them, leads to many speculations about the possible influence of the mythical stories that were composed there. Many scholars, like Eliade and Herm, have drawn attention to some symbols and elements that are supposed to be similar, or from the same source, in both the Norse and Celtic mythologies. However, we cannot say anything with one hundred percent accuracy, and what is an obvious similarity for one scholar, is a mere coincide for the other.

Nevertheless, it is worth trying to compare these two traditions. The richness and vividness of both Nordic and Celtic stories is impressive. Furthermore, the fact that those myths were written down on two remote islands is quite remarkable. I intend to show similarities and differences, common patterns and unique features of both mythologies, and some of the interpretations (probably the most usual ones, and some of the more controversial ones); both of them are said to come from the same Indo-European source, but they reflect different features of this source (if there was only one main source). Moreover, I would opt for a broader context in my work. The mythologies were not exactly composed on those two islands, they were written down

there. In order to understand the possible influences and borrowings we have to take into consideration earlier cultural contacts as well.

To my knowledge a detailed comparison of these two mythologies has not been made. Certain features are often compared (Sigurdsson: 1988), but I have not found a comparison that would deal with these mythologies in a wider scale. Certainly, the very fact that two of the most known and recognized mythologies in Europe were written down on two islands placed on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean was an inspiration for many researches, especially from the historical and genetic point of view. Moreover, some scholars claim that a few of the Norse stories were influenced or even borrowed from the Celtic tradition (after Sigurdsson: 1988). However, most of the conclusions are very vague, as we cannot decide what was influenced by what, nor we can decide when it happened. Furthermore, as Eliade (1982) claims, both mythologies came from the roughly same Indo-European mythological source, so similarities are unavoidable.

While comparing these two mythologies, I intend to present different accounts and theories about them, as well as some explanations about the similarities. I also intend to concentrate a bit more on the differences. It is worth analyzing how differently the reality was presented among those pre-Christian peoples. Scholars quite often pay most attention to similarities, but the special features and unique elements that make the Norse tradition so different from the Celtic one should be taken more into consideration. It is interesting how these two groups present such unrelated views of the world, how theoretically similar elements take diametrally different shapes. I intend to show that the differences between those mythologies might be a result of different world philosophies presented by the Norse and the Celts.

Furthermore, I hope to be able to relate these mythological stories to how people looked at the universe, and how they established a connection with it. It is an almost impossible task, but I am tempted to try to find out how the Celtic and Norse ways of thinking are imprinted in their mythologies. Geographically, historically, and culturally the islands represent some similarities, but their mythologies contain quite different features. I agree with Morris (2001: 18) that the period when religious/mythological ideas were being shared should be placed long before the

historical time known to us. We cannot determine, for example, in what phase were the Norse myths when they reached Iceland, or whether/ how much they changed under Celtic influence. I will try to show the possible ways in which certain mythological stories could have been formed, but one should not expect a final answer.

The analysis of myths is based on translations of early Christian manuscripts that contained first written versions of the Celtic and Norse mythologies, which includes translated texts from the Irish *Book of Invasions* and the Icelandic *Prose and Poetic Edda*. Moreover, I use several theories about the meaning and origins of the Norse and the Celtic mythologies, which are presented by scholars like Mircea Eliade, John Arnott MacCulloch and Kevin Crossley-Holland. Those secondary sources discuss many different and even contradictory theories. I take a critical view on some of them, as they sometimes seem to be based only on speculations. Obviously, it is not always possible to get any kind of clear and unquestionable proof in the subject of mythologies.

In the next chapter of this thesis I will present the historical context of my work, which is divided into three sections. The first deals with the historical context of both Norse and Celtic peoples. At the same time I present information about the islands in question, Iceland and Ireland. This section also includes some information about the contacts between the two islands, and a revolutionary and controversial theory of Gerhard Herm, who derives the origins of the Norse and Celtic tribes from the Northern Europe. The last section of this chapter is devoted to the written sources, i.e. the written material from Ireland and Iceland that was used as a base for the modern translations. In my thesis I use as primary sources translations of myths form Old Irish and Old Icelandic, as well as on some myths and legends retold by modern scholars and writers. Since I do not intend to make any linguistic analysis, I consider it enough to work on translations.

The third chapter of my thesis deals with the mythological theories, as well as with some aspects of cult and religion in Celtic and Norse traditions, and how it reflects in the mythological stories. Moreover, I examine how Christianity replaced those older cults, and how it actually helped to develop written vernacular literature. The fourth

chapter gets finally to mythological stories. There I present the distinct features of the Norse and Celtic mythological worlds, how they were built, that was their origin, their structure and final destruction.

Furthermore, I intend to present some controversial interpretations and the ‘missing’ myths. In the fifth chapter I analyze the divine tribes of Aesir in Icelandic myths and the Tuatha Dé Danann in the Irish sources, their position and their ‘history’, as well as their final disappearance. In this chapter I also present the main gods and goddesses of both tribes. The next chapter is about mortal heroes and animals that appear in those mythologies. I have chosen to present one main hero from every tradition, i.e. CuChalainn as a representative of a Celtic warrior, and Sigurd, as his Nordic counterpart. The last part of this chapter is about monsters and animals from both traditions. There, I will present their symbolism and the functions that they hold in both mythologies. The seventh chapter is the conclusion.

2 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In this chapter I briefly present the historical and cultural context of both the Norse and Celtic mythologies. In my historical analysis there is an account of ancient Irish and Icelandic history. Furthermore, I intend to present the probable origins of the peoples that created those mythologies, as well as earlier history of the Norse and the Celts. There are obvious problems with researching those ancient groups, and it is not possible to establish one unmistakable view of where they came from or who they really were.

The next part of this first chapter deals with the contacts between the Norse and the Celts, the problems of influences and trading of ideas from both cultures. Here, I also critically present the controversial theory of the origins of both groups and their cultures presented by Gerhard Herm (1976). The writer himself emphasizes in his book that it is not a fully scholarly theory. Nevertheless, it provides a very interesting account of how the Norse and Celtic mythological ideas could have been developed. Moreover, it provides an explanation of the striking similarities that are found in both mythologies.

In the second part of this chapter I describe in detail the written primary sources used in this thesis, i.e. among others Icelandic *Eddas* and *Volsunga Saga* and Celtic *The Book of Invasions* and retold myths from, for example, *Táin Bó Cuailnge (the Cattle Raid).* I explain their historical origins and their content. The only written accounts of those two cultures were produced in the very end of their long history, in Ireland and Iceland. As for their continental adventures, the Vikings and druids are silent. All we have left is some archeological evidence and accounts of the Greek and Roman writers, like Strabo, Diodorus and Polybius. However, although scholars base their work on these same elements, they have very different views on the matter of history, origins, cults and religions of the Norse and the Celts. In my thesis I present the most influential and well established theories, and I try to show some more controversial approaches as well.

2.1. Historical context

2.1.1. The Celts and Ireland

The Celts are quite a mysterious group, or groups of invaders from the East. After centuries of research scholars cannot agree what was the place of their origin, or even if there was one central place where Celtic culture and tradition originated. As Grantz (1981: 3) points out: 'The conservative view, and perhaps the most prevalent, is that the Celts surfaced with the beginning of the Iron Age in Europe, roughly 1000 B.C.' This claim is based mostly on the archeological evidence of the Celtic-like art that was found in Europe. But where did the Celts come from?

Many writers point to the shores of The Black Sea as the possible homeland of the Celts (Herm 1976, Bulas 2004). Moreover, the similarities between the Celts and the older Scythian culture, which developed there, are emphasized. Herm (1976: 70) points out at the 'nomad- like' mentality of the Celts, which was a characteristic feature of the Scythians. They constantly and restlessly wandered around, they were primarily warriors, and horses had a very important position in their culture and style of life. These characteristics were very similar to the Celts as well. Furthermore, their style of art, which was highly ornamental with plenty of details, seemed to derive from the sophisticated Scythian art.

Scythians were known to the classical world. The Persian king Darius tried to defeat them in their homeland, which was placed on the shores of the Black Sea (Herodotus 1996: 240-310). However, according to Herodotus, that turned out to be impossible, because he could not face them in open battle. They could attack out of nowhere, riding their horses, and then disappear in endless steppe. It is probable that some of those horse-riding proud warriors moved further west. Important settlements were found in the area of Danube River, and in Bohemia. In those areas Celtic culture and art developed and flourished, and not surprisingly it is often referred to as their homeland (Grantz 1981: 4). The famous Celtic expansion westward into France, Spain, and later to the British Isles and even Turkey, most likely started from those lands in Central and Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, Eliade (1982: 137) recognizes a proto-Celtic settlement in Urnfield culture of central Europe. According to him it was the influence of the Cimmerians, the descendants of the Scythian culture from the shores of the Black Sea that shaped the Celtic military aristocracy (Eliade 1982: 137). The Celts traveled west, south and north. They reached as far as Denmark, and some of the most precious archeological evidence of Celtic culture, for example the famous Gundestrup Cauldron comes from Denmark (Green 1992: 221).

The wandering Celtic warriors also marched to Greece and attacked the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, probably in 279 (Herm 1976: 19). They caused chaos and destruction. Furthermore, the Celtic tribes met the rising power of Rome, and were quite successful in fighting with them. Celtic wars against the Romans started from around 400 B.C. and continued with longer or shorter brakes till the time of Julius Ceasar and his famous wars against the Gauls in the 50s B.C. As Herm (1976: 19) notices, quoting Polybius: 'It was partly thanks to the Celts that Roman legionaries had become such outstanding troops. As Polybius (...) remarks: "Once they had got used to being struck by Gauls they were incapable of imagining anything worse".'

Those wild, blond warriors, full of battle rage and not afraid of death, shook the ancient world and made boldly their way to the shores of Atlantic Ocean. From France, and probably also from Spain, they reached the Irish shores (for example Powell 1958). Here, a new problem appears. Scholars do not agree when or where from exactly the Celtic conquest of Ireland took place. Furthermore, there is a recent discussion if anything of a bigger scale migration to Ireland happened at all (Grantz 1981).

Ireland became an island in the early post- glacial period. The earliest evidence of settlement dates back to the Mesolithic period, which was over nine thousand years ago (Barry 2000: 4). The time and scale of the Celtic migration (or migrations) is a question open to discussion. Some researches view the Beaker Folk culture of the British Isles as essentially Celtic, and thus they date the first waves of Celtic invaders to the early Bronze Age, around 1800 B.C. which would be shortly followed by the emigration to Ireland (Grantz 1981: 3). On the other hand, Eliade (1982: 137-139) identifies Celtic-Irish art and culture with the Celtic culture of La Tene, France, which

flourished about 500 B.C., and in fact the invasion of Ireland should be dated more or less from that period. Ó Corráin admits the vagueness of evidence and agrees with Eliade's view: 'In fact, scholars are not at all sure when Ireland was conquered by the Celts, but many would agree that the Celtic conquest or conquests (…) took place during the second half of the first millennium B.C.' (1989: 1)

Scholars struggle here with a lack of archeological evidence in Ireland. That Irish art and culture was essentially Celtic does not necessary mean that its creators had dominantly Celtic blood in their veins. As a matter of fact 'the rich store in Celtic language, and literary tradition, that has survived from ancient times in Ireland must contrast with the present very incomplete archeological testimony from that island' (Powell 1958: 55). This puzzle led to theories that there was no 'conquest' of Ireland as such, but rather 'evolution of the indigenous population into a Celtic one at the behest of a small number of aristocratic invaders' (Grantz 1981: 6). In that case, a large- scale immigration into Ireland would not be necessary. Moreover, the most important archeological sites in Ireland, like New Grange, are pre-Celtic, but were successfully adopted by the newcomers. Irish 'Celticness' was unique, and perhaps we can find the source of this uniqueness in Ó Corráin's explanation (1989: 2):

> It must be remembered, too, that Ireland had highly developed and impressive cultures in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and the incoming Celts, who were never more than a dominant minority amongst a non-Celtic and non-Indo-European majority, were heavily influenced by the societies which they found before them in Ireland. (…) Early Irish mythological writings link the great Neolithic and Bronze Age sites with the ancient gods and regard them as cult centers of great importance – displaying a continuity of cult as well as occupation.

Furthermore, the island itself had a massive impact on the culture and mythology of the new coming Celts. Ireland became the main character of their myths and legends. We may never be sure how much the 'original' Celtic belief system and storytelling changed on that green island. We do know, though, that the names of deities were different, that the Irish worshipped their own heroes, like CúChulainn and Finn, who were unknown to the other Celtic tribes. Moreover, the enigmatic deity called Cernunnos, so famous in France for example does not appear in Irish stories (for

example Powell 1958). Ireland changed its Celtic inhabitants and reshaped their traditional cults. Thus, it is so unique even among the other Celtic heritage all over Europe.

This fusion of old Bronze Age cults and ‘new’ Celtic ideas allowed Celtic Ireland to produce elements not known to the rest of the Celtic world. This unique mix of traditions also preserved there the Iron Age Celtic culture long after it died out elsewhere in Europe. Furthermore, under the influence of the new cult, Christianity, Irish Celts produced written accounts, literature on scale not existing among the Celts before, and comparable with the classical poems of Iliad and Odyssey. It is the power of the written word, produced by educated Christian monks, that makes Ireland today a proud holder of the ancient Celtic heritage.

2.1.2. The Norse and Iceland

The Northern Germanic tribes were already present when the Celtic wave appeared on the European horizon. According to the scholars, like for example Eliade (1982), the migration to the northern parts of Europe started quite early from the east. From the steppe came the Indo-Europeans with their masculine cults of horse and bull, and the patriarchal system. As Herm writes: 'Then the steppe peoples emerge in the middle Danube, move further west and finally reach even Denmark, Southern Sweden, Norway and the British Isles. (…) The older European cultures now gave up their matriarchal ways and adopted the Indo-European patriarchal system, renouncing their earth-oriented fertility cults, instead to sun-gods – those to whom horses and bulls were sacrificed in the steppe' (1976 80-81).

The proto-German/Scandinavian tribes predominantly had similar mentality to the Celts, with masculine cults of bulls and horses, and the importance of warriors. Those early settlers created quite a prosperous culture in Sweden and Denmark during the Bronze Age. The climate was milder and the contacts with the south were lively (Herm: 1976). However, the prosperity of the homeland of future Vikings ended in the beginning of the Iron Age. 'The opening centuries of the Iron Age were a depressed period for most of Scandinavia. The wealth and liveliness of the Bronze Age dulled and contracted (Jones 1968: 19-20)'. Not only climatic changes appeared, but also the Celts showed their abilities. This was the Celtic time, an epoch of their power, glory and expansion. The North froze under Celtic pressure, waiting for better times. Gerhard Herm presents an interesting view of this shift, which actually links the Norse and the Celts together. I discuss that theory in the following chapter.

However, the time of Celtic affluence did not last long, and the Norse tribes hardened in the new circumstances. They recovered from the material and cultural impoverishment, and soon enough they were a threat to the Celts (Jones 1968: 23). For the Romans, they were a new savage enemy from the North. Herm presents Strabo's view of that new European force: 'The Germans (…) were a people living east of the Rhine. They differed from the Celts if the left bank, being even taller, more savage and blond' (1976: 67). Those tribes and their descendants had to wait few more centuries

to show to Europe their real might and power, when as bold and cruel Vikings they ‘held the world at ransom’ (Morris 2001: 10).

The next important phase of Nordic history started when most of Europe, including Ireland, was already Christian. Fast and swift wooden boats started to leave the shores of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, giving the birth to the Norse pirates. Traditionally, the eight century is marked as the beginning of the Viking Age, which lasted approximately until the eleventh century. During that period, using Hjálmarsson’s (1993: 11) expression ‘these Nordic nations were practically at war with the rest of the world’.

In a relatively short time the Vikings were known all around Europe, spreading fear and destruction in many costal areas. The first recorded Viking raid on England took place in 793, when the monastery at Lindisfarne was destroyed. Ireland was first raided in 795 (Hjálmarsson 1993: 11). Restlessly sailing around, the Vikings moved west, they discovered Greenland, reached the shores of future North America, and on one of their trips they found Iceland. That quite small, cold island was discovered around 850 by the Norsemen who had probably driven off course (Byock 2001: 8).

The island seemed deserted. Nevertheless, the first inhabitants there were not the Vikings, but, surprisingly enough, Irish hermits, who traveled there looking for peace and solitude. The first vernacular historian of Iceland, Ari Thorgilsson, mentions their presence at the time when the settlement of the island was initiated around 860. The Irish were in Iceland nearly a century before the Norse came. However, those hermits were not able to establish a lasting settlement. Most likely they arrived sporadically, and stayed there for some time (Hjálmarsson 1993: 10). As Hjálmarsson notices, those first settlers did not have any lasting influence on Iceland (1993: 11). They gave way the followers of the ancient deities, the land-hungry Norsemen.

As mentioned above, the Age of Settlement started around 860, and lasted till 930, and by this date, according to Ari Thorgilsson, Iceland was supposed to be fully occupied, and proved to be a lasting and successful ‘Norse colonial experiment overseas’ (Jones 1968: 279). Since the settlers did not have to deal with any indigenous population of the island, their own culture and customs grew strong there. Separated from the rest of

the European continent, and located quite far away from everything, Iceland was so to speak safe from any influences from the outside for quite a long time.

However, the Icelandic settlement did not consist purely of Norse Vikings. As a matter of fact, the majority of immigrants were free farmers. According to Hjálmarsson 'The great majority of the immigrants came from the west and southwest of Norway and some might have been from other Nordic countries, while a considerable number originated from the British Isles, and also from Ireland, Scotland and the islands to the west and North of Scotland' (1993: 17). The Norsemen already had their settlements in those lands, and many of those early Norse settlers moved to Iceland, sometimes bringing with them Irish or Scottish wives and slaves. Some of them might even have been Christians, but it did not have any visible influence on the non-Christian majority, which stayed faithful to the old cult until the beginning of the new millennium. I discuss more the influence of those Celtic elements in Iceland in the next section.

Iceland was converted to Christianity comparatively late, in the year 1000. Just like in Ireland, the newly converted society quickly produced written versions of the old myths and legends, and thus Iceland became the only place in the Norse world where the Norse pagan oral tradition was preserved. Icelandic sources played exactly the same role for the Norse and Scandinavian heritage as the early Irish literature for the rest of the Celtic world. As Eliade remarks: 'It is only in Iceland (…) that a sufficiently consistent oral tradition was preserved to enable us to reconstruct (…) both mythology and cult' (1982: 154).

2.1.3. Celtic and Norse contacts. The theory of Gerhard Herm

The contacts between the Norse and the Celts existed long before members of both groups found their homes on two islands on the edge on the Atlantic Ocean. Starting in central Europe, the Celts and the Norse grew familiar to each other. The German tribes took the place of the fading Celtic power in territories of future Germany and France. However, it is the later contacts between Christian Ireland and pagan Vikings that interests scholars. The fact that the amazing examples of vernacular literature rooted in the pre-Christian tradition was composed first in Ireland and then in Iceland, prompted the questions of influences and sharing of ideas. The mythologies written down on those islands bear some similarities, or hints of similar origin.

The geographical position was certainly favorable for historical and cultural contacts, albeit not usually friendly. The eighth century saw the rise of the Vikings, and soon Europe learnt their name. The first Viking raids in Ireland and Britain took place around 793, and during following decades they intensified. The Vikings that attacked Ireland were most likely mainly Norwegians. For the first about forty years the raids were so called 'hit-and-run' incidents and the attackers appeared and disappeared quickly. In time those rapid raids changed into planned migration. The most famous Viking settlement in Ireland was Dublin, but obviously there were others (Ó Corráin 1989: 31-33).

The degree to which those two cultures mixed in Ireland is a debatable point. Some Viking elements survived there in names of three provinces if Ireland, i.e. Ulster, Leister, and Munster, the ending *–ster* being from the Norse language (Ó Corráin 1989: 36 and Nowacki 2004: 9). Moreover, the first traditional king of Dublin, Olaf the White, was a Viking, and also a claimed descendant of Sigurd the Volsung, one of the greatest Norse heroes (Morris 2001: 10). Later on, when the settlement in Iceland began, many Vikings from Ireland, Scotland and Hebrides traveled there as well. As mentioned before, those settlers brought with them Gaelic wives and slaves. There were also some independent Celtic colonists. Thus, in Icelandic sagas one can find some names that were definitely Celtic in origin, such as Njáll and Kormákr, in Old Irish Níall and Cormac (Byock 2001: 9).

The Viking presence in Ireland for two centuries surely influenced the Irish, but the Norse could pick up some elements from Celtic culture as well. It has been suggested by Sigurdsson that the Norse settlers in Ireland, or their descendants, could understand Irish literary entertainment. The storytelling and oral tradition was rich and lively in Ireland at that time. Obviously, this prompted a hypothesis 'that Icelandic literature was influenced by the Gaelic world where oral literature was highly developed and written prose sagas were produced in the vernacular' (Sigurdsson 1988: 11). Nowhere else in the Norse world a written literature was produced to the extent as it happened in Iceland.

Sigurdsson adds that 'it is a debatable point, however, whether such secondary knowledge of storytelling and deep-rooted literary tradition was enough to build up a culture in Iceland in total contrast to the original Norwegian one' (1988: 22). It might be that the rich Irish literary tradition helped to develop a similar one in Iceland. Consciously or not, it might have been used as a model for Icelandic writers, who were already familiar with such literature. Furthermore, the context in which the Norse myths and legends were written down was very similar to the one in Ireland. Short after the conversion to Christianity some monks or scribes decided to write down the pagan stories that reflected their ancestors' cult and religion. The same pattern happened it Ireland about four centuries earlier.

The Irish literary tradition was definitely older, and obviously already well-established when the Norse invaders landed in Ireland. As Sigurdsson mentions, many scholars attempted to find ideas, motifs, or events in the Icelandic literature that could have been directly borrowed from the Irish sources. However, it is not possible to establish once and for all that such and such element had to be originally Celtic, and then it was just reused in the Norse sources. Furthermore, the conclusions drawn on analysis of just some aspects and elements are usually quite vague. We should bear in mind that when the Vikings got to Ireland it was a meeting of already devout Christians and incomers described as 'savage pagans', ignorant to the word of Jesus Christ. The Irish were no longer the worshippers of Lug or Dagda when they were attacked by the worshippers of Loki and Freya. For the Norse, their mythology was still alive; they lived and died according to the words of Odin and Thor. For the Irish, the cult of their ancestors was already becoming a relic, a vague recollection of the

past traditions. Nevertheless, the Irish successfully concretized early Christianity with older, pre-Christian elements, thus creating unique, Irish version of the new religion.

Did the Norse stories change their content or character under that predominantly Christian influence flavored with Celtic spirit? Would the Norse rethink their mythology by admiring Irish literary achievements? On those points I have to agree with Sigurdsson's statement: 'The general conclusion which may be drawn from looking at Gaelic influence in Old Norse/Icelandic mythology are therefore in line with what was said earlier. It neither formed the tradition nor changed its basic characteristics' (1988: 85). It is easily acceptable, however, that the Norse literature flourished because it had a model in the Irish writings.

Still, one has to remember that the Norse and the Celts did not meet on Irish shores for the first time in history. If any exchange of myths, symbols or ideas had happened, it could have been long time before that, when both groups were marching through Europe, seeking their destinations. Furthermore, Eliade (1982) among others, suggests a common ancestry of both Norse and Celtic mythologies. According to him they came from the Indo-European tradition, and they reflect its elements, albeit differently. Eliade views the Norse and the Celts as generally coming from the same Eastern stem. They started they journey west and formed their own religious systems vaguely based on the same ideological ancestry and developed it into two different cultures. Gerhard Herm presents a bit different theory, which places the Norse and the Celts even closer together.

In his book, Gerhard Herm presents a theory that the ancient Atlantis, a capital of highly-developed civilization described by Plato, was placed in northern Europe, in the northern shores of Germany, Denmark, and in southern Sweden. He presents Jurgen Spanuth, a historian, as the first who proposed such an interpretation of Plato's saga of Atlantis. Herm provides his explanation, based on Spanuth's claim, by analyzing archeological finds as well as the texts written by the ancient writers. Herm agrees that the theory is quite controversial, and that Spanuth was 'accused of a tendency to tailor pieces of prehistory to fit his own "Atlantis theory". (...) This practice is not, however, uncommon, even among reputable scholars. Indeed, used in

moderation, it is quite legitimate. It is rather like trying to do a jigsaw that refuses to come out by starting at a different corner’ (Herm 1976: 88)

Herm points out, that northern Europe about 5000 BC was at its peak of warmth and fertility. As he (1976: 85) writes: 'Vines grew in southern Norway, the whole of Scandinavia lived in the shadow of mixed and deciduous forest, there were glaciers only in the extreme north.' In other words, all the geographical and climate features were favorable for development of a civilization, whereas the Mediterranean area suffered from drought and heat that lasted for decades during that time. Herm suggests that this theory of the Northern Atlantis could be interesting because it breaks from the classic theses that 'the sun of civilization rose first in the Near East and Egypt and then gradually began to illuminate the dark regions of the north- west’ (1976: 88). Rather, as Herm claims, we should look at Europe as developing from two sides, from the south, but also from the north.

