

## **A Gaelic Eschatological Folktale, Celtic Cosmology and Dumézil's "Three Realms"**

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ATU 20C is an international tale with an eschatological theme and a wide distribution throughout the world. Gaelic variants recorded in Ireland and Scotland during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have been observed to contain cosmological themes and formulae, along with the pagan theonyms Crom and Donn. These are examined in their relation to a medieval Irish cosmological formula appearing in the *Táin* and other sources. The pre-Christian traditions, particularly that of a tripartite cosmological structure consisting of sky-earth-sea, are discussed within the contexts of early Celtic belief. Comparisons