The scholar analyzes the old- fashioned theory that the stone constructions built in Spain, France, Great Britain, Ireland and Northern Europe were creations of Egyptians, Greeks, Cretans, or Phoenicians, who happened to travel along the Atlantic coasts of Europe (89). As Herm explains, the first serious questioning of this idea came when it turned out that the massive stone constructions, as well as first swift Viking ships, were much older than, for example, first Phoenician high- seas ships. Thus, if anybody should travel around European costs, it could have been the people from the north that did it first (1976: 89- 90).

Thus, the appreciation for the north-west corners of Europe awoke, quite rightly according to Herm. As he writes: 'Instead of western Europe as a dark, primitive and barbarian area in the shadow of the brilliant eastern centers of civilization, we can imagine as age that had at least two poles of civilization, one in the eastern Mediterranean and one in the Atlantic north. Both flourished under the blue skies that covered the whole of the Ancient world after 5000 B.C.' (1976: 91). It could be suggested, then, that this ancient culture was the place of origin, or rather the major cultural influence, for the future Norse and Celtic societies.

If the theory presented first by Spanuth, and then retold by Herm was correct, then the

Greek philosopher Plato presented us with the detailed description of the vanished empire of the north (Herm 1976: 92). As a matter of fact, the areas of the northern Europe were considerably wealthy and fertile at that time. 'Pre- historic research has long demonstrated that roughly in the area of the southern England, Schleswig-Holstein and Jutland there were in the Bronze Age princes who enjoyed considerable richness. They acquired gold from Ireland, silver from Spain, found amber off their own coasts, got ornamental pins from central Germany, urns from Greece, faience beads from Egypt and must have paid for these imports largely with the tin that could be mined in greater quantities in their region (...) than anywhere else. (...) Given the climate of the time, it is not all that unlikely that their land was exceptionally fertile' (Herm 1976: 93). Indeed, these areas were like the Arabian lands of our century, rich in those times oil, which was obviously tin. Dwellers of the Bronze Age Denmark and Sweden definitely had resources for developing their community.

Herm states that according to Plato's description of Atlantis, this sophisticated empire was destroyed by earthquakes and floods. And as a matter of fact there was a time of ecological disasters during the Bronze Age. As Herm (1976: 95) writes: 'In the earthquake period of the fifteenth century BC, towards the end of the middle Bronze Age, a broad and fertile stretch of fenland along the western coast of Schleswig-Holstein was completely destroyed. (…) Perhaps provoked by Icelandic and other quakes, sixty-foot-high waves must have unleashed a flood whose height and destructive force far surpassed any other kind in history.' Thus, the northern civilization was destroyed by natural catastrophe. Moreover, Herm, after Spanuth, states that the cataclysm described in Icelandic Eddas, Ragnarök, could have been a recollection of the day when Atlantis was destroyed (Herm 1976: 95).

Furthermore, Herm finds another proof of the northern Atlantis in the mysterious 'Sea-People'. They were attacking kingdoms and cities in the Mediterranean region roughly after the time of the great cataclysm (Herm 1976: 97-99). They would be then the survivors, who sailed along the Atlantic coast. Herm claims that it was their impact, and their sailing skills that helped to develop eastern cultures. Other survivors from the destroyed Atlantis were supposed to move to the south. Herm refers to them as the 'bands of emigrants' who traveled along the rivers Elbe and Oder, and then populated

the area along the Danube (1976: 97). Thus, those survivors would become the core element of the future Celtic culture.

‘Unscholarly’ as it is Herm’s theory presents an alternative version of the history of Europe, and at the same time it seems to work in terms of explaining similarities and differences of the two major European cultures, i.e. the Norse and the Celtic. In other words, the destroyed Atlantis of the North gave birth to at least two different traditions. Those who stayed in Scandinavia were forever marked with the idea of great disaster that was slowly approaching. The tribes that moved to the South developed a sense of change and continuity. It could seem a bit far-fetched, but at least to me the idea of the northern origins of Atlantis seems plausible, and presents an interesting view of the European history.

2.2 Written sources

2.2.1 Ireland

The Norse and the Celts relied on the oral tradition. If something was sacred, important, essential for the culture and cult of the group, it was never written down. For centuries history, customs, mythical stories and laws existed only in human memory, and passed from generation to generation. When Christianity approached the so-called 'heathen' societies, it could have been relatively easy go get rid of those barbaric pagan stories. However, in both Ireland and Iceland a miracle happened. The monks, who learned to read and write in order to help spreading to word of the Lord, they wrote down the sacred stories of their ancestors (for example Bulas: 2004).

Obviously, as men of the Church they did not praise mythical heroes and their pagan customs. Grantz (1981: 15) writes: 'The evidence of the Irish tales has suffered from faulty transmission, political distortion, historical overlays and church censorship.' Moreover, some writers tried to Christianize those ancient characters and explained their origins according to the Bible, or make the deities look more human, and not like powerful gods. On the other hand, those old deities were often viewed as demons, defeated finally by the word of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, the myths were written down, and apparently the monks felt the need to preserve the old stories, which were fading away from human memory.

Early Irish Christianity saved the pre-Christian heritage of the Celts. Unfortunately, the first written manuscripts, dated back to the eight century, did not survive. One can suspect, though, that there were earlier versions too. The Vikings were one reason why we do not have the earliest written Irish accounts, as 'they tended to destroy whatever was not worth taking away; consequently, very few manuscripts predating A.D. 1000 have survived' (Grantz 1981: 20). Of the manuscripts that have survived, the oldest date back to the twelfth century. These are *Lebor na huidre* (*The Book of the Dun Cow*) and *the Book of Leinster*. These manuscripts contain, among others, the stories of the Ulster cycle, birth of CuChúlainn, a description of destruction of mysterious Da

Derga Hostel etc. In this thesis I use the retold myths based on the translations of those manuscripts, as well as the translation of *the Book of Invasions,* and *the Táin* (the Cattle Raid).

The Book of Invasions, called in Irish Gaelic *Lebor Gabala Erren*, is the most important source of information about the tribe of deities referred to as the Tuatha Dé Danann, and their arrival to Ireland. Many of the most important deities appear in this work. It was written down probably around 1150 A.D. and presents the history of Ireland and its habitants from the time of Noah and the flood. It describes seven waves of invasions, the sixth one being the Tuatha Dé Danann, the People of the Goddess Danu. This divine tribe is often viewed as the tribe of Celtic deities, to which belonged the Dagda, Lug, and the Morrígan. Surprisingly enough, they were destroyed by the group called the Milesians, traditionally identified as the actual Celts, who took control over Ireland. In the chapter about the divine tribes I try to explain more this puzzle of Celtic deities being destroyed by the Celts themselves.

Lebor Gabala Erren is full of 'Christian pollution'. For example the writer had to find some Biblical ancestors for the pagan inhabitants of Ireland. Moreover, often the mythological elements seem quite weak, and deities lack their divine features. The same characteristic applies to the *Táin*, another important source, which concentrates on stories from the Ulster province of Ireland, and its main hero CúChulainn. This text is full of semi-god-like characters, who are probably downgraded deities. Every now and then in the text there are remarks how awful these pagan beliefs were. Those comments were provided by those who wrote the story down (the *Táin* had probably more that one author). Nevertheless, this mythical legend seemed worth to be written down (Nowacki 2004: 7).

Whatever the reasons, Irish monks left for us rich sources of mythical worlds and characters. Traditionally, early Irish tales are divided into four groups, so called cycles. Grantz (1981: 22) provides the description of the cycles: 1. the Mythological Cycle, those protagonists are the Síde, the members divine tribe of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who retreated underground after they were defeated by the incoming Milesians; 2. the Ulster Cycle, which details the (possibly historical) adventures of the warriors of Ulster, a few centuries before of after the birth of Christ; 3. the King Cycle,

which describes activities of the traditionally historical Irish kings; 4. the Find Cycle, which focuses on the adventures of Find (Finn) mac Cumaill and his fíana. This cycle did not achieve widespread popularity until the twelfth century. Although these categories are useful, it should be remembered that they are modern, and there is no particular arrangement in the manuscripts. Thus, in a sense those categories are artificial. In my thesis I concentrate on the first and second cycle, as they deal with the Celtic deities, and also they contain the oldest elements of the Irish written sources (Grantz 1981: 22).

In spite of open criticism of the pagan customs and stories, and the diminishing of the characters, Irish manuscripts represent a strong and powerful mythical world. We can only wonder what was behind the decision of writing down those stories. It could have been that the pagan tradition was no longer strong, no longer dangerous for young Christianity, and the old stories were only entertainment without sacred meaning. On the other hand, it might have been that heathen beliefs were still strong enough so even Christian scholars were familiar with them, and respected the cult of their ancestors. Some later sources describe even how the old gods were banned from Ireland, but interestingly enough nobody questioned their existence. Few of them are even saved from hell by Saint Patrick. It might appear that the new Christian God was just more powerful than the old deities.

2.2.2 Iceland

Iceland was Christianized much later than Ireland (1000 A.D. compared to the fifth century in Ireland). As in Ireland, the new religion did not destroy old tales and sagas. The conversion was peaceful, and the new class of Icelandic priests and monks grew up knowing old pagan stories. They also had the courage and skill to write them down. Interestingly enough, nowhere else in Scandinavia a whole stories or poems had been preserved, that would date their origins to the pre-Christian times. As Kristánsson mentions, the Norsemen in Scandinavia had to have some kind of poetry, but it was almost exclusively oral tradition. There were, however, some fragments of poems in archaic runic inscriptions in Sweden and Norway (1988: 28-29).

The two main sources of Norse mythologies are *the Prose* and *the Poetic Edda*. The name edda is supposed to derive from Latin 'edo', which means 'I edit', or 'I compose' (Kristjánsson 1988: 26). Poems and sagas existed in the Viking society before they reached Iceland, and undoubtedly the contacts with Celtic inhabitants in Scotland and Ireland helped to develop skills and style of the old tales. Especially in Ireland, the Norsemen met a society where the pagan stories survived along with Christianity. The same phenomenon was to happen later in Iceland, which preserved the accounts of a cult that once reigned among Germanic and Scandinavian tribes.

Although the oldest Icelandic manuscripts known to us date from the thirteenth century, the content and form of the poems suggest that they were composed considerably earlier. Scholars generally agree that the poems in *the Poetic Edda* pre-date the conversion to Christianity, and thus they had to be created around 1000 A.D. or even before that (Jones: 288, and Larrington 1996: 11). According to Kristjánsson, the most sublime poem from *the Poetic Edda*, called Völuspá or the Sybil's Prophecy 'was created in the twilit period of the conversion, its nature determined by the fact that the poet's mental furniture was fundamentally heathen even though he was also a seer and a preacher who got some of his ideas from the new religion' (1988: 44).

The Poetic Edda is preserved in the manuscript called *Codex Regius*. Most of the mythological stories are only in this single manuscript, which was probably created

around 1270, and it is the major source of information about the Norse mythology (*the Poetic Edda* 1996: 11). The writer, or writers, is usually described as unknown. However, one version of *the Poetic Edda*, translated into English by Benjamin Thorpe, gives the name of Seamund Sigfusson as the author of this Edda, and dates the collection to 1050s. Thorpe writes (2005: 7):

> Sæmund, son of Sigfus, the reputed collector of the poems bearing his name, which is sometimes also called the Elder, and the Poetic, Edda, was of a highly distinguished family, being descended in a direct line from King Harald Hildetonn. He was born at Oddi, his paternal dwelling in the south of Iceland, between the years 1054 and 1057, or about 50 years after the establishment by law of the Christian religion in that island; hence it is easy to imagine that many heathens, or baptized favourers of the old mythic songs of heathenism, may have lived in his days and imparted to him the lays of the times of old, which his unfettered mind induced him to hand down to posterity.

The author of the second text, *the Prose Edda*, is less controversial. Snorri (Snorre), Sturleson, born to a distinguished Icelandic family in 1178, wrote a handbook of mythological stories about 1220, which was later named the Prose or Snorra Edda (Krisjtánsson 1988: 25). The original form of this Edda was not preserved, but it exists in four complete or almost complete manuscripts, and the oldest of them dates back to about 1300 (Hallberg 1975: 1). Snorri's work consists of four parts. The second one presents the complete synopsis of Norse mythology, which he probably took mostly from *the Poetic Edda*. The first and last part of *the Prose Edda* reflect the tendency already noticed in Ireland, where the writer puts together Biblical and mythical characters, as well as some protagonists from the Greek and Roman traditions, thus trying to show the origins of his people. Obviously, it results in confusing syncretism. (Thorpe 2005: 13).

Another feature that provides a similarity with earlier Irish works is Snorri's 'disgust' about the pagan stories he writes down. A few times in his work he stresses, that these are the heathen beliefs of old times, which should not be treated as religious dogma. Being a good Christian, Snorri asserts the pagan tradition as 'heresy'. He makes clear that these are past, pagan beliefs, which should not be accepted by proper Christians (Hallberg 1975: 9). Nevertheless, he understood the value of those heathen stories for

poetry and the mythological part of his work is very powerful. No matter the evaluation, the predominantly pagan thought is present in *the Prose Edda*.

In this thesis I also use *the Volsunga Saga* as a main source for the Norse hero, Sigurd, who is comparable with Irish CúChulainn. The original was probably composed in the twelfth century from songs and stories circulating in the Nordic society. How old the actual oral tradition could be is impossible to assert (Morris 2001: 33). The saga explains the history of the noble family of Volsung, and tracks their ancestry to the main god Odin. Sigurd appears as just one character in the long history of noble and cruel Vikings, his story being probably the most tragic. Morris (2001: 37) refers to 'Volsunga Saga' as: 'the Great Story of the North, which should be to our entire race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks'.

The inevitable miracle that saved the pre-Christian traditions of the Norse and the Celts resulted in magnificent early medieval literature in Ireland and Iceland. Those pagan stories enable us to at least partly understand the beliefs and cults of those ancestors of the Europeans.

3 MYTHOLOGY, CULT AND RELIGION

In this chapter I deal with some aspect of cult and religion, which means annual religious celebrations, ways in which people worshipped their gods, and the main aspects of the worship. I introduce briefly the main features of both Norse and Celtic cults, what we know of their religions and their organizations. I follow other scholars, like Eliade, in explaining the Indo-European hints that are present in Irish sources. Furthermore, I devote some time to enigmatic Celtic druids and their sacred teaching. As for the Nordic part, I deal here with the shamanistic elements that marked the cult of Odin. I rely in this analysis mostly on Mircea Eliade. That cult presents some features of the Indo-European traditions that are exactly present in the Irish sources. Moreover, I briefly present how Christianity made its way in those pagan societies, thus partly replacing old gods.

The second part of this chapter is devoted the theory of mythology, its theoretical origins and meaning. People all around the globe felt the need to explain the reality; they were looking for something greater than themselves that would provide a basis for daily life, an explanation for natural phenomena and societal order. I also use here some ideas presented by Mircea Eliade. Although the mythologies express striking similarities, it is worth noticing how different ‘solutions’ were adapted to explain this world, and how rich and colourful human imagination could be.

3.1. Cult and religion

3.1.1. The Celts

As much as Celtic rituals and cults are fascinating, there is not much we definitely know about them. Mac Niocall (1972: 25) states that 'Not that much is known about early Irish paganism with any degree of certainty', and Eliade laconically writes that 'We know nothing of continental Celtic mythology' (1982: 142). We do have archeological evidence from the continental Europe, like some sculptures, and places of cult. On the other hand, we have the written Irish sources. However, it is not possible to establish how those sources are representative of the whole ancient Celtic society. Quite often Ireland is regarded as a separate and unique phenomenon in the Celtic world. There is, however, at least one element that connects all Celtic tribes from every corner of Europe, and that is the institution of the druids.

Previously viewed as merely priests, nowadays more as wise men and teachers, the druids are the constant puzzlement for scholars. Both Eliade (1982: 140) and Powell (1958: 58) stress the similarities between druids and Brahmans, who were kind of priests and teachers in ancient India, especially in terms of importance of memory, mixing of practical and magical knowledge, and prohibition of writing it down. Other Indo-Celtic similarities would be the magico-religious value of truth, and the importance of bards. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that the druidic teaching contained a belief in metempsychosis. This idea of soul-wandering is one of the most important characteristics of the Hindu religion (Eliade 1982: 152-153). Another feature that links the Celtic tradition with its Hindu counterpart is a somehow twisted (in modern eyes) order of things. To have creation first you need destruction, to be born, first you need death. Ellis writes: 'Death always came before rebirth, hence darkness before light, in both Celtic and Hindu religions. Hence the Celts counted time by the night followed by the day' (1999: 21).

The belief that a soul does not die, but just passes after death from one body to another is regarded as oriental in origin, and thus it is quite extraordinary, that one find that

idea on the western shores of Europe. Moreover, in Ireland it was still reinforced by the idea of ‘two worlds’. When one died on this world, he was born in the other world, and the other way round. The belief in the wandering of souls and in existence of another world provided some twist in the Celtic perception of reality. This view of life provided a surprising reaction to life and death. As Ellis writes: ‘When a soul dies in the Otherworld, it is reborn in this one. Thus birth was greeted with mourning and death with exaltation and celebration’ (1999: 20). This sophisticated system belonged to the oral tradition for centuries, and although scholars managed to recover quite a lot of it, we might be facing the same problem as with teaching of the philosopher Plato. Plato left many written sources of his philosophy, but he also stressed many times that the ‘real knowledge’ should not be written down. Nowadays many scholars believe that we do not know the core of Plato’s teaching, and all we have left are some remarks of lesser importance.

Certainly, it is possible that only small parts of druidic esoteric knowledge survived in written forms. Interestingly enough, one more fact connects the Greek Plato and Celtic druids. When the Greek world met the Celts, the classical writers like Diodorus and Strabo were puzzled by the institution of druids, and often they described druids as philosophers. Thus, one could have an impression that those savage barbarians lived according to the ideal Platonic system, where a society was ruled by a class of philosophers (Herm 1976: 56-57). The ancient writers seemed to be impressed by the Celts, as they appeared to represent the perfect social order introduced by Plato. It could have been at least partly true, as the Celtic society relied heavily on the teaching of the druids, and knowledge was of very high value.

There are several explanations of the meaning of a word ‘druid’. Generally it is connected with the Greek word ‘drus’, which means an oak. Many scholars welcome this idea, as it connects druids to the sacred trees and sacred oaks, which cult was known among the continental Celts. However, according to Herm this explanation does not make much sense. He writes: ‘So far as the name of the office is concerned, it is nowadays believed that (…) it can be deduced from the Greek word drus (oak) and the Indo- European wid (wisdom), which produces the apparent absurdity of ‘oak-knower’ (1976: 57). Certainly, the druids managed to remain a mystery for us.

In Celtic Ireland, undisturbed for quite long time by the upheavals of European history, the institution of druids survived until the Middle Ages. Consequently, the early Christian missionaries were confronted with a highly educated class of teachers-priests, who had quite firm control over the Irish society, established its laws and nourished its traditions (Powell 1958). Young Christianity had tough competition in those native preachers. Not surprisingly, the two religions lived side by side for some time, and thus Ireland produced both educated monks and scribes, as well as druids accustoms with pagan traditions and stories. As Powell writes: 'The traditional oral schools continued to flourish, but now side by side with the monasteries. By the seventh century, if not earlier, there existed aristocratic Irish monks who had also been fully educated in the traditional native learning' (1958: 57). It might have been that those monks with deep knowledge about the dying old cults were first to write down Celtic myths and legends.

In addition to druidic teaching that survived to our times, many scholars try to read other features of the Celtic cult and religion from the mythological stories. Furthermore, the probable origins of the Celts might also give some hints of the most important elements of the cult. Both Eliade (1982) and Herm (1976) stress the significance of Scythian influence on the Celtic culture. Scythians were nomadic tribes, steppe people from the northern shores of the Black See. They believed they were descendants of animals, and different tribes had a different animal as a symbol, and as an ancestor. The same idea is still to be found among the tribes of the North America. The shape- shifting is quite common in the Irish mythology, and thus Green concludes that 'There was no rigid barrier in the Celtic mind between the human and animal form' (1992: 195).

That idea could serve as a background for an explanation of deities that were humans and animals at the same time. The goddess Macha sometimes appeared as a woman, and sometimes as a horse. Moreover, the famous and mysterious deity called Cernunnos was in human form, but he had antlers. Certainly, animals had some extraordinary features and abilities that people did not possess. Many (if not all) ancient cultures recognized the sanctity of the animal world. It has been often suggested that the Celts were animists, and thus they believed that all elements of the reality contained spirits, or even some sort of personality (MacCulloch 2004: 132).

There was no huge gap between nature and humans; they regarded themselves as elements of the same system, where everything was connected in the cycle of life. This idea is partly reflected in the early Medieval Irish art. Animals, plants and humans blend together in medieval illuminations, surrounded by ribbons and ornaments with no beginning and no end.

The Celts are also said to be afraid of an open space (Bulas 2004). In arts, everything was filled with endless ornaments. Furthermore, the beginning and the end of the Irish mythology are also vague. In fact, vagueness defines almost everything we can say about the Celtic culture, art, political system, mythology, and deities. There are no clear borders, no defined beginning nor the end of things. It stays in a wide contrast with the Norse tradition, where the end of the world is unavoidable and spectacular. In the Celtic philosophy of life one can find endless continuation, life just goes on, and everything merges together.

Probably the most famous example of the Celtic way of thinking was recorded by the classical writers. While meeting Alexander the Great one Celtic warrior was supposed to say that the Celts were only afraid ‘that the heavens might fall on their heads’ (Herm 1976: 35). The Celts were as fearless as their Norse counterparts, but the source of their courage was based on a different presupposition. While the Norse celebrated a warrior death as a sort of self- sacrifice, the Celts simply saw the continuity in the act of dying, as they awaited rebirth in the other world. The Celtic ribbon rolled on, not knowing borders or restrictions. One can observe here a rigid difference in worldview, which is even more surprising considering the possible common origins of both the Celts and the Norse.

The Romans often stressed that Celtic tribes did not have one leader, or any sort of central political power. Some scholars point out that this feature was also present in the Celtic mythology. There was no pantheon of gods as such, and it is even disputable which deity was the highest in the hierarchy. As Grantz remarks, there were rather ‘localized deities with localized functions; and this accords with what we know of the Celts politically, for they had a little tolerance for centralized authority, even their own’ (1981: 14).

Celtic spirituality is rather difficult to describe. Furthermore, in the written Irish sources it often blends with Christianity, which came to Ireland in the fifth century. As mentioned above, there was no religious revolution. The new cult was tolerated among the pagan worship, with the later one gradually diminishing, and making space for the followers of Jesus Christ. There was no such thing, however, as instant evangelization. For some time Ireland experienced a pattern known in other parts of Europe, where the society was partly Christian and partly pagan. MacNiocail (1972: 26) gives an example: 'Diarmait (…) king of Tara in the mid- sixth century, was almost certainly a pagan – and perhaps some sort of Christian also (…) paying obeisance to the Christian god when life was quiet and undisturbed, but in times of stress calling on the gods of his ancestors'.

In the end, Christianity was accepted all across Ireland, and the golden age of Irish monasticism approached. Furthermore, the new religion affected also heathen deities. In Irish sagas the saints, St Patrick among them, save souls of some of the Celtic heroes, like CúChulainn, Fionn and children of Ler, and declare heaven for them. Moreover, some lesser deities are even converted to Christianity (MacCulloch 2004: 208-210). This shows how the acceptance of the new cult did not destroy the old tradition. The old gods and spirits found, more or less, their place in the new Christian mentality. In one story St. Patrick expels spirits from Ireland, and deprives deities of their former power over the island (MacCulloch 2004: 134), but even he did not question their existence, nor their abilities.

The Celtic cult and religion has definitely 'softer edges' than its Norse counterpart. The Nordic people seem to defy their world by sharp lines and definite ends, whereas the Celtic world just rolls on and on. Just like the Celtic deities, the Norse gods had to give space for the new coming faith, but they had to die to do this. The entire Norse world seemed to simply wait for the end that was unavoidable.

3.1.2. The Norse

Compared to sophisticated druidic teaching, the Norse religion seems to lack any esoteric or mysterious elements, which are present in the Irish tradition. We do not know much how the gods were exactly worshipped, what kind of ritual was used during ceremonies, what kind of celebrations there were. We do know, though, that the Vikings tended to burn their dead, instead of burying them into the ground. It is also a common knowledge that the noblest death was during a battle, and warriors who died in that way would join the god Odin in Valhalla, drinking, feasting and fighting till the end of the world. Other dead people simply went to hell.

There were no priests as such in the Norse society, no such important position as a druid in the Celtic world. Morris (2001: 23) states: 'There was no priest-class; every chief was priest for his own folk, offered sacrifice, performed ceremonies, and so on.' Moreover, there were very few shrines. There is written evidence that the settlers in Iceland built temples to worship Thor, Frey, and Njord. However, the archeological founds are very scarce. These temples were more like sacred sites, special places for a sacrifice, and definitely not like buildings of stone or wood (Jones 1968: 281). These facts fit quite well with the style of life of the ever wandering pirates. It might have been also a reminiscence of a former nomadic life, which did not require building any cult places.

Eliade points out some striking characteristics of the Norse religion. First of all, the Nordic world came to existence by the blood sacrifice. Odin and his brothers, Vili and Ve, killed a frost giant and built the world from his flesh and blood. This kind of creation was known in other cultures, and Eliade draws a comparison to the Oriental myths of Tiamat, Purusa, and P'an-ku (1982: 156). The cosmology based on killing was a widely-spread idea in ancient communities. Something/somebody has to die to make sure the beginning of new life, new world would happen. It was also a justification for human sacrifices, which happened it the Norse society. People were sacrificed, albeit rarely, to Odin, who was the god of the dead.

Another important feature of the Norse religion is the dominating interest in the myth of the end of the world. As Eliade writes: 'This interest is, in any case, a general phenomenon, documented from the second century B.C. in the Near East, Iran, Palestine, and the Mediterranean (…). But what characterizes Germanic religion is the fact that *the end of the world is already announced in the cosmogony*' (1982: 155). From the very moment of creation, everybody knows that the end would happen, and it is impossible to stop it. The elements that would bring the future destruction exist from the very beginning of the world; as, for example Surtr, the lord of flame and fire is waiting in his kingdom in the South for a moment when he would burn down the whole world (*the Poetic Edda* 1996).

Eliade also draws the attention to the figure of the cosmic tree, the centre of the world, which in Norse mythology is represented by Yggdrasill. All the worlds (a world of god, a land of men, and hell) are located under the tree, and they are connected to it. Yggdrasill nourishes all three spheres that were built under it. It symbolizes, and at the same time constitutes the universe. Eliade describes these characteristics as very Oriental in style and origin (1982: 157-158). However, there is one feature that reflects the Norse thought: the inevitable end of the world. When it comes, the tree would shake and announce it. Moreover, the seeds of destruction grow on the tree. A dragon eats its roots; an eagle shakes its branches. The tree prepares for the bloody battle to come. Eliade writes: 'It could be said that Yggrasill incarnates the existence - the world, the gods, life, men – is perishable and yet capable of rising again at the beginning of a new cosmic cycle' (1982: 158).

As for the worship, it is generally stated that the main god, Odin, was not the most important one for the Norse society. 'By far the most important deity for the early Icelanders was Thor, the god of farmers and seafarers. His name is connected with large numbers of personal and place names. Frey, the god of fertility, also seems to have been popular. Odin, the god of warriors and aristocrats, was worshipped to a far lesser extent' (Byock 2001: 294). There also existed a cult of land spirits and guardian spirits called landvaettir.

The Norse tradition also contains strong shamanistic elements, which are, among others, the occult character of knowledge, possibility to send one's spirit on a journey

to another world, and contacts with the dead. Such characteristics are mostly represented by Odin. Eliade describes his sacrifice to obtain knowledge as a very shamanistic representation. This one-eyed deity was highly respected, but also evoked fear. As a true shaman Odin is a shape- changer. He sacrificed his eye to drink from spring of wisdom. He also obtained a drink made of Kvasir's blood. He who would drink it would possess all the wisdom and skills of poetry[1]. Moreover, Odin hung for nine days from the tree Yggdrasill, died and came back to life. In that way he obtained an occult knowledge (for example in *the Poetic Edda* 1996).

This ritual death, sacrificing himself to himself for the sake of divine knowledge, made many scholars and writers believe it was a motif borrowed from the Christianity. Odin's death by hanging on tree resembled the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Nevertheless, the sacrificial trees were known long before Christianity approached the shores of Scandinavia. 'Sacrificial trees have existed in northern Europe from earliest times. Christian missionaries like St Boniface (c. 674 – 754) cut them down, to the terror and rage of the people' (Cotterell 1986:193). As a matter of fact victims sacrificed to Odin were hung on trees.

According to Eliade, these elements of Odin's cult that stressed death and sacrifice, helped to glorify war, and established an almost sacred character of the killings (1982: 161-163). A war, or a battle, was treated as an almost religious sacrifice, a blood offering to the deity. The name Odin means probably 'wild' or 'furious'. Cotterell writes that dark cult of Odin probably 'inspired the frightful berserkers, maddened warriors who rushed naked into the midst of the fray' (1986: 173). This ecstasy of death and blood changed the warriors into raging beasts. They were also sometimes called 'úlfhédnar', which can be translated as 'a man with a wolf's skin' (Eliade1982: 162). Thus the warriors were like shamans, changing their shapes and approaching new worlds in their war madness.

[1] Kvasir was shaped out of the saliva of all the gods. He was the wisest creature in the universe, and he could answer every question. His fame reached two dwarf brothers. They invited Kvasir for a feast and then they killed him. From his blood, mixed with honey, they brewed excellent mead, and whoever drunk it became a poet or a wise man. The two brothers later killed a giant and his wife, and since their son was calling for revenge the dwarves offered him the magical mead instead. The giant boasted about the mead, so the gods got to know what really happened to Kvasir. By using a trick, Odin obtained the mead and became the master of poetry. (After Crossley-Holland 1980: 26-32)

This ‘holiness’ of war and killing was in a way justified in the Norse mythology. Odin had to kill to build this world, and he even sacrificed himself on the tree Yggdrasill[2], so obviously he demanded sacrifices for himself. And there was a price promised: a great feast in Valhalla. It should be mentioned that in the Celtic tradition we also find the descriptions of war fury, so terrifying for the Roman armies. There, too Celtic warriors often went fighting naked, believing that if they were supposed to die on that day nothing would protect them (Herm 1976: 4).

The Norse cult and beliefs are marked with the acceptance of death and the inevitable end to come. Somehow it lacks the feeling of continuity, which is present in its Celtic counterpart. Moreover, shamanism played quite an important role, although the great shaman, Odin was feared and often avoided by simple folk. One can trace some similar elements of both Norse and Celtic cults, like shape-changing, importance of poetry and knowledge, and war fury of warriors. Nevertheless, the Norse cult seems very drastic and dramatic, whereas the Celtic world continues endlessly.

Icelandic society stayed pagan till the eleventh century, but when Christianity approached, the change of religion was surprisingly peaceful and quite rapid. During the Age of Settlement, some of future Icelanders converted to Christianity, or at least knew about the new religion. The migrants from Ireland and Scotland could have been Christians as well. Nevertheless, those early contacts with Christianity did not affect Iceland. As Byock (2001: 293) remarks: ‘The majority of settlers were believers in the old gods, and organized worship among the relatively few Christian immigrants probably died out within a generation or two’.

When two centuries later almost all of Europe was Christian, including Scandinavia, missions were sent to Iceland. There was also a strong pressure from Norway. Finally, according to tradition in the year 1000 there was an open dispute between the Christians and pagans, which was resolved peacefully. The heathen majority agreed to adopt new religion, and thus Iceland was welcomed among other Christian nations (Byock 2001: 300-301). Interestingly enough, the pagan society was willing to give up the old cult to avoid social upheavals, and most likely bloody conversion. Considering

[2] The word Yggdrasill means ‘the horse of the terrible one’, which is generally understood as the horse of Odin, a way in which he expressed his shamanistic powers (Eliade 1982).

the long and cruel conversion in Norway, Iceland adopted Christianity quickly and peacefully, by common agreement (Byock 2001: 297).

Possibly that bloodless conversion had an impact on old pagan stories. In a way, the Norse cult was neutralized so much, that it was acceptable for monks and scribes to write them down. In other words, we might suspect that the heathen myths were viewed as an important heritage, but no longer as a competitor for Christianity. One might wonder how deep the faith in Odin and Thor was, since it was given up so rapidly. It could also appear that the Icelanders did not convert for the sake of salvation, but rather to keep social peace, and to avoid an open conflict with Norway. We can only wonder about the real reasons that changed cults in Iceland. Nevertheless, Iceland is nowadays the only country in Europe that recognizes paganism as an official religion.

3.2. Theory of Mythology

> Mythologists have for long time been aware that sagas and fairy- tales from areas as far apart as Polynesia and North Germany show extraordinary similarities. They conclude that men and cultures of all times have always influenced each other and that, very early on; there were extensive migrations from Pacific to Atlantic and vice versa. There is little likelihood that we shall ever be able to feel our way back home to those times. (Herm 1976: 83)

The common heritage of the human kind has been long discussed and analysed. As stated in the quote above, there are elements in every mythology which are similar to another mythological system, created thousands of kilometres away. Indian legends have a trickster, and Loki from Norse mythology resembles such a character. Egyptian Isis has to protect her son Horus from evil Set, and so does Mary, hiding baby Jesus from king Herodus. Obviously, scholars are quite eager to find even small similarities in every possible mythological story. However, more striking is how many differences there are, how people's views broke away from the common background, and produced so much diversity.

Both Herm and Eliade claim that the Norse and Celtic mythologies come form the same source, albeit they present different theories about that same source. Taking that into consideration one can notice how extremely different world views those two mythologies present. For example, the Norse world has a complex beginning and a spectacular end, whereas the Celtic tradition seems to lack both of them. Those mythologies, evolving so close to each other, present different states of mind, different ways to measure reality, different assessment of the world around.

In that context, would it be right to adopt Herm's theory of the Atlantis situated on the Northern shores of Europe, where after the ecological disaster some of the tribes moved to the South, evolved as the Celts, and praised the continuity of the existence in a mythological system that had no beginning and no end? And consequently, did the other survivors stay on the destoyed land, and remembered the great cataclysm in the stories of fire and floods that ends everything? Obviously, it is just a suggestion based on vague evidence. Nevertheless, the Norse and Celtic tribes, and their ancestors, had

to experience something dramatic so their mythologies evolved in such different directions.

It is impossible to reconstruct the origin of mythologies. They expressed human need to explain reality, as well as the feeling of supernatural powers, divine beings that influenced one's life. Myths are sometimes described as 'primitive religions', the first attempts to express the difficult situation of human beings, who were part of nature, but were looking for something transcendent and divine. As we can see on the example of Celtic and Norse mythologies, they are not simple narratives, but complex systems, fascinating in their depth and intuition. One has to remember, though, that these pagan stories written down in Ireland and Iceland might differ from their continental versions. The names of the gods are different, and thus Irish Macha is called in Gaul Epona, and Odin is a Germanic Wodan (for example Eliade 1982). Moreover, in the case of Ireland its mythological tales really grew on its ground, making the island the main character of the legends.

The word *mythology* is of the Greek origin. It literally means the retelling of myths. The definition of this concept is rather vague. Usually it is described as 'stories that express and organize beliefs and religious customs of a society' (Głowiński et al 1976: 243). Usually the society that uses myths to establish its system of beliefs is described as archaic. Myths generally tell stories about deities or heroic beings. They intend to explain the reality, the origin of the world, or natural phenomena.

Myths can be classified into certain types. Three groups are especially significant: creation myths, eschatological myths (which describe catastrophic ends of the world), and anthropological myths, which are stories of the origin of man. Apart from that, there are also ritual myths, cult myths, or prestige myths. They all try to give coherent and rather logical explanation of the ways the world has been built.

Every culture developed some kind of mythological system, which included elements of its history, religious customs, and stories about its heroes. The role of myths was, for example, to justify a war, or the structure of the society. Moreover, myths created impressions of a holy space, a sort of the middle of the universe. Sometimes they helped to establish law and order in the society, by presenting divine origin or divine

cause of certain customs and happenings (Głowiński et al 1976: 243). The myths had a great influence on the first societies. The stories made people worship certain things and phenomena, and made them afraid of others.

Despite some similarities, the Norse and Celtic mythologies express differences in almost every aspect. In the following chapters I try to show how different meanings the reality and its phenomena had for both groups. We cannot explain with one hundred percent accuracy what caused those differences. Nevertheless, it is important to try to find the answers, as mythologies were shaped by human spirituality and the need to justify the existence in this world. Those two mythologies, the Norse and the Celtic, shaped human minds in western and northern Europe for centuries.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE MYTHS: MYTHOLOGICAL WORLS OF THE NORSE AND CELTIC TRADITIONS

This chapter begins the analysis of the actual mythological stories. My aim here is to present how different views those two groups (the Norse and the Celts) presented. Theoretically they came from the same cultural background. Furthermore, they lived close to each other on the European continent, and experienced contacts for many centuries. At the dawn of pre-Christian Europe their inhabited two islands placed on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, both groups evolved drastically different ways of thinking. The Norse world was awaiting grim destruction, while the Celtic reality praised endless change and borderless existence. I also intend to present possible explanation of certain symbols and elements, as well as their probable origins.

In this chapter I present how the Norse and Celtic mythological universes come into existence, how they are structured, and what (if so) causes their ends. Certainly, there are very many interpretations of particular stories, especially with the Celtic sources. Nevertheless, both mythologies represent very complex realities, full of supernatural elements. One could ask how people placed themselves in these realities. The usual problem is that we use nowadays scientific explanations (no matter now 'fairy-tallish' they might appear) instead of myths and legends to explain reality. But how was it to believe that the world had been built from a giant's flesh? Or being afraid of getting to the other world on the day of Samuin? For Celts and Norsemen every little story helped to explain the reality and also helped them to deal with it. These were not primarily stories for entertainment, they contained hints how to live a good life on this earth.

One interesting feature is that often mythologies come quite close to the modern explanation of the universe and its features. Furthermore, Celtic and Norse approach differ quite a lot. The Nordic universe seems much more 'global' that the Celtic one. The myths brought with Celts to Ireland grew there, and in the end their universe and their island became one. Their mythology was not even a mythology of the all the

Celts, but rather served only locally for the Irish population. Their world finishes and ends with Ireland. Norsemen had so to speak ‘broader horizons’. The Insular Celts talked about Western Isles, the Vikings actually went there.

4.1 Creation of the mythical universes

4.1.1. The Norse

> Burning ice, biting flame; that is how life began.
> (Crossley-Holland 1980: 3)

The creation of the Norse universe is vividly present in *the Poetic Edda* and *the Prose Edda*. The wild Norse imagination placed the beginning of things in emptiness, in the state of chaos. Life appeared on the edge of two extremes. According to *the Poetic Edda* there were two lands, one in the North called Niflheim, covered with ice and snow, and the other one, Muspell, in the South, the land of fire, kingdom of Black Surtr. Between those two there was a huge and empty space called Gingungagap. As the myth explains: 'There, the warm breathe drifting north from Muspell met the rime from Niflheim; it touched it and played over it, and the ice began to thaw and drip. Life quickened in those drops, and they took the form of a giant. He was called Ymir'. (Crossley- Holland 1980: 3)

Two phenomena that could destroy life merged together in the Norse tradition, and created the first living creature. Furthermore, ice and flame are the typical characteristics of Iceland, which has both volcanoes and cold winters. Thus, it might be suggested that the Norse mythology reflects geological features of the island. However, we cannot determine how (and if) the creation myth changed after the Vikings discovered Iceland. We cannot check in what form the myth reached Iceland. It is certainly possible, though, that the original story got more details during the time of the Norse expansion. On the other hand, the Vikings sailed all around Europe, and the Middle East. Moreover, most likely Germanic tribes moved from the warmer south to icy north, so the striking climate differences were known to them from many different sources.

The giant Ymir was made from drops of water, and it happened in a space trapped between two deadly environments. The Norse intuition is quite striking, and it reflects

very well the conditions of humans on the Earth. Our planet is burning from the inside, and it is surrounded by cold, lifeless space. It is only on the thin surface of the Earth that is possible to sustain life. Furthermore, the scientific world agrees that life was first born in water, in the endless oceans of the young planet. The Norse creation of the world astonishes with its totality, and its sophistication. In the end, this ancient story was not far away from the modern theories.

Shortly after Ymir, another being was created. The melting ice took form of a cow called Audumla (Crossley-Holland 1980: 3). The cow started to lick salty ice that was around her, and thus another creature came to life, a forefather of the gods. We find a passage in *the Prose Edda* (1906: 263):

> The first day that she licked these stones there sprang from them, towards evening, the hairs of a man, the second day a head, and on the third an entire man, who was endowed with beauty, agility and power. He was called Bur, and was the father of Bor, who took for his wife Besla, the daughter of the giant Bolthorn. And they had three sons, Odin, Vili, and Ve; and it is our belief that this Odin, with his brothers, ruleth both heaven and earth, and that Odin is his true name, and that he is the most mighty of all the gods.

One cannot demand a full explanation of reality from any mythology. Things and beings just appear, and only the most important elements have the detailed explanation. Similarly, the Norse story jumps quickly over lesser giants/deities, so that the beginning of the highest god, Odin, could be explained. As mentioned above, his mother was a giantess, whereas his father and grandfather did not belong to any specific group. Odin was referred to as the first and oldest god, the Allfather of the world. Thus, his ancestors seem quite vague. Their only role is the introduction of Odin, the Highest One.

The giant Ymir was the forefather of the frost giants. Eliade (1982: 156) remarks, that this creature might have been bisexual, or at least expresses such characteristics. Bisexuality was an expression of totality. In a sense, Ymir was a perfect creature, he represented the harmony and unity that had to be broken, and so that world could exist. It could be tempting to say that the Norse combined two basic ways of creating the world. First, it came from chaos to cosmos, from emptiness to order, like in the

Greek mythology, or the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, it also required destruction of the harmony. Something had to be broken, something had to die, so the world could come to the existence, and that idea was later on in history fully expressed by Manicheans. According to their teaching a fallen spirit caused the destruction of the ancient order, and thus our world had been created.

The three brothers, Odin, Vili and Ve decided to kill Ymir. From his body they formed a new world (or rather worlds) inside Gingungagap, under the cosmic tree Yggdrasill. Again, the origins of the tree are not explained, it just exists there, its role being the protection of the new world. *The Poetic Edda* (1996: 43) describes how the brothers built the world:

> From Ymir's flesh the earth was shaped,
> and the mountains from his bones;
> the sky from the skull of the frost- cold giant,
> and the sea from his blood.

Furthermore, Ymir's hair was used to form trees, and Midgård, the land of men, was made from his eyebrows (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 265). This drastic description expresses the ancient idea of creation as a result of a killing, and thus the Norse tradition reflect also the 'global mythological tendency' of the sacrifice at the very beginning of existence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it could justify human sacrifices. As Eliade (1982: 156) mentions, the same idea was used in the myths of, for example, Tiamat and Purusa. Furthermore, in Mayan mythology gods had to sacrifice themselves so the sun could exist, and even Jesus Christ expresses the same need for divine sacrifice to save the mankind.

The Prose Edda, written down by Snorri Sturleson, describes also the creation of the first man and woman. Odin, Vili and Ve found two fallen trees: an ash and an elm. From them they formed first humans, who were called Ask and Embla. The resemblance of the Judeo-Christian names of Adam and Eve is quite striking. However, there is no agreement among the scholars if the Biblical version of creation could have affected the Norse myth, or whether a witty monk simply attached names to beings that had not had them at first. It could also prompt the question of how human ways of thinking are similar all around the globe.

One element in the Norse creation distinguishes it from the other traditions, and that is the always present hint of the forthcoming destruction. While presenting the creation of the world, *the Prose Edda* describes the beginning of the sun and the moon; it mentions two wolves that would chase them until the day of the final battle, Ragnarök. During the fight, the wolves would swallow both the sun and moon, and thus fulfill their destiny. This rather grim story presents very well how the Norse viewed the world. From the very beginning it was awaiting the destruction. The world seems to be created just so it can wait for its end.

The Norse reality had a firm and undisputable beginning. It had its father, its maker, who unified the universe under his rule. This creation myth involved also a certain degree of abstractive thinking, and went beyond the visible world and its elements. Comparing to that myth, the Celtic reality is drastically different, and vague. As we shall see in the next chapter, Celtic deities vary in their degree of importance from one story to another. Furthermore, the Irish Celts made Ireland the main protagonist in their mythology, and thus strongly connecting their tradition to this island.

4.1.2. The Celts

> In the early Irish accounts, therefore, of the beginning of things, it is not with the world that the narrators make their start – it is simply with their own country – Ireland. (Rolleston 1993: 23)

The Celtic mythology that survived in written form seems to lack the grand scale present in its Norse counterpart. Since the only written sources come from Ireland, the stress is put on the island and its inhabitants. The world starts and ends in Ireland, and the early medieval writers seemed to be interested in deriving the origins of the Irish from the Biblical tradition. This 'narrowing' of the mythical reality to one small island stands in sharp contrast with the Icelandic literature. Writings devoted to Iceland, like its history, are included in the sagas, and they are clearly different from the mythological stories. The Norse reached Iceland with their myths reflecting the creation and structure of the whole world. In other words, Norse imagination was not limited to Iceland. Certainly, there are stories and sagas concerning Iceland, but this island is not as important as Ireland in the Celtic sources. Ireland is simply a character of its own, a magical island of destiny.

The traditional view states that there is no creation myth in the Celtic mythology. The world has existed before, and it will continue to exist. However, some scholars, like P.B. Ellis, attempted to reconstruct the 'forgotten myth', which in his opinion could be read from the old manuscripts by cleaning them from the Christian glosses (Ellis 1999: 17). His collection of retold Celtic mythology contains a controversial myth about the creation of the world and its first elements. Many scholars reject Ellis's approach as not scientific enough. Nevertheless, his theory is extraordinary, and the 'forgotten myth' that he presents could be easily accepted in context of the world mythology. Ellis and Eliade also suggest that the very core of druidic teaching remained oral and probably was never ever written down, so we cannot determine the most important part of their teaching. It might be that the creation myth was so important that it was never even consider for writing it down.

What Ellis reads from old Irish manuscripts is a creation story quite similar to its Norse counterparts. The world starts with water, and the cosmic tree: 'The divine waters from heaven floated downwards (…). From the darkened soil there grew a tree, tall and strong. Danu, the divine waters from heaven, nursed and cherished this great tree which became the sacred oak named Bíle' Ellis (1999: 25). Later on, Bíle and Danu produce two beautiful acorns. From one springs Dagda, the Good God, from the second acorn comes Brigantu, the Exalted One. Thus, Dagda and Brigantu are to be the first of the Children of Danu.

Some justification for Ellis's approach could be found in remarks made by Powell (1958: 164): 'Both Gallo- Roman epigraphy and Irish texts throw light on the significance of the sacred trees amongst the Celts. Gods of oak and Beech are known from dedications. (…) In Ireland there are a number of allusions to a sacred tree (bile), and this word is compared with the French place name Billonn, originally Gaulish Biliomagus, the plain or clearing of the sacred tree.'

Thus, Ellis simply seems to use elements already known from the Celtic tradition, the sacred oak and mysterious Danu, and builds from it the probable beginning of the world. Nevertheless, this approach is quite controversial, as the Irish manuscripts are unclear, and there is no straightforward description of the kind one would find in Icelandic Eddas. Irish scribes did not care much about the mythological cosmology. All they needed was in the Bible, and they started their stories on a familiar background of the Old Testament. Ellis's approach is often viewed as not scholarly, and based on pure imagination. Rolleston (1993: 23) writes: 'There is nothing in the most ancient legendary literature of the Irish Gaels, which is the oldest Celtic literature in existence, no myth corresponding to the Babylonian conquest of Chaos, or the wild Norse myth of making of Midgård out of the corpse of Ymir'.

In the Ellis's retold mythology, Danu is often referred to as 'Divine Waters' or 'Waters from Heaven'. That mysterious tribal mother could have been a recollection of older maternal cults that once ruled over Europe. Her name is often connected with the river Danube, the traditional homeland of the Celts, and its name is traditionally derived from the Celtic form 'danu' which means 'to flow' (www.wikipedia.org: 2008). That would logically connect an important source of nature, water, with a

goddess who gives life. However, Danu as a main goddess does not seem to appear on the European continent, and she is clearly connected to the Irish tradition. It might be suggested that incoming Celts gave the Celtic name to the older deity, which already existed on the Irish soil. It should be remembered that the Celtic cult was dominantly masculine, with its worship of the horse and the bull. Danu, the mother-goddess from the Irish sources held surprisingly important position in that masculine society.

The Book of Invasions (Lebor Gabala Erren), one of the most important sources of Irish mythical stories, places the beginning of things with the first arrivals to Ireland. In paragraph twenty six of *Lebor* we read:

> Let us cease from the stories of the Gaedil that we may tell of the seven peoples who took Ireland before them. Cessair, d. Bith s. Noe took it, forty days before the Flood. Partholon s. Sera 300 years after the Flood. Nemed s. Agnomain of the Greeks of Scythia, at the end of the 30 years after Partholon. The Fir Bolg thereafter. The Fir Domnam thereafter. The Gailioin thereafter. The Tuatha De Danann thereafter. The sons of Mil thereafter.

The groups described there are quite mysterious, and the text presents great efforts to link Irish inhabitants and its culture with the civilizations of the Mediterranean Sea. Christian scribes tried to connect remains of the Celtic tradition with the new Judeo-Christian point of view. Thus, Cessair was a daughter or granddaughter of biblical Noah, who came to Ireland before the flood (MacCulloch 2004: 206). Furthermore, the groups who reached the island after the flood are also derived from the progeny of Noah, and thus the link between a remote island and the cradle of Jewish and Christian religions remains intact. The name of Iafeth and his descendants appears often in the text, making a clear line of the Irish ancestors (*Lebor*: paragraph 10).

The eagerness to put Irish inhabitants and their culture in the same sphere with the other European ‘civilizations’ seems quite understandable. Young Irish Christianity needed a link with its roots, and such a link was provided by early scholars, who mixed old beliefs with biblical names and places. Further groups of invaders, surprisingly enough, are said to come to Ireland from Scythia. *Lebor Gabala Erren* describes how Scythian tribes listened to druid Caicher, who told them to go west to a

beautiful island, which was supposed to be the place of their destiny. Caicher made a prophecy: ‘We have no rest until Ireland (…). It is not we who reach it, but our children’ (25).

Drawing on knowledge which source is not clear to us, early Irish scribes connected their culture with Scythians, and these days it is generally agreed that at least elements of Celtic heritage were under Scythian influence, or came directly from their tradition. We can only ponder whether there existed some notion of Scythian ancestry in the Celtic Irish society, or just deep knowledge of the history of the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East enabled Irish monks to look for references of their culture there. Those Scythian colonists were the first group that treated Ireland as a desired homeland. Later on, also the Tuatha Dé Danann was under pressure to get to the Island of Destiny.

The prophecy made by druid Caicher resembles the biblical story of Moses and Israelites traveling from Egypt to their Promised Land. Ireland seemed to be a divine, desired place that attracted more and more invaders. The scribes did not provide history of the Irish; rather, it is history of the island, which remains an object of the constant desire to more and more groups. Thus, Ireland is the main protagonist of the Irish mythological stories. It is the only unchanged element in the long list of invaders, rulers and heroes, who wanted to make Ireland their own island.

The first groups that came to Ireland were clearly related to Noah and his progeny. However, the origins of later comers, like the Firbolg and the Formorians, are not that clear. *Lebor Gabala Erren* often refers to these groups as demons, dangerous forces, which fought over Ireland. That struggle was joined by another group, probably the most mysterious one, the Tuatha Dé Danann. Although the Christian writers could not accept any divine origins of those heathen characters, they could not strip them totally of their power and might. As MacCulloch (2004: 38) writes: ‘The Christian scribes were puzzled over the Tuatha Dé Danann. The earliest reference to them says that because of their knowledge they were banished from heaven, arriving in Ireland in clouds of mists.’

Indeed, *Lebor Gabala Erren* even provides an exact place of their landing: 'In this wise they came, in dark clouds. They landed on the mountains of Conmaicne Rein in Connachta; and they brought darkness over the sun for three days and three nights' (paragraph 55). This powerful tribe came, according to tradition, from four mighty cities named Falias, Gorias, Finias and Murias (for example Rolleston 1993: 27). Like the previous groups, the Tuatha Dé Danann was told to go towards West, and it was their destiny to get to Ireland. From all these stories we get a picture that Ireland was the centre of the world, the perfect place where everybody wanted to live. All the groups of invaders fought savagely over that little island. The problem that appears here is that the traditional 'mythical' Celtic stories describe the Ireland of the Tuatha Dé Danann, whereas they were not even Celts in origin.

The last invasion on Ireland was led by the Milesians, a group that came from Spain. 'Four hundred and forty years from that time in which Pharaoh was drowned, and after Sru s. Esru came out of Egypt, till the tile when the sons of Mil came into Ireland' (*Lebor Gabala Erren*: paragraph 16). The Milesians were the actual Celts, and as MacCulloch suggests most likely the first Celtic colonists reached Ireland from Spain, rather than from British or French shores (2004: 23). That was the last phase of the creation of Ireland that finally made her Celtic. It is a constant puzzlement the Celtic invaders destroyed Celtic deities, the Tuatha Dé Danann that ruled over Ireland. I deal with that question in the chapter about divine tribes.

The creation story of the Celtic Irish sources could be viewed as simply 'the making of Ireland'. The incoming groups shaped its character, history and tradition. And that creation of Ireland was the most important fact for Irish scribes. In a way, we have here a pattern present in many cultures, where only the origins of one particular group (or place) is taken into consideration. For example Lappish people describe only the origins of their group in their mythology; the rest of the world is free to choose their creation stories (The Encyclopaedia of Saami Culture: 2008). The same feature applies to Ireland. The monks presented its history and its origins.

It might be suggested that the Christian tradition was already partly mixed with pagan stories. We could say that Irish scribes did not need a whole creation myth, as there was one already in the Bible, and an alternative or pagan version was not needed.

Nevertheless, the history of Ireland could have been freely composed and filled with ideas that still existed in the young Christian society. Thus, we should not probably claim that the Celts did not have any creation myth. Simply, by the time the stories were written down, such a myth was not needed anymore, as it was replaced by an orthodox Christian story.

One could ask how this relates to Norse myths, as they were also written down by Christian monks after conversion, and that did not stop them from including the whole wild story of creation from the flesh of a dead giant. We should note here, that in Icelandic tradition there is a clear division between the history of the island, and mythology that was earlier applied to it. Such a division does not exist in the Irish sources. By the time of conversion Ireland was probably still a magical, mysterious place full of myths and wonders, and early Christian writers understood that. My suggestion would be that old pagan stories were preserved because they were brought to another context; they were 'married' into Christian tradition by being transferred to another cultural background – a Biblical background.

This idea of syncretism and mixing of cults and ideas could also reflect the Celtic need for continuity, endless lines of life and history. The Irish scribes obviously did not want to cut themselves from the heathen tradition, and thus they provided a sort of cultural cushion, that connected it with the new Judeo- Christian point of view. Such a strategy was not needed in Icelandic culture, where sharp divisions and drastic ends were acceptable. The Norse pagan stories did not need the approval of the Church, as they did not need to express the continuity of existence. The world of Norse gods was supposed to end, as was said in the beginning of it, and it did, whereas the Celtic ribbon of life rolls on and on.

4.2 Structure of the mythological reality

Both mythologies present very complex structures of the universe. However, at first glimpse it seems that the Norsemen had 'wilder' imagination that the Celts, as the Celtic mythical world is conventionally limited to Ireland. Moreover, some geographical names like Greece and Spain appear the Irish sources. Ireland is simply the main character of Irish mythology. Also, the medieval writers were quite generous in adding contexts and hints, and in placing Celtic reality in a 'civilized company' of other nations and countries. The Nordic world, though, does not need any connection with real places. It describes reality in a broader context that goes beyond the visible world.

4.2.1. The Norse: under the Guardian Tree

The Nordic universe goes beyond the visible world, and expresses triple characteristics. Our reality is placed in a large empty space called Gingungagap. As mentioned in a previous subchapter Gingungagap is situated between the land of ice in the north and the land of fire in the south. Eliade (1982: 155) mentions that the image of huge emptiness at the beginning of things can be found in Oriental mythologies. Furthermore, its counterpart could be found in the idea of *protista chaos geneto* from the Greek mythology. The phrase literary means 'Verily at the first Chaos came to be' (Hesiod, *Theogony*: line 116). Previously the word 'chaos' used to mean emptiness rather that 'disorder', and it constituted the first stage of creation, which was a vacuum of nothingness.

Inside Gingungagap there was the cosmic tree Yggdrasill. There is no explanation whatsoever how the tree came into existence. It was one of those cosmic elements that were taken for granted. We find this passage in *the Poetic Edda* (1996: 6):

I know that an ash- tree stands called Yggdrasill,

> a high tree, soaked with shining loam;
> from there come the dews which fall in the valley,
> ever green, it stands over the well of fate.'

We could suggest an interpretation that Yggdrasill played the same role for the Norse as Ireland had in Irish Celtic sources. It is a symbol of the universe, it is situated in the centre of the world, and at the same time, it also constitutes the universe (Eliade 1982: 157). The difference here, obviously, is the scale and perspective. Nevertheless, the function that Ireland has seems quite similar to the one of Yggdrasill. They are the most important elements of the universe, it is because of them that life is possible, they can feel and suffer, they care about their inhabitants[3].

The cosmic tree is huge and magnificent, and it has many inhabitants. The tree gives shelter to creatures that slowly contribute to its destruction. As myths describe the cosmic tree: 'Usually known as a Guardian Tree, Yggdrasill nourishes, and suffers from, the animals that inhabit it, feed on it and attack it. While the dragon (…) gnaws the roots, deer and goats leap along the branches and tear off the new shoots; and a squirrel (…) runs up and down the trunk, carrying insults from [the dragon] to an eagle who sits in the topmost branches' (Crossley-Holland 1980: 23). This situation, which the cosmic tree experiences, expresses again the very typical future of the Norse mythology and that is the notion of destruction from the very beginning.

The tree lives with those who slowly destroy it; Yggdrasill provides nourishment for animals which forecast its end. In a way the Norse mythology expresses over and over again the notion that the end should be expected from the beginning, which could be a true description of our world. One could say that this notion is quite pessimistic. However, it just requires acceptance of the way things happen on this planet, where nothing in eternal and nothing exists forever.

Under the cosmic tree Yggdrasill three brothers- gods, Odin, Vili and Ve built three plates, three worlds: one for gods, one for humans and one for the dead. Yggdrasill's roots reach to all three spheres:

[3] In Scott's *Irish Myths and Legends* (1992) three spirits of the island unite with Milesians against Tuatha de Danann, because they might destroy Ireland, their deeds are not good for the Island of Destiny.

> That ash [Yggdrasill] (…) is the greatest and best of all trees. Its branches spread over the whole world, and even reach above heaven. It has three roots very wide asunder. One of them extends to the Æsir [plate of deities with the stronghold Asgard], another to the Frost-giants in that very place where was formerly Ginnungagap [Midgård, where also humans live], and the third stands over Nifelheim [the plate of the dead], and under this root, which is constantly gnawed by [the dragon], is Hvergelmir. (…) The first root of the ash is in heaven, and under it is the holy Urdar-fount. Tis here that the gods sit in judgment. (*The Prose Edda*: 271-272)

The tree provided the primary connection of all three places, and it was the only element that unified them. Although crossing from one plate to another was possible, all three plates seemed to be separated units. As Crossley- Holland explains the Norse mentality: 'The Norsemen visualised the universe as a tricentric structure – like three plates set one above another with a space between each' (1980: 20). The three spheres built under Yggdrasill were simply heaven, earth and hell, all dependent on each other and the Guardian Tree. We could find here a paralell with the Cross of Jesus Christ. That tree also, in a sense, linked three realms: it reached to hell to connect the earth with heaven. Further in my thesis I investigate another feature of Yggdrasill that provides a paralell with Christianity: just like on the Cross, also on the Guardian Tree one god died.

The three discs placed under Yggdrasill contain nine worlds. They were shaped by Odin, Vili and Ve from Ymir's body, and for example the world of humans, Midgård, was made of Ymir's eyebrows (Crossley- Holland 1980: 4-5). The complex structure of all three spheres seems almost mathematical. The highest one was home of the divine tribe of Aesir, and also of another, presumably older tribe of gods called Vanir. On that plate a stronghold called Asgard was built for Aesir. In *the Prose Edda* we find a vivid description of how the mighty castle came into existance. According to the text, a giant in disguise agreed to build walls around the stronghold, but as a price he demanded Freya, a fertility goddess[4]. It is the first story that pictures a conflict between giants, who were viewed as evil, and Aesir, who represented good forces.

[4] The giant mason was allowed to use the help of his horse, and despites hard conditions he almost managed to finish the wall around Asgard. To avoid giving away Freyja the gods sent Loki, the mischievous one, to disturb the work. He took shape of a beautiful mare and kept giant's horse occupied for the whole night. Thus, the giant was not able to finish on time, and the price he demanded, which was the goddess Freyja, was not granted (after Crossley-Holland 1980: 9-14)

The myth of building the walls of Asgard also represents vulnerability of the gods, and their lack of protection. Unlike their Irish counterparts, the Tuatha Dé Danann, Aesir had to look for a proper shelter, something that would protect them from evil. Certainly, Celtic deities also had their strongholds, like the Dagda's Bruig na Bóinde. However, in the Norse version all the gods were placed in one huge castle, built especially for them, where they were separated from everything else. The only other inhabitants of the highest plate were the Light Elves, and the warriors who died in battles. They retreat to a stronghold called Valhalla, where they feasted and fought together with Odin, and where they awaited the final battle of Ragnarök (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 277).

The second plate was inhabited by humans, dwarfs, dark elves and giants. The connection between this disc and the one occupied by deities was established by Odin and it was a rainbow bridge called Bifrost (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 275). Here again we might notice an example of the Norse specifications. There was only one way to get to the land of humans, Midgård, from the plate of the gods. In the Celtic Irish sources the connection between this and the other world is more a matter of time rather than place, as most of the cross- world journeys happened during the celebration of Samuin.

The last, third sphere was the world of the dead. The mistress of that land was called Hel. It was not possible for living humans to travel there, and even for gods it was dangerous. When Odin's son died the gods had to look for volunteers who would go there and offer ransom for the dead god. Aesir had no power over that land, and the gods feared that dark and gloomy realm of death. Furthermore, it was a place with no possibility to return, and not even the son of Odin was able to come back to life. The name of that world was Niflheim, and there was located Hel's citadel of sorrow (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 155).

The Norse world had very specific, finished structure, and described in details. It was a finished, ready world and any major change would bring destruction. Indeed, through all the mythological stories Odin and the other members of Aesir try to postpone the forthcoming end of times. In this world everything and everybody had a place, although ever now and then the delicate balance was disturbed. Once it came to existance, to the state of cosmos, it awaited the return of chaos, and since it was such a

noble, careful construction, its destruction had to be spectacular and one of a kind. The Celtic world was not afraid of chaos as much as its Norse counterpart, since every year the ancient state of chaos returned to some degree to Ireland, during the mysterious time of Samuin (MacCulloch: 2004).

It is said that in the Norse mythology we have a full description of the creation of the world. However, it could be probably better to say that it was rather constructing of the universe. There was no main Creator as we find in Christianity. First beings came to live simultaneously, without any help from outside. Later on, Odin and his brothers built the world under Yggdrasill from flesh and blood of the dead giant Ymir. They rather resemble divine masons than creators. Their work could be compared to the idea of building the world presented by the philosopher Plato in his works. There, the universe was built by a demiurg, a kind of spirit or deity, who took models from eternal ideas of things, and relying on that model he assembled the world. In short, we could say that instead of creation, the Norse mythology describes spontaneous biological reactions followed by constructing the universe from the pieces already existing (for example *the Poetic Edda* 1996).

4.2.2. The Celts and Inisfáil, The Island of Destiny

The Celts in Ireland did not produce anything of a scale and imagination of the Norse triple disc's world. No clear description of the structure of the world is to be found from Irish texts. The level of detail and precision in analyzing the world seems to be much lower that in the Norse mythology. Thus, we are not able to accurately reconstruct the Celtic Irish reality, although we should not doubt that the Celts had quite a clear view of a structure of the world they believed in.

The Celtic world seems more 'chaotic' than its Norse counterpart. There are no clear borders, the reality is not limited to plates of any kind, supernatural and human regions tend to merge together, and unlike the Icelandic descriptions, in Irish sources appear real place names from southern Europe and the Middle East, together with many different supernatural places (*Lebor Gabala Erren).* In this maze of worlds one place stays clearly the most important, and that is of course Ireland. This Island of Destiny, Inisfaíl, is the centre of universe, the most precious treasure that prompted seven big invasions and many bloody battles.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Irish scribes placed Ireland in noble company of other countries and nations from the Mediterranean See region, the cradle of European civilization. Places like Egypt, Greece and Persia appear in the manuscripts (Ellis 1999: 46). It might be that the scribes wanted to express the important position of their, quite small in the end, island. Irish mythical stories happen in the context of powerful and influential cultures, which are nevertheless no more than 'satellites' around the central figure, which is Ireland.

The island itself is described in details. Especially the myths concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann present careful descriptions of places where certain events took place. For example the place of landing of the Children of Danu was to be in Western Connacht. Furthermore, two big battles that Dé Danann fought against the Firbolgs were also carefully placed on Irish soil. The first one happened in the south of Co. Mayo, the second one in the north of Co. Sligo (Rolleston 1993: 11-35). Such careful geographical description was not known in the Norse mythological world, which

seemed to be placed it totally abstract reality. Our world, in the Nordic view, was placed inside the plate of Midgård, being just a small part of bigger and mightier construction, whereas Celtic Ireland connects all the visible and invisible worlds, and it hosts all historical and mythical stories, events and characters. Like in many other respects, the Norse vow for clear borders and defined universe, while the Celts allow their world not to be entirely precise.

The description of the arrival of the Tuatha Dé Danann into Ireland brings an important point of their origin. In many sources we find hints about four mighty cities built on banks of Danube (for example Ellis 1999: 26). The four cities were called Falias, Gorias, Finias, and Murias. These were supposed to be the starting points of de Danann's emigration into Ireland. Supposedly they took with themselves four great treasures to Inisfáil: from Falias came sacred Stone of Destiny, from Gorias a beautiful sword, from Finias a spear, and from Murias the Cauldron of Plenty (Ellis 1999: 26). The purpose of the cauldron is not specified in the sources. We might suggest, though, that it had similar symbolism as *sampo* from the Finnish mythical stories. *Sampo* was a magical thing, probably a mill or an idol, which brought good luck and prosperity (*Standard Dictionary of Folk Mythology and Legend* 1975: 969). All those magical artifacts were used to gain control over Ireland. The cities have not been identified with any archeological remains on the European continent. One explanation of it could be that those mighty places of origin gave a good idea of power and abilities of the divine tribe of the goddess Danu.

The Celtic reality lacks the degree of precision described in Icelandic sources, but it is definitely a complicated one, and contains many layers. In Ireland all possible worlds of deities, humans, and the so called otherworld, meet together. The Celts saw Ireland as the most important part of their world, but there was also the Land of the Living, the Land of Ever Young, and The Western Islands beyond the Atlantic Ocean, Isle of Women, and the Síde (or Sídhe). The name Elysium was also used quite often, and to confuse things even more, it could describe any of the 'worlds' mentioned above. Furthermore, these lands could replace each other, and sometimes they were treated as one place under many names.

All these lands were somehow connected, as there were no clear borders between them. The most physical of them was probably the Síde, Sídhe or Síd. MacCulloch (2004: 49) presents an explanation of that term: 'Hollow hills were known as síd, a word possibly cognate with latin 'sedes', and hence perhaps meaning seats of the gods.' According to tradition, when the Tuatha Dé Danann was finally defeated by the Milesians, they retreated to the Síde, and thus they became the Síde. In some stories, for example in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel, the term Síde is used for strange, supernatural characters who came to the hostel, and who cannot be killed (Grantz 1981: 60-107).

The defeated Tuatha Dé Danann could no longer rule over Ireland, so they moved to the underground world. Nevertheless, they stayed powerful, and could travel to the surface of the island, especially during the time of Samuin, when the gates to the otherworld, or worlds, were open. This curious story was probably derived from the cult places, or simply the land itself could have been associated with deities, and thus it became sacred. As MacCulloch (2004: 49) explains: 'Celtic deities may have been associated in pagan times with hills and pre- historic 'tumuli' (…) If this were the case, it would help to explain why mounds were regarded as the retreats of the Tuatha Dé Danann'.

It could be probable that the source of the story of the Tuatha Dé Danann going underground had its origins in customs and beliefs of older cult that was present in Ireland before the Celts, as the most important archeological founds are dated to pre-Celtic times. It should be also mentioned that the main stronghold of the Dagda, which was Bruig na Bóinde, today's New Grange, was definitely built before the Celts reached Ireland (for example Grantz 1981: 15). This feature again expresses how the original Celtic cult merged with what was found in Ireland from the older times.

The Irish sources did not present one clear leader of the divine tribe of goddess Danu. Sometimes the main deity is said to be Lug, the master of the sun, sometimes it is the Dagda, described as the Good God. Further more, Oengus, the Gagda's son, and Midir, were also important chiefs (MacCulloch 2004: 121). This expresses the well-known Celtic disapproval for centralized power. There was no such powerful figure as Odin in the Norse myths. Furthermore, there was no one clear otherworld either.

As mentioned above, in myths appear different names of the supernatural Celtic reality, and often they seem to simply defy different places. Rolleston (1993: 24) writes: ‘Beyond the Atlantic Ocean the Irish Fairyland, the Land of the Living was placed’. Its Irish name was Tír na mBeó. In one mythological story of the voyage of Bran, he went there and spent there many years. When he came back to Ireland with a group of warriors one of them jumped ashore ‘but then his foot touched land, he became a heap of ashes’ (MacCulloch 2004: 116). In other words, the hero lived for hundreds of years in the fairy land, but coming back to Ireland meant meeting the real time, and by those human, real standards he should have been dead for a long time.

Another story with the same pattern describes the adventures of Oisin, who also went to the fairy land, which this time was called Tír na nÓg, which means the Land of Ever- Young. Oisin was warned that on the return to Ireland he should not touch the ground. He did get off his horse, and the moment he stood on Irish soil, this beautiful young warrior turned into an old man (MacCulloch 2004: 90). Thus, Tír na nÒg na Tír na mBeó express the same characteristics, and often they both are described as Elysium.

The same term Elysium is often applied to Síde, or Sídhe, being the land of gods. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Síde came into existence only after the Tuatha Dé Danann, the divine tribe, was defeated, and some notion of a fairy land existed even when Dé Danann were happily ruling over Ireland, as the Dagda’s son, Oengus also left for a mysterious journey to the otherworld. Certainly, it might be a simple mix of old and new ideas, or just traces of evolving cult, but if we treat the idea of Elysium, or fairy land, as a Celtic belief, then the notion of it had to exist before the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Furthermore, we enter here a difficult discussion about Celtic deities, the divine tribe of Danu, being destroyed by the actually incoming Celtic tribes, the Milesians.

Further confusion with the Celtic Fairyland brings the term Mag Mell, which means the Pleasant Plain, and it is also a possible candidate for being Elysium (MacCulloch 2004: 84-85). Furthermore, Isle of Women is another place, more like a part of Elysium, where Celtic heroes also visited. MacCulloch (2004: 117) suggests that

probably the origin of this mythical place was in actual custom of living or going at certain times to some islands, or one island that were forbidden places for men. From all the possibilities of defying a leader of the Celtic Elysium, MacCulloch opts of a marine deity called Manannan, who ruled ‘a divine region including thrice fifty islands’ (2004: 122).

From the above description we could draw a conclusion that the Celtic Elysium was more of an idea that was described and realized in many ways. It had no one, simple definition, neither one clear description. It seemed that Elysium meant something different for every character and hero that had gone there. We could probably say that Celtic Elysium fulfilled desires and ideas of those who went there, and thus it had to be different every time it got a visitor. This variety of supernatural world stands in sharp contrast with the Norse plate of the gods. This was one, finished reality that had to be accepted by the cult’s followers. The Celtic system seems to leave a vast space for changes, individual ideas and possibilities. Certainly, we cannot be sure what the sacred druidic teachings say about so many ‘incarnations’ of the Celtic Fairyland, but we could notice here the idea of a change that seems to dominate the Celtic mind.

It should be remembered, though, that this supernatural world was not exactly the otherworld. As MacCulloch writes: ‘Elysium, called by many beautiful Celtic names, is the gods’ land and is never associated with the dead’ (2004: 114). On the top of all those supernatural realities there was the otherworld, the place where souls were reborn after death on this planet. I explained the idea of constant rebirth in the chapter about Celtic cult and religion. Although heroes could enter Elysium when they were alive, it seemed that after death they would go to the otherworld, and undergo a rebirth there. There is not any straightforward hint that anything like an eternal place of rest existed in Celtic religion. The cycle of birth and rebirth in this and otherworld seemed endless, and the land of gods was in a way separated from it, as long as gods were alive.

I mentioned few times in this chapter that Samuin was the time when the connection between this and the supernatural world was opened. As Powell (1958) mentions, it was not generally desired happening, as it could be safe for mortal people. The supernatural world could be dangerous, its inhabitants not always friendly towards

humans. Nevertheless, it was on the first night of November that Samuin took place. Grantz (1981: 12-13) describes it was a day of rebirth and re-creation, a partial return to ‘primordial chaos’. Such a celebration meant to purify, refresh, and marked new beginning, the beginning of the Celtic year. Even the divine characters could not escape the power of Samuin. In his dream during Samuin Oengus, the Dagda’s son fell in love with a mysterious girl, and after exactly one year, also on the first day of November, he finally got to meet the divine woman from his dreams. Similar story happened to CúChulainn, as he got sick on Samuin after seeing two fairy women (after Grantz 1981).

The Celts were afraid, in a sense, of open spaces, defined lines and borders (Bulas: 2004), and again, this is pictured very well in Celtic art. The Celtic universe, too, has no clear divisions, everything blends together. In the Viking fairy universe everything has to have its place. Dwarves, giants, elves, deities and humans have separate lands for themselves. Bulas, describing Celtic art mentions that Irish artists seemed to be afraid of totally finishing their work, as if one could not precede any further from a state of perfection, and thus the next stage could only be death. This interesting remark describes very well Celtic universe. The certain degree of chaos was needed to keep the world in order. Since it was not entirely precise, it could develop and adjust, just like everything else in nature, it could change shape and constantly evolve. On the other hand, we have the Norse universe, finished and perfect, and awaiting destruction with fear. This world was not flexible, and a major change meant the end.

4.3 The final destruction

One of the most striking differences between the Norse and the Celtic mythological traditions exists in their views on the end of the world. The Nordic sources describe vividly an impressive battle that would start the incoming destruction. On the other hand, the Celtic world seemed to lack the idea of a definite end. Simply, after one stage of life comes another and this process continues endlessly. Certainly, even the Norse had a glimpse of hope, and after the final destruction a new world was foretold. Nevertheless, the merciless end awaited all deities and creatures. The Norse tradition contains one of the most striking stories of the destruction of the world, which is called Ragnarök. Everybody knows from the very beginning that the end will come, it will be preceded but certain meaningful events, and all the gods and their world will burn down.

4.3.1. The Norse: Ragnarök

As I already mentioned in previous chapters, the most intriguing feature of the Norse mythology is the always present notion of the forthcoming end of the world. It could be delayed, but not stopped. From the very first stages of creation the gods know and recognize the enemies that would fight against them. Almost in every mythological story presented in *the Prose* and *the Poetic Edda* there appear hints, and vague description of the great battle called Ragnarök, that would destroy old gods. Every event described in the Norse mythology could be interpreted as simply forecasting the unavoidable end.

The first important remarks about Ragnarök appeared together with the progeny of Loki. Loki was a mischievous god; he belonged to the divine tribe of Aesir, but often worked against them. Often he was described as the evil one. From the union of Loki and one giantess, two creatures came to life, and those were the wolf called Fenrir and the great serpent Jormungand. When the gods discussed at the Well of Urd what to do with those animals they heard a prophecy: 'Expect them to harm you and endanger you. They will be in at the kill' (Crossley- Holland 1981: 33).

The serpent was put into the ocean around Midgård, where it kept growing until Ragnarök, when it would attack god Thor, and they would slay each other. The wolf was to be bound, but a trick was needed, and as a result of the binding god Tyr lost his right arm[5]. In *the Prose Edda* we find one passage where one person, learning about the universe asked, why Fenrir had not been killed, and the answer was: 'The gods have so much respect for the sanctity of their peace-steads (…) that they would not stain them with the blood of the wolf, although prophecy had intimated to them that he must one day become the bane of Odin' (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 289). In other words, the gods knew their destiny, and they could not stop the approaching catastrophe, nor could they harm their enemies before the actual battle.

[5] The wolf was told it would be a 'game', but to be sure that the gods did not really want to bind him, Fenrir suggested that one of them should put his arm between wolf's jaws. Only Tyr was brave enough to do it. When the wolf realized that he was tricked, he bit off Tyr's hand (after Crossley-Holland 1981: 33-38).

Thus, one of the gods, Loki, bred two most powerful enemies of the divine tribe of Aesir, and his children were to bring doom to the highest of gods, Odin, and his son Thor. The deities knew perfectly what was going to happen, but they could not argue with their destiny. Binding to the wolf Fenrir could only move the destruction in time, but when Ragnarök would be approaching the wolf would be freed from his bounds. This gloomy picture of unchangeable faith pictures very well the Norse ways of thinking. Death was unavoidable; it was just matter of time. Furthermore, the one that was close to the gods, Loki, was also responsible for their destruction. Aesir tolerated that evil deity, simply because there was no other choice. He had a certain role to fulfil; he was the one to bring death to Aesir.

The beginning of Ragnarök was also 'organized' by Loki. He was the cause of death of Baldur, the good god loved by everybody. Baldur's mother, goddess Frigg, swore every metal and plant that would not harm her son. However, she did not obtain such a promise from mistletoe, as she thought it was too weak and meaningless a plant. We could notice here the same idea as in Iliad, where Achilles' mother bathed him in holy water for protection, and held him by his heel, thus making this little spot vulnerable of wounds. In the same pattern, Baldur could be killed only by mistletoe, and that fact was used by Loki. The gods enjoyed a game of shooting at Baldur, as nothing could harm him. The mischievous deity made an arrow out of mistletoe, and convinced Hodur, a blind god, to shoot Baldur with it. As a result, the son of Odin died (after *the Prose Edda*1906: 316-319).

This curious story is sometimes compared to the story of Jesus Christ, as young god, beloved by everybody, dies as a victim of the evil-doer. The death of Baldur was a sure sign for the gods that Ragnarök was approaching. As a punishment, Loki was bound to a rock, but he would be freed before the final battle. Like everything else, the course of events was unavoidable. The young god Baldur was the first victim of forthcoming time of chaos. Nevertheless, because he was in the land of the dead during the time of Ragnarök, he later joined a small group of survivors, who would populate the new earth. But before that the destruction had to happen.

According to *the Poetic Edda*, even the Guardian Tree, Yggdrasill, would feel the coming end:

> Yggdrasill shudders, the tree standing upright,
>
> The ancient tree groans and the giant is loose;
>
> all are terrified on the roads to hell,
>
> before Surt's kin swallows it up. (1996: 10)

Surtr, or Surt, lived and waited in his kingdom of fire for centuries. The very first descriptions of the Norse universe mention him as the one who awaits the final battle. Even before the world was formed, Surtr knew he would have destroyed the three plates built under Yggdrasill during Ragnarök. *The Prose Edda* (1906: 260) says about him: 'In his hand he beareth a flaming falcon, and at the end of the world shall issue forth to combat, and shall vanquish all the gods, and consume the universe with fire'. And further on: 'There is nothing in the nature that can hope to make resistance when the sons of Muspell sally forth to the great combat' (1906: 269). And when the god Heimdall spots the forthcoming flames, he would blow his horn Gjallar, and thus the battle would begin:

> The ash Yggdrasill begins to shake, nor is there anything in heaven or earth exempt from fear at that terrible hour. The Æsir and all the heroes of Valhalla arm themselves and speed forth to the field, led on by Odin, with his golden helm and resplendent cuirass, and his spear called Gungnir. Odin places himself against the wolf Fenrir; Thor stands by his side, but can render him no assistance, having himself to combat with the Midgård serpent. Frey encounters Surtur, and terrible blows are exchanged ere Frey falls; (…) Thor gains great renown for killing the Midgard serpent, but at the same time, recoiling nine paces, falls dead upon the spot suffocated by the floods of venom which the dying serpent vomits forth upon him. The wolf swallows Odin, but at that instant Vidar advances, and setting his foot on the monster's lower jaw, seizes the other with his hand, and thus tears and rends him till he dies. (…) Loki and Heimdall fight, and mutually kill each other. (…) After this, Surtur darts fire and flame over the earth, and the whole universe is consumed. (*The Prose Edda* 1906: 325-326).

This horrid battle was followed by great fire that consumed everything. Every god knew his place on the field; every mythical character knew his enemy. Furthermore, everybody knew beforehand the result to the battle. It simply had to happen to make

space for the new earth, new cult, and new population. That is just the way the world works, it cannot be stopped. The Norse mythology is thus very eschatological, as it puts a strong emphasis on the happenings in the end of the world. Some scholars find here Christian influence, but it is not necessary to look there for inspirations. Every society has a strong feeling of change and the constant process of death that is needed to renew the earth.

Nevertheless, the Norse tradition presents probably one of the most detailed, cruel and merciless descriptions of the end of the world. Although the scenario and main characters of the apocalypse are known in other cultures as well (e.g. in India, Iran, Christian and Jewish traditions), the Norse sources present it from the very beginning (Eliade 1982). Ragnarök itself is almost the protagonist of the whole mythology. Everything happens because of it, everybody awaits it, the whole world prepares for the functions that it would have during the combat.

This unbelievably strong notion of destruction characterises very well the Norse myths. It was almost as if one needed time to get used to the idea of unavoidable end, and thus it was mentioned every now and then. Ragnarök was meant to be a massive, brilliant show, which had to be prepared and played carefully. We could say that the entire world prepared for it, so for a brief moment of time it fulfilled its destiny, and then died suddenly, consumed by flames.

We can only wonder what prompted such a strong notion of the unavoidable end of the universe. If we take into consideration the theory of Gerhard Herm, we could imply that the great and sudden ecological disaster that happened in the end of the Bronze Age could have made a lasting impression on the survivors. According to Herm, the bloody destruction of Ragnarök might be the echo of the cataclysm that buried that sophisticated Bronze Age civilization of the North. Earthquakes and floods destroyed it, and a similar description can be found in *the Poetic Edda*: the earth shook, the Guardian Tree trembled, and then the ocean covered the land. Herm states that the divine tribe of Aesir could have been a former ruling class that disappeared together with their kingdom, but gave birth to legends and then myths. Tempting as it is, we would never be sure if such an event really took place.

Despite of the overwhelming destruction, there were some deities who survived. First of all, Surtr, the lord of flames, would continue his existence (Eliade 1982: 169). We could suggest that it is simply because Surtr represents fire, an element of nature, which comes and goes, bringing death and destruction. From the divine tribe of Aesir Thor's sons, Modi and Mangi survived. Furthermore, the young god Baldur would come back from the land of death. As for the human race, two people, a man and a woman were hidden inside the trunk of Yggdrasill from the very beginning of the world. After Ragnarök, they would come out and populate the earth again (Crossley-Holland 1980: 175-176).

After the great fire that consumed the nine worlds ceded, 'a new earth emerges, green, beautiful, fertile as never before, purified of all suffering' (Eliade 1982: 169). Like in many other eschatological stories around the world, the total cataclysm was needed to purify the earth, to arrange the new beginning, to start again without the ballast from the past. Unusual as it is, the Norse mythology contains nevertheless the universal notion of periodical destruction that is needed for the universe to continue. Death and blood are necessary for the world to rise again.

The idea of the sacrifice of 'higher' beings, deities who agree on their fate, agree on being slaughtered so the universe would continue, exists nowadays in the form of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. According to the Christian religion his death and blood was needed so that our world would not stop in a dead, hopeless end. As I proceed to the Celtic myths we shall see that on the first glimpse there is no end of the world as such in the Irish sources. However, the end did come, and it was just far more subtle than it its Norse counterpart.

4.3.2. The Celts: the seventh invasion

The Celtic universe, comfortably narrowed to Ireland, seemed quite a safe place compared to the Norse plates built on the edge of destruction. Indeed, the main protagonist of the Celtic mythology stays intact, only the tribes and people change. We might try to find, though, a destruction story in the myths of the Tuatha Dé Danann. According to the traditional division of Irish mythological stories into four cycles, the story of this divine tribe constitutes the Mythical Cycle of the sources, compared with, for example, the historical cycle about the Irish kings.

In the whole of early Medieval Irish texts there is only one truly eschatological remark. After the victorious battle over the Formorians the Morrígan, one of the Danann, sings a kind of hymn about the end of the world and evil that would come (probably meaning the Milesians). MacCulloch states that it is such a rarity in the Celtic sources that it is most likely of a Christian origin (2004: 34). The Celtic world does not forecast the end of things as the Norse one does. The ever present notion of continuation of life seems to mean more that small catastrophes and 'personal' losses. The greatest tragedy that appears in Irish manuscripts concerns the Tuatha Dé Danann and their retreat to Síde.

The Tuatha Dé Danann was a mysterious tribe that supposedly was banned from heaven because of their magical knowledge, and thus they arrived to Ireland. We find a passage in *Lebor Gabala Erren* (55): 'In this wise they came, in dark clouds. They landed on the mountains of Conmaicne Rein in Connachta; and they brought a darkness over the sun for three days and three nights'. The Tuatha Dé Danann was a mysterious group of invaders. They came to their island of destiny, but all they brought was destruction and death. Throughout their stay in Ireland they constantly fought against the Firbolgs and the Formorians over the land. When they finally became the only masters, and then came ships bringing the last invasions in form of the sons of Míl.

Interestingly enough, the Tuatha Dé Danann were not portrayed by the Christian scribes as evil. On the contrary, that was the noble group, fair and beautiful compared

to the other groups that they fought against. As MacCulloch remarks, the pagan Celts probably regarded the Formorians and the Firbolgs as evil, unlike the Tuatha Dé Danann (2004: 35). The tribe of goddess Danu was powerful and immortal. If any scholar speaks about Celtic gods from Ireland he refers to the Children of Danu. However, they truly controlled Ireland only for a brief moment in the whole history of that land. And according to the sources, they were destroyed by incoming Celtic groups.

From the Irish sources we get the impression that the Tuatha Dé Danann were not really human. As MacCulloch writes (2004: 42) 'The annalistic account of the conquest of the Tuatha Dé Danann by the Milesians cannot conceal the divinity of the former nor the persistence of the belief in Druidic magic and supernatural power'. Furthermore, Ellis provides an account that the members of Dé Danann were 'defeated by the mortal sons of Míle Easpain' (1999: 56). It is a very rare example in the world of mythologies that the theoretical believers, the Milesians identified as the Celts themselves, destroyed the cult of the Celtic deities (the Tuatha Dé Danann) and they were praised for that.

The divine tribe of goddess Danu constituted truly Celtic Ireland. The scenario presented by the scribes, where the Celts defeat their own deities is quite hard to accept. Furthermore, it does not make much sense, and also it is not often considered carefully enough in the literature. The picture that emerges from knotty Irish texts reflects a double end of the Tuatha Dé Danann. First, they underwent the physical destruction from the Milesians, and later on, they were spiritually erased from the human minds. They did not take the whole world with them, as did the Norse Aesir. The defeat was only theirs, and they had to make space for new invaders.

The doom of the Children of Danu came from Spain, and most likely represented the first waves of Celtic migration. The sons of Mile landed at the Boyne, and almost immediately gave battle to the Danann (MacCulloch 2004: 44). After that for a brief period of time both groups coexisted in Ireland. However, quite soon another conflict began, which ended up with a bloody battle of Moytura. As MacCulloch (2004: 44) writes: 'And another conflict a further rout took place, in which the three Kings and

Queens were slain; and it was now the survivors of the Tuatha Dé Danann took refuge in the underground síd, the Milesians remaining masters of Ireland.'

The three kings were the sons of Ogma, and their wives where three sisters called Banba, Fólta (Fodla) and Eire (Eiru). The sisters wanted Ireland to be named after one of them (*Lebor Gabala Erren).* In one version of the myth, presented for example by Ellis (1999: 27-28) they faithfully fight with Dé Danann against the Milesians. However, Scott (1992) presents a bit different approach, where three sisters are the spirits of the island. They unite with the Milesians; because they fear Children of Danu might destroy Inisfáil, the island of destiny. In that story Ireland is personalized in triple female spirits, and chooses her own masters. The faith of the Tuatha Dé Danann is thus foregone.

After the battle Children of Danu accepted their defeat, and the control over physical Ireland was handed over to the Milesians, who 'conquered noble Ireland/ Against the Tuatha Dé Danann of great magic' (*Lebor Gabala Erren*: paragraph 64). However, those powerful magicians did not disappear from Ireland. In a famous act they moved underground. As Rolleston (1993: 37) explains: 'But the people of Danu did not withdraw. By their magic art they cast over themselves a veil of invisibility, which they could put on or off as they chose. There were two Irelands henceforward; the spiritual and the earthy. The Dananns dwelt in the spiritual Ireland, which was portioned out among them by their great overlord – the Dagda.' The two Irelands lived along for quite a long time. Members of that divine tribe for example appeared in many stories from the Ulster cycle, which describes adventures of CúChulainn. Irish legends are full of stories of visiting the Síde, and even nowadays stories about fairies living underground are popular.

Nevertheless, after long and quite peaceful coexistence, the second phase of destruction arrived. We find an example of that tragedy in the story of the children of Lir (Ler). Two sons and two daughters of Lir, one of the most powerful of the Tuatha Dé Danann, were changed into swans by their evil stepmother, and cast away for nine hundred years (Ellis 1999: 56-78). When they finally resumed their human form, they could not find their kin anywhere in Ireland. As Ellis writes: 'There was no sign of the children of Danu, no sign of the old gods and goddesses of Éireann. True it was, that

the descendants of the sons of Míle Easpain, the first mortals in Éireann, still lived on. But they had long ago rejected the ancient gods. (…) gods and goddesses exist only as long as memory and respect for them remain' (1999: 73). It appears, then, that the Tuatha Dé Danann lost not only their physical power, but also the spiritual one. Their believers and followers rejected them, moved to a new cult. Thus, Dé Danann was defeated twice by humans, the second destruction putting a real end to the divine tribe. This sad story could apply to many ancient cults and religions that were simply forgotten.

The curious story of double defeat to the Tuatha Dé Danann remains open for interpretations. The second stage of it, the spiritual death, seems easier to accept than the actual physical battle with Dé Danann's own believers. MacCulloch presents an explanation that the tribe of Danu was destroyed by Christianity, and sons of Míle were just invented by Irish scribes. MacCulloch states that shortly before the arrival of Christianity there were two very powerful tribes in Connacht and Ulster, and the story of the Milesians was invented by the annalists to present the noble roots of two main royal houses of those tribes (2004: 44-46). That could be a sufficient explanation of the usual mix up with the Tuatha Dé Danann being a Celtic family of deities that was destroyed by the actual Celtic invasion. That was also a suitable way to show that 'the old demons' of the island were not in charge anymore, and the actual population of Ireland had very little to do with them, since their ancestors, the Milesians, came from somewhere else.

Undoubtedly MacCulloch's view on inventing a story of the Milesians for the ruling Irish class is an interesting one, and it might be fully valid. However, I would suggest an interpretation that primarily the Tuatha Dé Danann was not necessarily a Celtic group of deities. If we accept that there was quite a strong cult in Ireland before the Celts, and that some of that culture was inherited by the future Irish Celtic one, we could argue that the story of the Tuatha Dé Danann is a mixture of the history of the forthcoming true Celtic cult and the fading away of the older cult already present in Ireland. Certainly, I cannot present more that hints and suggestions, but in a way my suggestion could explain some of the problems.

By assuming that Dé Danann represented the older cult we could explain why the Milesians destroyed their actual deities, as simply one cult replaced the other. Secondly, as mentioned before, the cult of goddess Danu seems older that the Celtic masculine worship, and that mother-figure could be a borrowing from other groups. Thirdly, the forthcoming Celts could easily replace names and functions of older deities, and thus some of the gods' names used in Ireland are similar to those found in Gaul and Great Britain. Moreover, by the time the stories were written down not only was the older cult forgotten, but the Celtic religion was disappearing too under pressure from Christianity. Thus, the scribes could have used more familiar names inherited from the Celtic tradition. Finally, the Tuatha Dé Danann could have been a joint product of the older cult which provided the skeleton, and some Celtic elements, like divine figures, legends and names. Thus, it would obviously suffer from being a messy mixture of stories and characters.

The idea I presented above is just a suggestion that would probably have little chance of being properly proven. Nevertheless, the Celtic world did not accept an idea of total destruction. Moreover, nothing really finishes nor starts in the Celtic universe, everything merges together, and the mythical characters appear long time after Christianity was accepted. There is continuity in everything; everything is a piece of the same puzzle. Endless reincarnations of same mythical figures connect all the stories. This could reflect a very Hindu- or Buddhism like flavor of the Celtic mythology. Everything is same, things just reflect different characteristics.

The Norse world had a drastic, quite painful beginning, and also a very impressive end. The Viking world needs a violent and bloody purification, and not just shifting to another phase. The beginning and the end happen in fire and blood, they need sacrifice. This feature could be found for example in the Aztec and Maya traditions and their circle of universe, where every world has to burn down, so a new one could emerge. Furthermore, even Christianity comes into that scheme. The first destructive sin and Abel's blood marked the beginning of human kind, and further on Christ's sacrifice was needed to purify the world and open the gate to heaven.

It might be also said that people would prefer a total destruction that would leave everything clear, new and fresh. It seems as if human kind would prefer a major

disaster when something bad or unexpected happens. We want the world to end, or at least to stop for a moment, to have our little Ragnarök, so we could start all over again. However, it is the Celtic way that happens. The world continues to exist no matter what, and we have to adapt and accept the changes.

5 GODS: DIVINE TRIBES

The Celtic and Norse mythological traditions have two divine tribes as main characters. These are the fairy and beautiful Tuatha Dé Danann and Aesir. The Tuatha Dé Danann was euphemized by the Irish scribes, and often they resemble people, but even in texts full of Christian references they are referred to as 'gods' (for example *Lebor Gabala Erren).* The tribe of goddess Danu came to Ireland in fairy mist, but they had to fight for it first against the Formorians, later against the Milesians. The Nordic divine tribe of Aesir also went to war against another group, the Vanir. Some scholars suggest that this is a reminiscent of a new cult (of Aesir) taking over the old religion (Vanir). The same interpretation could be applied to the Insular Celtic story. The Celts adopted successfully the 'native' sides, like New Grange, which were built before their arrival to Ireland, and applied their own stories there.

Both divine tribes, Aesir and the Tuatha Dé Danann, were powerful, skilled in magic and poetry, but also vulnerable to fate that they could not change. Furthermore, both groups expressed a quite typical mythological characteristic, as they were partly mortal and partly immortal at the same time. They might be hurt and they suffered, like for example Oengus, Balder, and Tyr. At the same time their immortality and power was stressed strongly. As MacCulloch (2004: 35) remarks: 'Pagan gods are mortal and immortal; their life is a perennial drama, which ever begins and ends, and is ever being renewed – a reflection of the life of nature itself.'

The most striking difference between those two groups is the fact that the Norse had a father, whereas the Celts praised their mother. Odin, the 'designer' of the universe and the Allfather was an unquestionable leader of Aesir. His Celtic counterpart would be Danu, the mother-goddess. Certainly, the Celtic cult had many strong male deities, but none of them held as strong position as Danu. In general, more goddesses appear in the Celtic myths, and they are more influential that their Norse counterparts. One exception would be Freyja (Freya), who was a Norse fertility goddess.

Both groups of deities happen to blend to some extent with their enemies. Odin's mother was a giantess, a member of the most hostile group towards Aesir. Furthermore, after the war some members of Vanir, an old enemy tribe, joined Aesir. The same pattern appeared in the Celtic stories. Some of the Formorians became partners of the Children of Danu, and the father of Lug, one of the most prominent Celtic deity, was reported to be a half-Formorii (for example MacCulloch 2004: 32), though both groups were hostile to the very end. We could say that both the Norse and Celtic groups presented a mixture of 'good' and 'evil' races.

In my analysis I present the main characteristic of each of the divine tribe, and then I discuss in details some of their members. Because of the amount of material I narrow the analysis to four characters from each divine group. From Aesir, I give most attention to figures of Odin and Loki, and also I mention briefly the most important features of Thor and the goddess Freyja. From the Tuatha Dé Danann I write about the Dagda and Lug, and I devote some space to Danu and the trio of goddesses: Badb, Macha and the Morrígan, as sometimes they are referred to as three emanations of the same female figure.

5.1.Aesir

Aesir was the main tribe of deities in the Norse tradition. Its leader and founding father was of course Odin, the oldest of gods. Excluding Odin and his wife goddess Frigg, there were altogether twenty four members of the divine tribe, twelve gods and twelve goddesses (Crossley- Holland 1980: 15). Obviously, these numbers are not exact, as scholars quarrel about the actual deities that constituted Aesir, and depending on counting and classifying the characters we could get sometimes more and sometimes less than twenty four. Nevertheless, these exact numbers reflect the need for order and precision, which seemed to be always present in the Norse world. This stayed in a sharp contrast with the Celtic tradition, the number and members of the Tuatha Dé Danann remained vague.

When the world was built by Odin and his two brothers on three plates, the highest plate was chosen to be home for the gods. There was built their stronghold called Asgard. Surprisingly enough, Aesir was not the only divine group which occupied that plate. There was another tribe of gods called Vanir. A conflict broke between those two tribes, ending up in savage battle. Traditionally, scholars assume that those two groups of deities represented two different cults, Vanir being the older one, which had to establish themselves among their followers. As Crossley- Holland (1980: 184) writes: ‘This myth could represent the folk memory of hostility between the adherents of two different cults – cults which ultimately fused. (…) The Vanir, who must have been original gods, are fertility gods and the Aesir are primary gods of war.’ This division suggests that some elements from the older cult were added to the new one.

According to the myth, after a cruel battle both divine tribes agreed to make peace. Moreover, there was no clear winner, both divine tribes seemed to be equally strong, and neither side appeared to win. Thus, it was agreed that instead of fighting Aesir and Vanir should combine their strength (Crossley- Holland 1980: 7). From that moment on all the gods are referred to as Aesir, and three leaders of Vanir: Njord, Frey and Freyja joined Aesir (for example Crossley- Holland 1980: 8). Two cults merged together, and in the character of Freyja Aesir got a mother- goddess figure, a fertility goddess and one of the strongest deities of the Norse mythology. We should also

mention that some members of Aesir were descendants of giants. Odin himself, strictly speaking, was half a giant after his mother. Furthermore, the god Loki was a giant by birth, but he was also Odin's foster brother, and thus he was accepted in Aesir. This mix- up did not have any big effect on the divine tribe. No matter the origin, Aesir was the faire, divine race of gods.

The main god in the Norse tradition is Odin. He is the true lord of his world. As *the Prose Edda* describes: 'The first and eldest of the Aesir (…) is Odin. He governs, and, although the other deities are powerful, they all serve and obey him as children do their father' (1906: 276). (…) 'He is called Alfadir (All- father or the Father of all); bit in the old Asgard he had twelve names (…). He liveth (…) from all ages, he governeth all realms and swayeth all things great and small. (…) He hath formed heaven and earth, and the air, and all things thereunto belonging' (1906: 259). As mentioned above, Odin was called by many names, each of them revealing different aspect of this divine leader. He was known as The Terrible One, Father of Battle, Allfather, Father of Warriors, One- Eyed Wanderer, Lord of the Gallows (for example Crossley-Holland 1980: 69).

Unlike enigmatic Celtic deities, we have a quite detailed description of how Odin looked. As the myths describe him: 'He has only one eye and wears a wide brimmed hat to escape instant recognition; he always wears a blue cloak and carries the magic spear Gunguir; on his shoulders sit the ravens Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory), birds of battle symbolic also of flights in search of wisdom' (Crossley-Holland 1980: 26). To underline unusual character of Odin, *the Prose Edda* states that Odin does not need food at all, as 'wine is for him both meat and drink' (1906: 294).

Odin represents strong father- like characteristics. He built this universe, he shaped the world, and he gave a breath of life to the first people, Ask and Embla. In other words, one part of this deity is positive and creative, as he brings life to the world. On the other hand, he was the primary god of war, cruel and terrifying. As Crossley- Holland (1980: 26) interprets that deity, Odin was 'maybe a god to be respected, but not a god to be loved.' In the figure of Odin we find features of the god of war, god of battle, of poetry, wisdom, of the dead, as well as the main shaman of his people.

Many of Odin's actions described in the Norse mythology were driven by a desire to obtain wisdom. As mentioned in the previous chapter, by using a trick Odin obtained mead of poetry, and only he had unlimited access to it. He also offered his eye as a price so he could drink from the spring of wisdom. Moreover, he could send out his spirit to obtain wisdom from the dead (Crossley- Holland 1980: 26). One of the most terrifying myths describes how Odin was hanging from the Guardian Tree Yggdrasill, died there and then came back to life. We find a passage in *the Poetic Edda* (1996: 34):

> I know that I hung a windy tree nine long nights,
> Wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin, myself to myself,
> on that tree of which no man knows
> from where its roots run.
>
> No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
> downwards I peered;
> I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
> then I fell back from there.

During this shamanistic journey to the land of the dead Odin learned the runic alphabet, and obtained knowledge from the dead (*the Poetic Edda* 1996). In this short passage we could find parallels to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Just like Jesus, Odin was wounded with a spear, he cried of a drink, he died and came back to life. Nevertheless, scholars generally agree that those are shamanistic features that do not need to be explained in a context of Christianity. Odin sacrificed himself to himself by hanging on Yggdrasill, and it was enough of a justification for human sacrifices, and as we know, the cult of Odin included sacrifices of people to that deity, usually by hanging them from a tree (Crossley- Holland 1980: 187). Thus he obtained the famous title of the Lord of the Gallows.

The shamanistic character of Odin is furthermore strengthened by the fact that he could change his shape. In one example he took a form of an eagle and traveled around the nine worlds (Eliade 1982: 160). Sometimes two ravens mentioned above, Odin's companions, are interpreted as aspects of Odin himself, traveling endlessly and gathering knowledge from every corner of the universe. Shamanistic elements appear even in the description of Odin's wife, Frigga. As the *Prose Edda* (1906: 276)

explains: ‘She foresees the destinies of men, but never reveals what is to come.’ Thus Odin’s better half also possesses occult knowledge forbidden for everybody else.

Eliade (1982: 159-161) compares Odin as a master of magic, wisdom and occult science to the Hindu god Varuna, who was also a deity of poetry. However, Odin is far darker and more dangerous a god, who is delighted in human sacrifices. Odin’s horse, Slepnir, has eight legs. This animal is often interpreted as a wooden casket carried by four men, an inevitable symbol of death and destruction. Furthermore, Odin is the one who collects warriors who died in battle in Valhalla, where they drink and fight till the end of time.

One striking description of Odin’s cruelty can be found in a myth about Freyja’s necklace. Furious with her shameless behavior, Odin wants to see blood and destruction to ‘cool himself down’, and he asks Freyja to start a war. As Crossley-Holland (1980: 69) retells Odin’s orders: ‘You must stir up hatred. You must stir up war. Find two kings in Midgård and set them at each other’s throats; ensure that they meet only on the battlefield. (…) As soon as each warrior is chopped down, bathed in blood, he must stand up unharmed and fight again. (…) Whether they with it or not, let men rip one another to pieces.’ It could be easy to understand from this description why Odin was feared so much. He was not a warm father- figure, but a merciless lord of his world.

Despite all the terrifying and cruel elements, Odin was nevertheless described as a ‘good’ god, the father of the entire world. There was another character among Aesir that held a title of being evil. His name was Loki. As *the Prose Edda* describes: ‘There is another deity (…) reckoned in the number of the Aesir, whom some call the calumniator of the gods, the contriver of all fraud and mischief, and the disgrace of gods and men. His name is Loki or Loptur’ (1906: 284). This was a very dynamic character, and throughout the Norse myths we could notice how he changed from a harmless trickster into a killer. The figure of this ambiguous deity is quite special for the European mythological tradition. Certainly, Norse and Celtic gods are not exactly moral in our modern sense, but only Loki expresses the terrifying notion of a close friend, a kin, who turned into the worst enemy.

Technically, Loki was not a god. He was a son of two giants, but being Odin's foster brother, he was accepted among Aesir (Crossley-Holland 1980: 29). That is the only explanation of this god's origin that we get from the sources. As mentioned above, Odin was generally feared, but Loki was a deity 'to be avoided'. As Eliade (1982: 167) remarks, Loki had no cult as such, and no true followers. Furthermore, there were no sacred sited not temples devoted to him. Just like Odin, Loki was known by many names, like for instance Sky Traveller, Trickster, Shape Changer, Sly One, Father of Lies (Crossley- Holland 1980: 51-52). Because of the title of a trickster, and quite playful character that he represented in the first myths, Loki was sometimes compared to the North American Trickster-character, which played jokes on spirits and people. Nevertheless, Loki's figure seems far darker and more dangerous, and an interpretation of his deeds and his character is quite difficult. As Eliade remarks: 'For more that a century scholars have successively explained Loki as a god of fire, as a god of thunder or of death, as a reflection of the Christian devil' (1982: 168).

This enigmatic and ambiguous deity represents a darker side of Aesir. He is the one who brings action and change to the perfectly built world, and in the end it causes destruction. Loki plays an important role in shaping Ragnarök. We could say that as Odin was the father of creation, then Loki was the master of destruction. He was accepted among the Aesir because he had a mission to fulfill, he was needed as the one who would bring disasters, but also arm the gods against them. He was the main cause of change, change that could not last long in the finished Nordic world. Loki could probably be compared to the biblical Judah. He just played a role assigned to him, as somebody had to.

The first stories that consider Loki describe tricks that seem almost harmless, that he plays on gods. However, with his every action the spiral of Rangarök moves faster. In the myth 'The Treasure of the Gods' (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 48-53) the story begins when Loki cuts off golden hair of Thor's wife, Sif. He claims it was just a 'funny trick'. To redeem himself and apologize to Aesir he brings a new, magical set of hair for Sif made by dwarves- smiths. Furthermore, he brings a gift for Thor, a hammer, which would become his famous Mjollnir; Odin gets from him a magical spear Gungnir and an arm- ring Draupnir. Thus he obtained the most precious of the gods' treasures, which would be crucial weapons during the battle of Ragnarök.

In the probably most famous Norse myth, Loki gives away Thor's hammer as a ransom to be freed from captivity. Next, he has to help the gods to get it back[6]. Loki's ambiguous actions bring plenty of confusion. His slightly cruel tricks are not generally aimed to harm Aesir, but step by step he becomes more malicious. As the myth explains: 'The playful Loki gives way to the cruel predator, hostile to the gods' (Crossley- Holland 1980: 29). He is both the friend and the enemy of the deities. However, in the final stage, during Ragnarök he would fight against Aesir.

Loki's ability to change shapes was more than impressive. In one of the most famous episodes about building a wall around gods' stronghold, which was described earlier, Loki took shape of a mare. Thus, he was also able to change the sex. As a result, he gave birth to Sleipnir, Odin's famous horse. Later on, Loki became a father of a serpent and a wolf (for example Crossley- Holland 1980: 33). Among other famous shape-changes Loki was a falcon, a salmon, and a giantess. His incredible ability found no match among Aesir. He could become anything he wanted. We could find some parallel in the Irish sources, where certain characters were reborn many times in different forms.

As Loki grew more and more bitter and evil, so his actions were becoming more and more terrifying. Probably the cruelest act of his was killing of the young god Baldur (Crossley- Holland 1980: 151- 154). It did seem from that myth that Loki had not had any real reason to cause Baldur's death. However, it was a necessary event for forthcoming battle of Ragnarök[7]. His punishment for this deed could remind us of the story of Greek hero Prometheus. As described in the myth, Loki was bound to the cliff by his son's entrails; there was a snake place above him, and its venom was dripping on Loki's face. His faithful wife held a bowl over his head to collect the poison. However, from time to time she had to empty it, and for few minutes Loki felt horrible

[6] Loki was in a shape of a falcon when he was captured by a giant. To get his freedom back he had to brink the giant Thor's hammer, Mjollnir. However, it was the best weapon against giants that the gods had, and they had to get it back. In exchange, giants wanted the fertility goddess, Freyja, as a wife to their king. To avoid giving her away Thor was dressed up as the goddess and sent together with Loki to the land of giants. Surprisingly enough they did not notice that the bride was a man, and Loki delivered many successful explanations why the bride ate so much, or why 'she' did not want to show her face. In the end the hammer was brought to bless the bride, and the moment Thor grabbed it he started killing giants around him (after Crossley-Holland 1980: 70-75).

[7] Hel, the mistress of the land of the dead agreed to send Baldur back from there if every living creature agreed to shed a tear for the dead young god. However, Loki took shape of a giantess and when asked, he refused one tear for Baldur. Thus, Odin's son, Baldur, had to remain in the land of the dead. All Aesir knew it was Loki, but nothing could be done, it was his destiny (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 162- 169).

pain. While he moved and shook feeling the venom dripping, he caused earthquakes. He would stay there till the end of time and the final battle of Ragnarök (Crossley-Holland 1980: 171-172).

That strange, ambiguous deity was the 'enemy within'. First one of Aesir's and gods' friend, he transformed into the one who brought to them death and destruction. It is difficult to assess his actions, but Loki was undoubtedly one of the most important elements of the final disaster. It is because of his actions that Ragnarök came closer and closer. Furthermore, his terrifying offspring, the wolf Fenrir and the serpent Jormungand were destined to kill two main deities, who were Odin and his son Thor.

Described as malicious, amoral, criminal, dynamic, unpredictable and cruel, Loki stands out in the Norse mythology as an evil force, which was once a friend of the gods, but became the most devoted foe. No such a character is known in the Celtic mythology, unless we take into consideration the three sisters- spirits of Ireland. If we presume that originally they were of the Tuatha Dé Danann, then we could say that just like Loki they turned against their former friends, bringing death and destructions as it was meant to. Certainly, it is a far fetch comparison, and Loki would probably remain one of the most enigmatic and tragic figures in the world mythology.

The highest classes of Norse society were worshipers of Odin, so as a result he did not have very many followers. Indeed, although the highest god, he was not very popular. People were simply afraid of that dark, enigmatic god who knew everything and ruled everything. The true Norse god was Thor, one of Odin's sons, who was the symbol of a perfect Nordic warrior. He was Odin's child, strong and powerful, but also impetuous, hot- tempered, and violent. We find a passage about this deity in *the Prose Edda* (1906: 277): 'The mightiest of them (…) is Thor. He is called Asa- Thor and Auku- Thor, and he is the strongest of gods and men. (…) Thor has a car drawn by two goats called Tanngniost and Tanngrisnir. From his driving about in this car he is called Auku- Thor (Charioteer-Thor).' According to tradition it is this chariot that causes thunders heard on earth. His very name, Thor, is supposed to mean 'thunder' (Eliade 1982: 164).

Thor was the defender of Aesir, and he was loved and respected. By far, he was the most popular god among the Norse population. As Eliade remarks: ‘As a master of storms, Thor was popular among farmers, though he was not an agrarian god. But he insured harvests and protected villages from demons’ (1982: 165). Thor was a fighter, and he could represent a model Viking. He loved eating, drinking, bragging about his strength, and of course fighting. He was loud, brutal, and strong. Many myths describe him killing giants, the main adversaries of Aesir, with his precious weapon, a hammer called Mjollnir. Eliade (1982: 164) states that Thor resembles the Vedic champion with his great appetite and strength. In my opinion he could be also compared to the Celtic CúChulainn. The stories concerning Thor resemble very much saga-style tales of CúChulainn and his great deeds. They both were role- models for warriors from their societies.

The Norse mythology does not provide many strong female characters. The most powerful one is Freyja, the fertility goddess. Originally, Freyja and her brother-lover Frey were the fertility gods of Vanir. When the peace was sealed between the two divine tribes, they joined Aesir (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 280). She was the most desired goddess, and as mentioned above, few times giants tried to take her from Aesir. She was beautiful, but also cruel, as she had the characteristics of the goddess of war. As *the Prose Edda* (1906: 280) describes: ‘To whatever field of battle she rides, she asserts her right to one half of the slain, the other half belonging to Odin.’ She was Odin’s favourite companion in slaughter. Thus, Freyja seemed to combine the features of mother-goddess and a war-deity, features that were split in the Celtic tradition between Danu and the trio Badb, Macha, and the Morrígan.

Furthermore, Freyja seemed quite amoral and open sexually. She did not express any ethical concerns known to our modern societies. Moreover, even other gods condemned her at times for the shameless behavior. In one mythological story she slept with four dwarves for four nights to get a precious necklace. The myth describes how Freyja’s desire for the beautiful necklace was greater that her distaste for the dwarves, and she agreed to sleep with them. She said shamelessly to the dwarves: ‘As you wish. I’m in your hands’ (Crossley-Holland 1980: 66). This behaviour even shocks Odin, who accuses Freyja of bringing shame on her and other gods for selling

her body (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 69). She represents fertile earth and life, but also death and destruction, as she and Odin go together into cruel battles.

The Aesir presents an interesting group of gods. Some of them seem quite plain, some have vivid characteristics. The most important fact about this tribe seems to be the notion that its destruction came from within. Although giants were the main enemies, it was Aesir's own member, the god Loki, who caused almost every little step of forthcoming destruction. The process was unavoidable, it just had to happen, and it was Loki's faith to create change and chaos that would harm Aesir's world. This is in sharp contrast with the Celtic tradition, where the end of the Tuatha Dé Danann came from outside of Ireland.

5.2 The Tuatha Dé Danann

Unlike their Norse counterparts, Celtic deities from the tribe of goddess Danu did not have very clear roles to play, and there was no clear leader either. Members of the Tuatha Dé Danann did not enjoy such exclusive functions as a god of war, god of love etc. Their roles seemed to change from one mythological story to another. However, they bear some similarities with the Norse masters of Aesir. Both groups immediately found their enemies. Aesir fought against Vanir, and the Tuatha Dé Danann had to challenge Formorians, the so called aboriginal lords of Ireland. Furthermore, just like Aesir, the Children of Danu mixed with their adversaries, and some of the most important deities, such as Lug, came from the 'mixed' divine families.

The distinction between gods and humans is not clearly marked in the Irish written sources. At times deities from the tribe of goddess Danu seem mortal and weak, and the broad description of their power and magic does not match stories where they are wounded, hurt, or even killed. As MacCulloch (2004: 24) writes: 'The annalists, partly as a result of the euphemising process, partly through misunderstanding, mingled groups of gods with tribes or races of men and regarded them as more or less human.' One good example here is the queen Madb from the Ulster circle. She is regarded as human, but there is a remark that she is from the Síde, so from the divine race. It would be possible, then, and this character enjoyed previously a title of a local goddess, but lost it throughout the centuries.

According to MacCulloch, this plethora of deities was connected to a desire for local gods, which would be specific for a certain area. As a result, functions and characteristics of deities overlap. This feature also applies to the idea of the Síde. As MacCulloch (2004: 122) states: 'In general, however, every síd had its own ruler, and if this is an early tradition, it suggests a cult of a local god.' This definitely was not a global, and total Norse universe, precisely arranged and with clear functions for every deity. The fact that the Celtic universe seems to be comfortably limited to Ireland does not mean that it is simpler than its Norse counterpart. On the contrary, the Celtic world

expands, finds new meanings and descriptions to fill in any open space, physical or spiritual.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, with the Tuatha Dé Danann we face a problem of a presumably Celtic tribe of deities being defeated by the Celts themselves. There are many explanations of this puzzle, depending on which aspect of the mythology scholars want to focus. For example MacCulloch (2004: 25) writes 'the Tuatha Dé Danann were gods, and their strife against the Fir Bolgs, a non- Celtic group, is probably based on a tradition of war between incoming Celts and aborigines.' However, that would mean that Dé Danann had to represent Celtic tribes' incoming to Ireland. On the other hand, we have a view represented by Rolleston (1993: 24), which states that the Milesians represent the Celtic race, and thus 'People of Dana are evidently gods.'

I find these explanations unsatisfactory and fragmentary. Obviously, we do not have any proof to assess whether this confusion was simply caused by unclear style of the Irish scribes, or rather if it marks some deeper meanings. As explained in the previous chapter, I would suggest an interpretation that the Tuatha Dé Danann could have been originally an aboriginal group of deities, which partly mixed with the Celtic cult, and its elements proved to be strong enough to shape some of the most important features of the Celtic Irish mythology.

Nevertheless, the Tuatha Dé Danann is generally understood as a group of Celtic gods. An organized pantheon, known for example from Greek, Roman, or even Norse mythology, had no place in the Celtic world (Powell 1958: 143). The famous disapproval for centralized power and clear distinctions inevitably had some influence on the shape of the Celtic cult and religion. As Powell (1958: 146) notices, there were hundreds of deities' names, but only a few enjoyed more or less precise descriptions of their functions. Among them we could mention the Dagda, Lug, the Morrígan, and Danu.

One of the most famous of the Children of Dana was the Dagda. According to Ellis' 'forgotten myth', he was the first god to appear on this world, and thus he could be regarded as having similar properties to the Norse god Odin. Indeed, he was described

as the Father of the Gods, lord of the year, the one that maybe did not participate in creation personally, but had seen it happen (Ellis 1999: 26). It is generally agreed that the Dagda is the Irish version of the Gallic deity whom Julius Caesar recognized as a counterpart of Roman Jupiter (for example Eliade 1982: 142). Thus, the Dagda would be the leader and master of the Tuatha Dé Danann. That view is expressed by Powell (1958: 146): 'He [Dagda] is the father of the tribe, its protector and benefactor, and it may be said at once that this is the basic type of all the Celtic male deities in Ireland and beyond.' We could notice that although powerful, the Dagda was not the sole chief of the tribe of Dana. Furthermore, he was not in charge during the most important battles against the Formorians and the Milesians[8].

A symbolic leader, perhaps, the Dagda does not enjoy the position ascribed to Odin. The world is not in his possession, and surprisingly enough, his power seems to be limited geographically. In order to help his son Óengus to find a girl that put a charm on him, the Dagda had to ask king Ailill for help and permission to enter his lands, as the girl in question seemed to live there (after Grantz 1981: 111). It appears from this myth that Celtic deities ruled their own side, their own piece of land, and they were assumed to be powerful only in those certain places ascribed to their power.

The Dagda was often described in Irish sources as 'the good god'. However, it seemed to have nothing to do with moral or rightful behaviour. As Powell (146) describes: 'The name Dagda, used normally with the definite article, means the Good God, but not good in the ethical sense, but good – at – everything or all – competent.' Grantz (1981: 39) also adds that the adjective 'good' applied to the Dagda could mean strength, ability to perform miracles, and even control the weather.

Besides the common father-figure characteristic, the Dagda does not seem to have much in common with Norse Odin. No occult knowledge, no shamanistic elements appear in descriptions of the Dagda. He had, however, two important possessions, and these were a magic harp and a cauldron that brought the dead back to life. We find a curious description of that harp in the mythology: 'No melody would sound from it until Dagda uttered a charm; but then the harp came to him, killing nine men on its

[8] In the beginning the chief of the Tuatha de Danann was Nuada, stripped of his functions for some time because he lost his hand, and a leader should have been faultless. Later on his hand was restored (after Ellis 1999).

way, after which he played the three magic strains of sleep, mourning and laughter' (MacCulloch 2004: 34). It could seem that we got a reverse picture here: Odin, god of poetry, had a magic spear as his main artefact, whereas Dagda, not so strongly connected with poetry, had a harp as his symbol. Furthermore, Odin, as a god of the dead, could not bring anybody back to life, not even his own son, whereas Dagda's famous cauldron did the trick. We could interpret that fact in a context of both cults. The Norse world was following strict rules of destiny, not even gods could change them. The Celtic reality enjoyed flexibility to some degree, coming back and forth from one world to another, and bending some of the rules. Thus, Dagda's cauldron did not make any damage to the order of the universe; it just 'bent' the rules a little.

Furthermore, the Dagda lacked the aristocratic elements, the noble appearance that characterized Odin. As Powell (1958: 150) describes: 'The Dagda is represented as a grotesque figure of immense strength and appetites, he is clad in the short garment of a servant, his weapon is a great club, sometimes dragged on wheels.' It seems the Dagda was more of a simple, strong brute rather than a noble hero. Some of his actions were not exactly noble either. He played a trick on king Elcmar to sleep with his wife, a patter very familiar to the Greek stories of Zeus and his endless list of lovers. Later on, he tricks Elcmar again, so his son Óengus, born of Elcmar's wife, steals his lands (Grantz 1981: 39).

Another Celtic deity was Lug. He had not came to Ireland with the other Children of Danu, but belonged to a second generation, as he was born already in Ireland, his mother being of the Tuatha Dé Danann, but his father from the Firbolg, or from the Formorians, according to different sources (for example MacCulloch 2004: 25). When the first truce of peace was made between the groups, then they mixed to some extend. Lug's father's name was Cian, and it was not clear from the sources whether he joined the Tuatha Dé Danann, or rather remained loyal to his own tribe (*Lebor Gabala Erren:* paragraph 59). Thus, one of the most important Celtic gods was not purely Celtic.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Odin also came from a 'mixed' family, his mother being a giantess. However, Odin's right to be a god came from his father's side, and thus it went along paternal line as it was more important. Lug, on the other hand, belonged to Dé Danann because of his mother, and so it followed the maternal

line. This rather little fact could also indicate that the Celtic tradition that arrived to Ireland was influenced by an older cult of mother-earth. The obviously stronger element of the mother- figure rather than father-figure comes as a kind of puzzlement in the Irish sources, as the Celtic society was a warrior one, with defined cults of the bull, the horse, and of course warriors. We know that women enjoyed quite a lot of freedom in the Irish society, but so did women in the Norse population, and the female cult there was scarce. Thus, again I would suggest that it was another element adopted from older Irish tradition by incoming Celts.

Lug was often referred to as 'samaildánach' which meant 'possessing many arts' (MacCulloch 2004: 29). His other nickname was 'Lámfhada', 'Of the Long Arm', which Powell interprets in the sense of far- reaching (1958: 153). Lug possessed many gifts and skills, and usually he was described as a sun deity. As MacCulloch (2004: 29) retells the myth: 'As Lug went to meet the Formorians, Bres was surprised that the sun seemed rising in the west, but his Druids said that this was the radiance from the face of Lug, who cast a spell on the cattle taken for tribute.'

Thus, as a warrior and a magician Lug played an important role in defeating the Formorians. Because of these characteristics Eliade (1982: 143) compared him to Odin: 'The Irish texts present Lug as the leader of an army, using magic on the battlefield, but also as a master poet (…). These characteristics make him comparable to Wodan- Odin (…). We may conclude from this that Lug represented sovereignty in its magical and military aspect: he is violent and to be feared, but he protects warriors as well as bards and magicians. Just like Wodan-Odin.' Thus we might say that properties expressed by Odin were split between the Dagda (father, main lord) and Lug (poet and warrior). Obviously, this division is by no means a strict one, as different authors apply different characteristics to those deities (for example Cotterell 1986: 152).

Certainly, Lug was a young god, strong and glowing with power, and seemed more civilized that the Dagda. As Powell (1958: 153) writes: 'Lug is always portrayed as a young man representative of a much less primitive concept, and exhibiting none of the grosser characteristics of Dagda.' Furthermore, there is no such vivid description of Lug as there is of the Dagda. Lug was a very precious member of the Tuatha de

Danann, and just before the battle against the Formorians, the tribe of goddess Danu decided forbade him to go to the battlefield ‘for Lugh was all- wise and all-knowledgeable and it was thought that his life was too valuable to risk in battle, for his wisdom needed to serve humankind’ (Ellis 1999: 31). Needless to say, Lug escaped and joined the battle, and it was mostly his strength and skill that provided the victory for the Tuatha Dé Danann (after Ellis 1999: 30- 34).

The very name of the Tuatha Dé Danann comes from a goddess, mother of all the tribe, who was called Danu, Danaan, or Danann. Her name derives presumably from Hindu and means ‘the waters of heaven’. Most likely Danu was an early Hindu goddess (Cotterell, 1986: 153). As many scholars noticed, some of the biggest rivers in Europe, like Don, Dnieper, Danube, Dniester, and Donwy, contain a striking similarity to the original word Danu, thus probably their names come from the same Indo-European source (Cotterell 1986: 153).

However, it is only in Irish sources that Danu becomes a mother- goddess. Though he was a Christian, the poet who wrote down *Lebor Gabala Erren* referred to Danu-Danann as the mother of gods (paragraph 64). She does not appear literally in any of the Irish mythological stories. She keeps her special position as the all- powerful mother, but at the same time she is not involved in any particular story. Eliade suggests that Danu could be a recollection of the archaic concept of the Earth Mother, and that maybe it was adopted by the Celtic world from the pre-Indo-European cultures (Eliade 1982: 147- 149).

Perhaps the old Indo- European idea of divine waters that bring and sustain life was reinforced on Irish soil by the cults of ancient mother- goddess, which already existed in Ireland. Matriarchal systems, as older, were gradually replaced in Europe by the incoming horsemen and their paternal cults of strength and war. The fact that quite late in history Ireland still worshipped the mother- goddess is quite striking. Obviously, we are not able to assess how much of this cult was from the Indo- European heritage, and how much came from an older source. Nevertheless, this might be again a hint that the Irish Celts adopted quite a lot from the previous populations living in Ireland.

The last character, or rather characters I would like to present here are three war goddesses, or perhaps three emanations of the same goddess, named Badb, Macha and the Morrígan. This trio seems quite enigmatic. In the stories about the war against the Firbolgs they are pictured as powerful witches, preparing to help their people against the enemies. As MacCulloch (2004: 24) retells the myth: 'Badb, Morrígan and Macha, three of their women, producing frogs, rain of fire and streams of blood against the Firbolgs.' The same myth has slightly different protagonists according to Ellis (1999: 29), as Macha is replaced two other deities. As he writes: 'Across the battlefield, the Morrígan, Great Queen of Battles, with her sisters, Badb the Crow, Nemainthe Venomous and Fea the Hateful, rushed hinter and hinter with their wailing cries which drove mortals to despair and death.'

Those multiple female deities had a strong connection with death and war. As both Powell (1958: 154) and Green (1992: 195) state, these goddesses represented the zoomorphic aspect of the Tuatha Dé Danann, as well as voluntary shape- changing, as Badb and the Morrígan were known as Battle Ravens, whereas Macha was a horse goddess. Furthermore, the Morrígan could also transform herself into a stag, and thus she combined the aspects of both Badb and Macha (Green 1992: 168). Their ability of shape- shifting is almost as terrifying as that of the Norse gods. Furthermore, also in the Norse mythology we have ravens, which symbolize knowledge and wisdom. Those birds made a lasting impression on ancient cultures, attracted to battlefields by the smell of blood and flesh, and producing sounds imitating human speech. It is no surprise that special powers were attached to them.

The goddess Macha becomes the main character in only one myth, where she was forced to race against horses while being pregnant. Macha was faster than any horse, an obvious indicator of being a horse goddess, and then her labour pains had started. At her delivery she screamed horribly, and any men of Ulster who heard her would suffer the pain of birth for 5 days every year (after Grantz 1981: 127-128). This famous curse came back in the stories of CúChulainn, when the warriors of Ulster could not fight because of the labour pains their suffered. Macha gave birth to twins, and supposedly that where the name of Ulster's capital, Emuin Machae comes from. This strong connection of female fertility and warriors could be compared to the above-mentioned myth from the Norse sources, where Thor, the most brutal and

masculine of gods, had to be dressed up as a woman in order to get his hammer back. Inevitably female power was present and cherished in those societies, at least to some extend.

The Morrígan seemed to be the most important, or the most powerful of the trio. She was an important character in the myths about CúChulainn. For example, as Green describes: 'The Morrígan alights on CúChulainn's shoulder at his death, to symbolize the passing of his spirit' (1992: 178). We have here a motif that would appear again on the Celtic crosses, where a raven accompanied dying Jesus Christ (after Bulas: 2004). Furthermore, the Morrígan sung a magic rune before the battle against the Formorians, and that song strengthened the Tuatha Dé Danann (MacCulloch 2004: 33).

As Powell (1958: 157) mentions, this triple or multiple character of Celtic deities could be an expression of extreme potency. In a way, that was the main difference between the Celtic and the Norse approach to their deities. The Nordic tribe of Aesir was precisely described, with attached functions, whereas the Celtic deities seemed to express potency, possibilities that any of them could achieve. Their main aspect was not perfection, but potential that would never end. It seemed not absolutely important who was the main god, or the main goddess in the Celtic world. All the deities represented the force of life and change. The Norse gods, on the other hand, enjoyed fixed positions, but from that point they could only await death.

It should be also mentioned that because of the dislike of emptiness, gaps, open spaces, there are no clear borders between gods, humans or animals in the Celtic world. Obviously, to some extend deities were humanized by the scribes. Nevertheless, this little chaos of persons and creatures blends together, filling the space completely. On the other hand we have the Norse approach, where emptiness is essential. There borders are much clearer, and distinctions unavoidable. Though both mythological worlds bear some similarities, in the end they are built according to totally different rules.

6 MORTAL HEROES, MYTHICAL ANIMALS AND MONSTERS

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> but glory never dies,
> for the man who is able to achieve it.
> (*The Poetic Edda* 1996: 24)

Every culture has its heroes, and so do the Celts and the Norsemen. For this thesis I've chosen only two representatives, the most famous and celebrated heroes from both traditions: CúChulainn and Sigurd the Volsung. They clearly represent different cultures and different points of view, but obviously there are some similarities, and some are a bit surprising. CúChulainn seems to be a strictly Irish figure, and it might be that the continental Celts had their own heroes (Pwyll in Celtic Wales for example). Sigurd's story was known to a certain degree among all the Norsemen, although in different versions. In Medieval Germany one anonymous writer found some poems about Sigurd, who became then known there as Siegfried, and it was the core inspiration for Wagner's opera. The *Volsunga saga* which I have used in my work was written down in Iceland, and differs from the German version.

The most striking difference between those two characters is the fact that CúChulainn seems to be a hero by himself, there are myths only about him, and he is praised and celebrated as one of the kind hero. On the other hand Sigurd is just a part of the whole family saga. Obviously, he is a great and brave warrior, but he is only one element in the bigger story. Stories involving god Thor resemble more CúChulainn's style legends, where there is one great hero, and the plot reveals his strength and power.

Moreover, in this chapter I also deal briefly with some of the animals and beasts that appear in both mythologies. Though often treated symbolically, many monsters and animals appear in mythical stories, and often they have important roles to fulfill. Some scholars (for example Green: 1992) present an interpretation that the border line between animals and humans was not very rigid for ancient peoples. Living creatures were treated with awe and respect, as they could fly, swim or run much faster than any

human being. Because of the remarkable skills, some animals were associated with deities, or they were deities themselves. We could point out that the Celtic tradition deals mostly with domestic animals, while the Norse sources present mighty beasts, which have little to do with the real world.

In my work I analyze most important and well-known monsters from the Norse mythology, which are the wolf Fenrir, the giant serpent and the eight-legged horse Sleipnir. I will also present the most important animal figures from the Celtic traditions, which are birds, bulls and swine. One creature that appears in both mythologies is the raven. That bird was treated with respect and also with fear by both the Celtic and the Norse societies, as it was associated with death, battles and occult knowledge (for example MacCulloch: 2004).

6.1 Sigurd the Volsung

The stories of Sigurd and his ancestors were written down in *the Poetic Edda*, as well as in the *Volsunga saga*, the great story of the family of Voslung, a great warrior and hero. According to Larrington (1996: 17) the heroic poems from *the Poetic Edda* were probably originally separate tales, cycles about individual heroes, and later on they emerged as a more or less consistent whole family saga. If we take into consideration that entire family story, then Sigurd's part seemed rather small. Nevertheless, Sigurd was a celebrated figure in the Nordic world, mostly because he differed from the other characters, and was famous for slaying a dragon called Fafnir. Larrington (1996: 20) claims that Sigurd originally followed a pattern of his ancestor's stories, being destroyed by his involvement with a valkyrie, a female divine warrior, like for example Helgi, a warrior who appears earlier in the story.

As Larrington writes: [the heroic poems] 'trace the history of Sigurd, son of Sigmund, slayer of the dragon Fafnir, and possessor of the treasure- hoard which was later to become known as the Rhinegold' (1996: 19). The saga of the family starts with the appearance of mysterious stranger. We find a passage in *the Volsunga saga*: 'But there, came there to a certain man, old of aspects and one- eyed' (2001: 191). This was obviously Odin, the highest god, starting the story of a mighty tribe. Odin had a mortal son called Sigi, who would become the great- great- grandfather of Sigurd. Thus, Sigurd could claim divine ancestry, although he was already the fifth generation after Odin. CúChulainn also had divine blood, as his father was supposed to be the god Lug.

Sigi, the son of Odin and the ancestor of Sigurd, was not much of a noble, semi- divine hero. He did not express any special powers or abilities. On the contrary, he was an outlaw, because he murdered another warrior (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 39). Moreover, Sigi's special family ties with the gods did not help him in any respect. He was just the starting point of the saga. However, the deities from the tribe of Aesir interfered again in the history of Sigi's family. His son's wife could not get pregnant, so she prayed to Freyja, the fertility goddess. The goddess took pity on her and gave

her an apple. After eating it the woman gave birth to a ‘man- child’ called Volsung (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 41).

We could notice how close this mythical story comes to the one of CúChulainn. There, CúChulainn’s mother was supposed to get pregnant after a drink, with which she swallowed a ‘small creature’. The birth of Volsung also required some divine help. He became a strong and mighty king, probably the most solid character in the entire *Volsunga saga*, as the story was named after him. Volsung married a daughter of a giant who brought the magic apple to his mother, and his oldest son was Sigmund, future father of Sigurd (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 42). This complicated family story is full of battles, revenge and betrayals. We could say that all these elements that spread on many generations of this Norse family appear also in the CúChulainn’s stories. However, they are all applied to one main hero. In the *Volsunga saga* few generations were needed to experience the wonders and difficulties described there.

Sigurd’s mother was called Hjordis. When she was pregnant with her son they were attacked by their enemies, and as a result Sigurd’s father Sigmund was killed. Hjordis went then to king Alf, and Sigurd was brought up in his castle (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 73-77). Later in his life, Sigurd would be required to avenge his father. Thus, after the long family history Sigurd appears. His life was remarkable for two reasons. First, he killed the dragon, or worm Fafnir. Second, he became involved with a valkyria, which brought him to an end. Sigurd, just like CúChulainn, had his fate prophesied, he knew exactly what kind of life he could have (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 87). Furthermore, like the Irish hero, Sigurd wanted everlasting fame that would make him immortal. Both heroes chose the adventurous life and agreed on death at the young age, and in exchange they could be regarded as real warriors and heroes. The same pattern could be found in Odyssey, where Achilles chooses a short and adventurous life over long, but simple one (Cotterell 1986: 140).

Being a hero required possessing special equipment. Thus, in the *Volsunga saga* we have a whole chapter about the making of Sigurd’s sword (2001: 85-86). It would become his weapon against the dragon. Furthermore, his horse was of divine origin. It was supposed to come from Sleipnir’s kin, the magical eight-legged horse of Odin.

The *Volsunga saga* (2001: 78) states that 'an old man' helped Sigurd to choose it, and it was probably the god himself, assisting his mortal progeny.

The most unusual and greatest adventure of Sigurd was slaying of the dragon Fafnir. That deed made him famous around the Norse world. The young warrior was hungry for fame and wealth, and he heard a story told by this foster- father called Regin. At this point the *Volsunga saga* (2001: 79) presents us the myth of Otter's ransom, which is present in both *the Prose and Poetic Edda*[9]. Fafnir and Regin were brothers, and received great treasure as a ransom for their third brother, Otter, who was killed. However, the gold was cursed, and the growing greed turned Fafnir into a dragon (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 83- 84).

Sigurd eagerly went to meet the beast, and after a fight he killed Fafnir (*the Volsunga saga* 2001: 94- 98). Just before the dragon died, there was a discussion between the killer and the victim. Sigurd asked Fafnir about the wonders of the world, and also about gods of Aesir and Surtr, who would come during the battle of Ragnarök. All the gold that was in dragon's possession was to become his, but he promised to Regin that he would roast the dragon's heart and bring it to him. Whoever would eat it would gain great wisdom and understand animals. Sigurd wanted to fulfill his promise, but while the heart was roasting he touched it, and as it hurt his finger he licked it. Thus the wisdom went to him. As *the Volsunga saga* (2001: 100) explains: 'When the heart-blood of the worm touched his tongue, straightway he knew the voice of all fowls.'

A story with the same pattern appears in the Irish sources too. The great hero Finn was roasting a salmon of wisdom for his teacher, but accidentally he touched the hot fish and licked his finger. Just like in the Sigurd's story, all wisdom went to him. This myth, in both the Norse and the Celtic version, present the importance of occult knowledge that a hero could obtain magically. This great wisdom was possessed by

[9] Three gods, Odin, Loki and Honir were travelling in Midgard, when they saw an otter that had just caught a salmon. Loki killed the otter. They stayed for the night with Hreidmar, a powerful magician, who turned out to be Otter's father. He and his two other sons Regin and Fafnir, demanded a ransom for Otter's death. Thus the gods agreed to cover the skin of the dead otter fully with gold. Loki was chosen as the one to bring the gold while Odin and Honir were kept bound as hostages. Loki caught a dwarf Andvari, who was known to possess many treasures. He gave Loki all his gold, but wanted to keep a small ring. Loki took it by force and then the dwarf cursed the ring, so the gold would destroy anybody who possessed it. When the ransom was being paid Odin was amazed by the beauty of the ring, but Loki warned him about the curse. The gold stayed with Hreidmar and his sons, Regin and Fafnir (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 136-142).

animals, which impressed ancient peoples with their skills and abilities, and obviously they were supposed to know secrets about this world that were hidden from men.

Sigurd's slaying of the worm Fafnir made him a famous and respected warrior. While traveling around the land, he learned about a valkyrie called Brynhild, the wisest person in the world. Valkyries were mythical creatures, personal attendants of Odin. As Cotterell explains: 'They rode over battlefields of the world to choose those who must die. (…) Their main task was bringing back to Valhalla, the hall of the slain, the souls of fallen champions' (1986: 189). Sigurd's relationship with Brynhild would eventually bring him death.

Sigurd came to Brynhild by crossing through a wall of fire. It was a test of his strength and courage. The valkyrie taught him wisdom but also fell in love with the young hero. *The Voslunga saga* presents their conversation: 'Sigurd spake "None among sons of men can be found wiser than thou; and thereby swear I, that thee will I have as my own, for near to my heart thou liest." She answers "Thee would I fainest choose, though I had all men's sons to choose from".' (2001: 105). As a token of his love, Sigurd gave Brynhild a golden ring from the dragon's treasure. It was a cursed ring that started troubles. The Valkyrie, as the wisest creature on earth, knew their fate, and although she loved Sigurd, she said: 'It is not fated that we should abide together (…) thou shalt wed Gudrun, the daughter of Giuki' (*The Voslunga saga* 2001: 119). As we shall see later, Sigurd's involvement with the valkyrie resembles very much CúChulainn's adventures with the women from the Síde.

The story tells that Sigurd had no desire to betray Brynhild. Nevertheless, when he left her, he met and eventually married Gudrun. As Brynhild explains later, Gudrun's mother gave him 'an evil drink' so he forgot all about the Valkyrie (*The Voslunga saga* 2001: 134- 135). The myth continues, bringing more grief to their protagonists. Sigurd did not only 'cheat' on Brynhild, but also tricked her to marry somebody else:

> Brynhild has sworn only to marry the man who knows no fear; this is Sigurd, but he is already married. Sigurd magically exchanges appearances with Gunnar [his wife's brother] and rides through a wall of flame to Brynhild's side. (…) Brynhild marries Gunnar, believing him to be the man who crossed the

> flame- wall. At some point (…) Brynhild discovers the truth and incites Gunnar and his brother Hogni to kill Sigurd. (…) After his death she commits suicide (Larrington 1996: 19-20).

After she discovered the truth, Brynhild suffered great grief and shame, all she wanted was revenge. Her husband murdered Sigurd when the hero slept, thus killing his sister's husband and his own best friend. Nevertheless, Brynhild knew exactly what was going to happen, but could not change their fate. It had been already decided that she and Sigurd would die, and then be buried together. The saga continues with the story of Sigurd's daughter, who was murdered as well.

In the end of the saga appeared a mysterious, one- eyed stranger. It was Odin, who began and ended this unhappy family story. Throughout this saga the moments of happiness are short and vague. On the other hand, grief, mourning and tears appear all the time. There was no space for peace or happiness in Sigurd's life, and it was not his aim. Immortal fame was his prerogative, and he achieved it. One interesting feature that appeared in both the Norse and Celtic mythologies was the hero's involvement with divine women. Both Sigurd and CúChulainn had 'affairs' with divine, non-human females and both heroes had to pay a high price for such involvement.

The life of Sigurd was marked with great deeds, but his story fitted in the whole family saga. The Irish hero CúChulainn was more the type of a modern, lonely hero, who cared only about himself, and who was the main and only truly important figure from the legends. Sigurd was preceded by his great ancestors with their equally complicated stories, and the saga continued when Sigurd died. He was just one element, one part of the greater story, started ages ago when a ransom for dead Otter was paid in cursed gold. CúChulainn, however, was a story of himself.

6.2 CúChulainn - Setanta

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sigurd's story seemed to be just one piece in a bigger 'family puzzle'. Nevertheless, he did not really carry any social responsibilities. On the other hand CúChulainn, a very individual hero, lived and fought in a group, in the tribe of Ulster, and he was the main protector of the kingdom. Like the Norse hero Sigurd, CúChulainn was marked with divine ancestry, extraordinary deeds, and young death. The main source of the CúChulainn's stories is *Táin Bó Cualnge* also known as *the Cattle Raid*, which also contains a number of prefatory tales where the birth and boyhood of CúChulainn are explained.

CúChulainn was born as Setanta, his mother being Deichtine, the daughter of the Ulster king. His father was supposed to be the god Lug. However, the story of CúChulainn birth seems quite complicated. The myths explain that Deichtine stayed for a night in unknown place, where a woman gave birth to a son. Deichtine took it as her foster- child, but it died after few days. Then Diechtine swallowed a small creature that was in her drink, and thus she got pregnant (Grantz 1981: 132-133). Both Grantz and MacCulloch suggest that this could be interpreted as the child Setanta being at once his own birth and re- birth, or even a re-born god Lug.

However, Grantz presents an alternative version of the myth, where Deichtine indeed got pregnant from swallowing a tiny creature, but then she got married to Sualtain. Being pregnant before marriage meant shame and disgrace, so Deichtine was said to 'crush' the child inside her, and thus she became a virgin again, and then, eventually, got pregnant with her new husband (Grantz 1981: 133). This puzzling story might suggest that the divine ancestry of CúChulainn was a later invention, or that Lug was more of a protector figure for him, a foster- father rather than a biological one.

MacCulloch (2004: 83), in order to explain the story of CúChulainn's birth, refers to an old Indian belief. As he writes: 'the father became an embryo and was reincarnated in his first- born son, whence funeral rites were performed for the father in the fifth

month of pregnancy, and he was remarried after the birth.' Could it be that the old, occult belief nourished by the druids got a bit forgotten and mixed up by the time the CúChulainn's stories were written down? Certainly, it is possible, but we have no means to find the one true meaning of this legend. We could notice, though, that a similar pattern appeared in Sigurd's story, where his grandmother ate an apple and got pregnant. Many scholars agree that in the ancient cultures women were believed to possess special powers, as they could create life, they had a bit 'magical' position in a society (for example Bulas: 2004). This way of thinking is still to be found among some of the American Indian tribes.

Like Sigurd, CúChulainn had to prove that he was a real warrior, and thus he had to obtain his championship by fulfilling many difficult tasks against other Ulster heroes (MacCulloch 2004: 146-149). However, he was only six years old when his adventures had started. It was at that age when he changed his name from Setanta to CúChulainn. The story tells that he was late for a feast, and the huge and amazingly strong dog of Culan the smith was running loose already and protecting the party. The six- year old Setanta killed the beast, and then offered to protect Culan's home until he would find a new dog. Thus, Setanta was named CúChulainn, a dog of Culan (Grantz 1981: 139-140).

This story presented the unnatural strength and skills of the young warrior. It also fixed in a way CúChulainn position as the main protector of Ulster, a dog who would constantly look after it. Shortly after that episode CúChulainn heard a druid professing that whoever took weapons on that day would become immortally famous, but would die young. CúChulainn eagerly chose that fate, and, like Sigurd, he preferred a short and adventurous life (Grantz 1981: 141). The poems about Sigurd do not present any detailed physical descriptions of the hero, but CúChulainn is described as a rather terrifying character. As MacCulloch (2004: 143) writes: 'Besides being very handsome, with golden tresses, he had seven toes on each foot, seven fingers on each hand, and seven pupils in each eye.' These were probably the symbols of divine strength and super- human abilities. Nevertheless, CúChulainn emerges as a rather strange hero.

The main episodes from CúChulainn's life are included in the epic *the Táin.* The main plot line describes an invasion of Ulster by Medb, who was the queen of Connach. The reason for that war was quite trivial. The queen quarreled with her husband, Ailill, who possessed more treasures, and who of them was more powerful. They seemed to be quite even but Ailill had a beautiful magic bull, the White Horned. Medb could not stand that her husband had something better than she, so she decided to find an equally beautiful bull. Such creature lived in Ulster, and thus a massive and cruel conflict was started between two kingdoms of Connacht and Ulster (*the Táin* 1969: 52-58). Unfortunately for Medb, CúChulainn was then the main protector of Ulster, and he was able to fight alone against the queen's army[10].

The story of CúChulainn is much longer and complicated than that of Sigurd. He seems to be far more a colourful character than Sigurd. Nowacki (2004: 37) notices that the figure of CúChulainn was slightly 'unstable.' He was the protector of his tribe, but at the same time he had uncontrolled outbursts of fury, when he became dangerous even for his own people. MacCulloch (2004: 154) describes CúChulainn's 'riastrathae' or 'distortion':

> He grew to an immense size and quivered in every limb, while his feet, shins and knees were reversed in his body. (...) Of CúChulainn's eyes, one sank to his head so that a heron could not have reached it, while the other protruded from its socket as large as the rim of a cauldron. His mouth reached his ears, and fire streamed from it, mounting above his head is showers, while a great jet of blood higher and more rigid than a ship's mast shot upward from his scalp, within which his hair retreated, and formed a mist all about.

CúChulainn was transformed into a beast, whose only prerogative was to kill, and nobody around him was safe. Once, when he was playing with other boys his 'riastarthae came upon him, the king of Ulster found a curious way to cool him down: 'A hundred and fifty women with uncovered breasts were sent to meet him (...) then he

[10] The warriors of Ulster suffered their yearly labour pains. It was a curse cast upon then by goddess Macha. She was forced to race against horses when she was pregnant. When the race was over she gave birth to twins and screamed horribly. Any man who heard her scream would suffer labour pains for 5 days every year. Thus, the kingdom of Ulster was very venerable at certain time of the year. CúChulainn was not affected by that curse, so he was able to fight against the invading army of queen Medb (*the Táin*: 1969: 58-76).

was seized and plunged into vessels of cold water. The first burst asunder; the water of the second boiled (...) if the third became warm; thus his rage was calmed' (MacCulloch 2004: 143).

Thus, CúChulainn's aggressiveness and strength could not be controlled even by himself. He was a great hero and protector, but also a constant danger to his own people. We might suggest that he represented the double-character of almost every single thing and creature in the world that might be good, but also dangerous at the same time. Furthermore, CúChulainn's rage was the perfect example of the famous Celtic 'furor', a Celtic warrior who transformed himself during a battle, entranced in a rage for blood. It was this rage, this 'riastarthae' that terrified the Roman army (Herm 1976: 4). Similar behaviour could be found in the Norse tradition, where young warriors transformed by their thirst of blood, and they became *berserker*. As Eliade (1982: 161) describe them: 'by an excess of aggressive and terrifying fury, their humanity was transmuted – they became like raging carnivores.'

CúChulainn's brutal and merciless character was portrayed for example in a story where he killed his own son. While studying weaponry with a Scottish woman-warrior, CúChulainn had an affair with her sister. He decided that if she gave birth to a son, the boy would have geasa, a curse upon him: CúChulainn's son would have to fight every warrior, was forbidden to reveal his name. After some time CúChulainn met his son, defeated and killed him, although he knew exactly it was his own child (Grantz 1981: 148- 151). We might suggest that CúChulainn represented a quite ancient and even barbaric idea of a perfect warrior. He was supposed to kill and win, no matter how. He knew no mercy, and was short-tempered. Slaughter was his entertainment. As Grantz writes: [CúChulainn] 'has boasted that there is no district in which he has not slaughtered one hundred men' (1981: 197). We might notice that CúChulainn seems more of savage and brutal than Sigurd, who already presented some elements of chivalry. One reason for this could be that Sigurd's saga was written down much later that CúChulainn's legends.

Like Sigurd, CúChulainn got involved with divine women. First of all the goddess Morrígan played an important role in many stories concerning CúChulainn. She was very hostile to the hero, and in *the Táin* we find a passage that the source of this

hostility was in an early episode from CúChulainn's life. He met a woman who offered him help, but CúChulainn ignored the offer and insulted the woman. It was the Morrígan herself, and before she left, swore revenge to CúChulainn (*the Táin* 1968: 132-133). It seems, then, that the Morrígan played a similar role in CúChulainn's stories and the goddess Hera did in the myths about Hercules. She was his main enemy, always trying to hurt the hero (Cotterell 1986: 162).

Another adventure concerning divine women from the Síde started, when two magic women appeared in CúChulainn's dreams and struck him with horsewhip (Grantz 1981: 157). It happened on the night of Samuin, and CúChulainn was sick and weak for the whole year. During the next Samuin he went to the same place, and the women appeared again. They were Li Ban and Fand, and invited CúChulainn to the Síde to fight for them. Furthermore, Fand, although married to a powerful lord of the Síde, Manandan, was hopelessly in love with CúChulainn. The hero went to the Síde, and was charmed by the divine woman. The hero was married too, and his wife, Emer, learned about his affair with Fand, and went to him to complain about it (Grantz 1981: 157- 174).

What follows is a discussion between CúChulainn and his wife, in which he proved her that the woman from the Síde is better, more beautiful, and more skilled than her. However, the weeping Emer moves CúChulainn's heart, and at that moment Fand realizes she could not take the hero from his wife. Thus, Fand goes back to her husband, and CúChulainn stays with Emer. Nevertheless, all the protagonists are quite bitter after this adventure, so the druids prepare for them the drink of forgiveness: 'He asked for a drink; the druids brought a drink of forgetfulness, and, when he drank that, he forgot Fand and everything he had done. Since Emer was no better off, they brought her a drink that she might forget her jealousy. Moreover, Manandan shook his cloak between CúChulainn and Fand that they might never meet again' (Grantz 1981: 178). This myth ended in quite a strange way, the characters needed some extra help to move on. We might recall that 'the drink of forgetfulness' appeared also in the Sigurd's saga, when his mother-in-law was supposed to give him such a drink to forget about the valkyrie Brynhild.

Unlike Sigurd, CúChulainn received some help from his divine ancestor. During one of his battles CúChulainn became very weak, and his divine father, Lug came to be of assistance. He put his son to sleep and continued the battle. As MacCulloch (2004: 65) writes: 'he not only battled for him (...) but he cured his son's wounds with medical herbs; and when CúChulainn awoke, he was refreshed and strong.' This myth seems to suggest that Lug took care of his offspring, and listened to prayers. Odin, on the other hand, did not seem to be bothered much about the faith of his son's family. This might suggest that tribal and family bound were stronger in the Irish society than in the Norse one.

As the prophecy said, CúChulainn had an adventurous life, and died as a young man. Bad omens were prophesizing his death when he was going to his last battle. Powerful magic was used to trick CúChulainn to believe that enemies were attacking Ulster. It was an illusion, but he went to fight: 'On his way (...) he saw Badb's daughter washing blood from a warrior's gear – (...) a prophecy of his own death – but he was resolute and cheerful in face of the desperate fight to which he bound himself' (MacCulloch 2004: 155). Nevertheless, his end was to come. While he was dying, the Morrígan in a shape of a raven sat on his shoulder to assist his passing spirit.

It should be noted that CúChulainn's death was also a revenge prepared by children of Cúroi (CúChulainn killed their father) and queen Medb from Connacht, who invaded Ulster with her army and was defeated because of CúChulainn's strength. Thus, Sigurd's and CúChulainn's death was result of hatred and planned revenge. Furthermore, they were killed by men, but the deed was planned and prepared by women (queen Medb and valkyrie Brynhild). CúChulainn and Sigurd did not seem especially similar characters, although there are certain elements in both stories that use same patterns and ideas. Nevertheless, they present the type of ideal warrior cherished in both societies.

Both the Norse and the Celtic traditions present a certain figure of a perfect warrior, whose only prerogative is to fight and to kill. CúChulainn and Sigurd had much in common. They lived short and adventurous life and they did not express much sympathy towards their friends or relatives. One feature that drew them strongly together was the thirst for immortal fame. This life did not seem especially important

in terms of gaining happiness. Thus, they both accepted the young death, so they would become immortal in human memory. The only important thing was fame and respect in their societies, and that could be achieved by ruthless and merciless behaviour, by completing tasks and challenges, not by compassion or thoughtfulness. Both CúChulainn and Sigurd represent the old, tribal society, where strength and brutality were praised as sure means of survival and prosperity of one’s group.

6.3 Mythical animals and monsters

Like every mythology, the Norse and Celtic traditions provide us with plenty of beasts and magic animals. Three very famous Viking monsters are horse Sleipnir, wolf Fernir and the serpent of Midgård. *The Prose Edda* provides a detailed description of those three monsters. Surprisingly, all three have one parent in common. Sleipnir's mother is Fernir's and serpent's father, and that is the god Loki. The Celtic tradition presents us mostly magical, wild and domestic animals rather than unreal monsters. Thus, the Irish sources are full of divine birds, bulls and swans.

As Green (1992: 196) notices: 'admiration and acknowledgement of a beast's essential nature led easily to reverence of those qualities and abilities which humans either did not possess at all or possessed only partly.' We could say that the Celts did not have to 'invent' mysterious, magical creatures, as they were all around them, filling the reality with extraordinary abilities. The Norse imagination, on the other hand, resulted in frightful images of the giant serpent or eight- legged horse. One animal that both traditions have in common is the raven, the black bird that was associated with death.

As presented above, the Norse mythology 'created' beasts that did not really belong to reality. Once again the Norse had to cross the line of the real world and presented some extraordinary creatures. For the Celts the world was mysterious and magical enough, they did not have any need to look for something stranger or more magical. As MacCulloch (2004: 127) notices: 'Man easily concluded that animals useful to him were also useful to the gods, but he regarded these as magical.' Thus, one of the most important Irish mythological stories deals with two magical bulls and a huge war over the animals.

One of the most famous Norse beasts was the eight- legged horse called Sleipnir. His mother was god Loki, who took the shape of a mare (*the Prose Edda* 1906: 296-299). Sleipnir was the horse of Odin, reflecting some of his shaman and occult characteristics. As Crossley- Holland (1980: 186) writes, horses' bones were often found in Viking burial sides, and thus horses, and especially Sleipnir, could have been

a symbol of fertility and of death. The eight legs could suggest great speed of the animal. However, since it could travell to the land of the dead, some scholars suggest that Sleipnir was a symbol of a coffin carried by four mourners, thus we have eight legs (for example Crossley- Holland 1980: 186). Sleipnir could have been then 'the carrier' of the dead.

The importance of the horse could be also noticed in the Irish mythology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, goddess Macha was clearly associated with horses. Among the continental Celts there was a well- known horse- goddess Epona, who sometimes was in a shape of a horse, and sometimes of a woman (MacCulloch 2004: 129). Herm states that one important wave of migration came to Europe came from the area of the Volga River, and it contained tribes which tamed horses on the steppe. They were the first users of those animals, and according to Herm, these tribes were possible ancestors of both the Norse and the Celts. Nevertheless, the role of the horse differed in both cultures. We could notice that the Irish Celtic sources did not associate the horse with the other- or underworld. In the Celtic mythology that element was associated with birds.

The siblings of the horse Sleipnir were the wolf Fenrir and the Midgård serpent called Jormungand. Both the wolf and the serpent would play key roles in the final battle of Ragnarök. For the Nordic tribes wolves were probably the worst predators, as even these days they are a threat to animals and people. Fenrir was both admired and feared as a mighty beast, which was destined to kill Odin during the battle of Ragnarök. He had to be bound and imprisoned, so he would not harm the gods before its time would come. Fenrir appeared in the Norse mythology only in the beginning, where his origins are explained, and then in the end of the world, when freed from his bounds, he would attack Aesir.

The serpent was placed in the see that run around Midgård, the plate of humans. Furthermore, it was present in other myths, which described adventures of god Thor. Also Thor and the serpent would kill each other during Ragnarök. One mythological story, where Thor and the serpent meet before the final battle, describes how the gods run out of ale and Thor together with the god Tyr went to look for a proper cauldron to brew the ale for the gods. They ended up trying to obtain the cauldron from a giant

Hymir, who took them fishing. To astonish and scare the giant, and to expose his might, Thor fished for the serpent, and for a brief moment the giant snake was helpless in his grip (after Crossley- Holland 1980: 95-99).

In the Celtic sources neither the wolf nor the serpent had such a roles and meaning as in the Norse tradition. Nevertheless, a hint of 'the serpent of destruction' appears in the context of the goddess Morrígan. As Green (1992: 183) retells the story: 'The war-goddess Morrígan produces a son named Meiche, who carries within him seeds of Ireland's destruction. He is slain by the divine physician Dian Cécht, and the boy's heart is found to contain three serpents: it was believed that if the creatures had been allowed to grow to maturity inside Meiche's body, they would eventually have wiped out all animal life from the face of Ireland.' The full story with this motif did not survive to our times; we have only some hints about it in other myths. However, these serpents would have a similar role as the Midgård serpent as a threat to the existence of the world. Serpents and snakes were generally viewed as creatures with supernatural powers, and their ability to change skin every year was later used by Irish Christianity as a symbol of Christ's resurrection (Bulas: 2004).

One particular creature that appeared in both mythological traditions was the raven. As mentioned earlier, two Celtic war goddesses, Badb and the Morrígan, often took the form a ravens. Furthermore, Green (1992: 178) explains: 'The major characteristic of ravens in the early literature is of evil, death and destruction. (...) ravens as prophets, foretelling the future – which was usually linked with death.' Furthermore, Odin also had two ravens, which informed him about everything that happened in the world. In *the Prose Edda* (1906: 294) we find a passage: 'Two ravens sit on Odin's shoulders and whisper in his ear the tidings and events they have heard and witnessed. They are called Hugin and Munin. (...) Hence it is that Odin knows so many things, and is called the Raven's God.'

It is not difficult to imagine that for the ancient societies birds were regarded as magical creatures with supernatural qualities, as they could fly, fish, hunt, and sing. They belonged to another dimension that was forbidden for people (Green 1992: 171). Furthermore, ravens could appear to have even more special qualities. As Green

explains the raven had a ‘distinctive “voice” (...) which may have been perceived as resembling human speech’ (1992: 178).

The goddesses Badb and the Morrígan were often viewed as battle ravens. Indeed, fresh corpses often attracted those birds. They were connected with death, but also with life. The ancient symbolism of ravens survived on the medieval Celtic crosses. Usually with the image of the dead Christ there is a figure of raven putting its beak into Christ’s mouth. It was believed that the raven not only announced a new down, but the bird also knew that the new day would come; the raven was a prophet of the down. In other words, that black bird was helping Jesus Christ to survive those hours of darkness until the morning (for example Bulas: 2004). This is only one interpretation of this symbol, but the image is quite striking.

The Celtic mythology was marked with other birds as well. In many mythological stories birds from the Otherworld appear to heroes, and they possess some kind of power and usually are objects of unexplained desire (Grantz 1981: 156-157). Furthermore, some of the characters could take the forms of birds. For example, in one myth Óengus and his beloved girl, Cáer, slept together in the form of swans (Grantz: 112). Furthermore, the children of Lyr (Lear) were transformed into swans (Ellis 1999: 56-78). As Green (1992: 211) explains, birds probably symbolized a link between earth, water and air. They were viewed as knowing and understanding more that people, since they had an access to other dimensions.

Another typical feature of the Insular Celtic sources is the popular motif of magical cattle and swine. Pigs and cattle held a very special position in the Celtic mentality. As MacCulloch (2004: 127) writes: ‘Pigs are associated with the gods’ land and are brought thence by heroes or by the gods.’ The Tuatha Dé Danann are said to have first introduced swine into Ireland or Munster. We find many mythological stories that have a herd of pigs, or magical cow or a bull as a central figure. Sometimes the caw was a deity who took the form of that animal. For example the goddess Morrígan appeared once as a red cow (Green 1992: 184). We could point out that the importance of domestic animals in Celtic Ireland shaped their magical character. In Ireland the main source of wealth was herding and pasturing, unlike for the Norse Vikings, who

often made their living by plundering the shores of Europe. As Green (1992: 183) remarks: ‘Early Irish society was underpinned by cattle- owning (and cattle- raiding).’

Furthermore, one of the most famous Irish epics deals with the entire conflict around two magical bulls. This epic, *Táin Bó Cúalge (Cuailuge),* or *Cattle Raid of Cooley.* As Green (1992: 183) explains: ‘[it] chronicles the conflict between two supernatural bulls, the Findbennach, or White- Horned of Connacht in the south and the Donn or Brown of Cuailuge in Ulster.’ Interestingly enough, the two mythical bulls were reincarnated deities or semi- deities (*the Táin* 1969: 46-47). Those were the divine swineherds called Rucht and Friuch. Previously friends, when they started a quarrel they swore to kill each other. During their fight they underwent extreme shape-changing. They took seven different forms, at last becoming worms (*the Táin* 1969: 48-50).

As the last episode of their conflict, Rucht and Friuch were reincarnated as magnificent and magical bulls, which became the reason for a conflict that affected two powerful kingdoms of Connacht and Ulster (MacCulloch 2004: 127). As Green (1992: 183) remarks, the bulls ‘possess human level of understanding and intelligence.’ It was their destiny to meet again and fight to the death. And indeed, the last episode of the war describes a combat between the bulls. As Green (1992: 183) writes: ‘it rages over days and nights and ranges over much of the land. Finally, the Ulster bull prevails and slays Ailill’s [bull called] Findbennach, but dies of the effort.’

We could conclude that like the other aspects of mythological traditions, the Celtic mythical beasts and animals represent change and possibility, whereas their Norse counterparts have fixed roles that they are supposed to play. The Midgård serpent or the wolf Fenrir are needed as characters in the final battle, they have a ‘mission’ to fulfill. On the other hand, the animals that appear in the Celtic sources change their shape and their role many times, and express the variety of forms and possibilities.

7 CONCLUSION

The two mythological traditions presented in this thesis, the Norse and the Celtic, were preserved in the written form. As Christian scribes from early medieval Irish and Icelandic societies wrote down the stories of their ancestors, they also documented rich and powerful traditions that had flourished in Western and Northern Europe. The Norse and Celtic myths became one of the most important sources of information about the cult and spirituality of the ancient tribes that once ruled over Europe.

The comparison that I present points out similarities and differences between those two mythologies. The first part of my thesis consists of information about the historical and cultural background of the Norse and Celtic traditions. By presenting different theories I show possible origins and influences of both groups, and contacts that could have appeared between them. The second part of the thesis concentrates on the analysis of primary sources, which are the actual mythical stories, translated into English from medieval texts composed in Ireland and Iceland, as well as some retold mythical stories, which were based on those old texts.

This thesis presents different point of view from most of the studies which compare mythological stories. Of the particular interest for this work were two pre-Christian interpretations of the universe, the Norse and the Celtic, which had been based on very different psychological presuppositions. By applying quite broad context and using many secondary sources I have been able to avoid narrow and detailed comparisons that deal with single motifs or events. Furthermore, I could concentrate on analyzing those two mythological universes, the Norse and the Celtic, as whole entities, rather than using isolated symbols. This study shows that although related, those two mythical systems reflect different states of mind of peoples who followed in them. Moreover, the thesis also presents possible explanations of those differences.

My view comes close to that of scholars like Eliade and Herm, who claim that the Norse and the Celtic mythologies had some similar origins, or at least similar influences. Based on my analysis I would suggest that similarities that appear in both mythological systems come from their common beginnings, their ‘starting point’ on

the continental Europe and Asia, rather than from later contacts between Celtic Ireland and Nordic Vikings, like is for example suggested by Sigurdsson. Obviously, when the Norse world met already Christian Celts on the Irish soil there was certainly some sharing of ideas, but one could doubt if that those quite recent contacts (eighth and ninth century A.D.) could have any lasting influence that could change the shape or content of mythologies.

I agree with Morris, that the age of shaping myths was long before our historic era. It is possible though, as Sigurdsson claims that the rich Irish written traditions could have inspired 'future' Icelanders to write down their stories as well. Mythologies were the very first explanations of this world, and it is an interesting question what shaped them, and how they came into existence. Europe is rich in mythological traditions, especially in its northern part, where the Irish, Icelanders and for example also the Finns managed to preserve, to some extent, the beliefs of their pre-Christian ancestors.

It seems that the most important similar elements in those two mythological systems come from the ancient days of common origins. One could point out, among others, features like cult of the horse and bull, leading position of warrior class, strong cult of sun, glorification of war and death (albeit in different contexts), and dominantly masculine elements of the myths. We could also point out the idea of battle rage that was present in both the Norse and Celtic traditions, in forms of Nordic berserker and Celtic furor (Eliade 1982: 161-162). These similarities form some of the core features of those two mythologies. They express the basic character of those systems, and stand in sharp contrast with what could be called 'secondary resemblances', which are applied to certain motifs, like a particular kind of a plant or an animal.

Certainly, this kind of similarity is also important and meaningful. However, I have focused on a broader comparison that would allow me to suggest an interpretation of some of the similarities and differences. I would suggest that most of the parallel elements that could be found in those mythologies come from their earlier continental contacts. I would disagree, though, that the later contacts between Ireland and Iceland could have had any long-lasting or particularly important influence on the Norse and Celtic traditions. We could accept Sigurdsson's view that the rich Irish poetic tradition could inspire Icelanders to write down their own myths. Nevertheless, besides minor

symbols and elements both mythologies present very different stories and points of view. We could definitely find corresponding details, but we could not probably say if they had a common source, or if their similar character was a result of a pure coincidence.

The strongest conclusion that would follow my analysis is that the Norse and the Celtic mythological worlds were based on two radically different approaches to reality. The Norse universe was finished, as perfect as it could be, arranged with precision. It was a massive construction that could not be developed any more. Thus, the only destiny for it was death and destruction, and it was an accepted and awaited fate of the world.

The Celtic reality, on the contrary, did not have any clear edges or boundaries. It could be described as a flowing stream of life and possibility, where change was praised and welcomed. It did not await destruction, because it could carry some of the destructive elements within itself. One good example of such tendencies is the annual celebration of Samuin, when the worlds mixed, humans and deities changed shapes etc. The order of the Celtic world could accept a certain degree of chaos; it was far more adjustable and open for fluctuations than its Norse counterpart. Such situation was impossible in the Nordic mythological tradition. There the order was established as opposite to chaos and disorder. Odin and his brothers built the world, arranged its sophisticated structure, and then protected it against the forces of destruction. The awaited catastrophe, the Ragnarök, meant coming back to chaos, and disappearance of the universe of the old gods.

The Norse and Celtic traditions bear some obvious resemblances, but it is almost impossible to determine who and when influenced whom. We should note Eliade's view that both mythologies came from the very same Indo-European source. However, they seem to explore different elements that came from one culture. The Irish Celts are famous for the Hindu elements that were present in their tradition. On the other hand, the Norse deities expressed strong shamanistic features, possibly also of Indo-European origin. Despite those resemblances, those mythological systems are quite different, and those distinct elements could have many unrelated sources and, what follows, many explanations are possible.

Especially one striking difference between those mythologies should be pointed out. While the Norse and the Celtic cultures where quite masculine and war-oriented, the Irish Celts expressed a somehow surprisingly strong female cult of the mother-goddess Danu. In my opinion it could be possible that the Celts that came to Ireland were strongly influenced by the older, maternal cult that had already existed there. Another fact that points to the 'aboriginal' Irish influences could be the long discussed story of the Celtic tribe of gods, the Tuatha Dé Danann, that were defeated by the incoming Celtic tribes.

Scholars like for example MacCulloch offer many explanations of this puzzle. It does seem, though, that the most logical way to approach this problem would be to regard Irish heritage not as strictly Celtic, but rather as a unique fusion of the elements already developed on that island and the 'fresh' Celtic influence. Certainly, it has been pointed out that the Celtic invader adopted places of cult that already existed there, like for example New Grange. However, it would be possible in my opinion that the Irish Celts got far more from that original, older cult than it is generally assessed. Certainly, this claim would need further investigation.

Furthermore, I introduced in my thesis a theory of origin of both the Celts and the Norse presented by Gerhard Herm. He connects both cultures to the legend of Atlantis, which centre he places roughly in Southern Sweden, Denmark and Northern Germany. We could conclude from Herm's book (1976) that an ecological disaster that destroyed that civilization would influence psychologically groups that sprung from it, and those would be the Norse and the Celts. In a way, the story of the Northern Atlantis could fit the mood of both the Norse and the Celtic cultures, as the first one was marked with a strong feeling of unavoidable destruction, whereas the second one preserved the notion of continuity of life. Still, even Herm himself called this theory 'unscholarly'. We do have a geological and historical proof that a major catastrophe took place in the north of Europe during the time of the Bronze Age, but we cannot determine if it caused an end of the European cultural centre of those times. Nevertheless, we could take into consideration how easily archeological evidence could be destroyed. I do think the theory of Gerhard Herm could get a bit more attention, as it shifts the cradle of the European civilization from the south, and emphasis the bipolar-like development of Europe.

Obviously, it cannot be determined in what shape the mythologies reached Ireland and Iceland, where they were written down, and thus I think we cannot draw conclusions based only on the possible contact between the two islands, especially if they deal with some minor motifs or symbols. However, it appears that scholars too often isolate features and elements of a particular mythology. What really shaped those systems, and gave them their primary flavors, had to happen in the very beginning of their existence.

The present study definitely raises some questions for further research, which could develop in many different directions. It would be definitely worth analyzing whether the Irish culture of the Iron Age was primarily Celtic, or rather just flavored by the Celtic influences. Furthermore, the theory presented by Gerhard Herm should be further investigated, as it presents tempting solutions to some of the puzzling elements of the Norse and the Celtic mythologies. Moreover, a modern approach could be taken as it could be analyzed how modern societies view the mythological stories. It certainly seems that in relatively small communities, like in Ireland, Iceland or Finland, the mythological heritage has still considerable influence and it is far more respected that in other countries. The research could analyze what sort of impact, if any, the pre-Christian myths have had on the modern nations.

Every civilization bears a stamp of the very same human nature. People think in some similar ways all over the world. Thus, we should not be really surprised by similarities that appear in mythologies and systems of beliefs. All humans have a common heritage that is just explored in different ways. The same statement could be applied to the Norse and Celtic mythologies. Although related to each other and expressing some resemblances, those two mythological systems reached very different conclusions about the structure and faith of the world. In a way, there is a drastic gap between those two realities, expressed in the Norse view of awaited destruction and the Celtic notion of endless continuity.

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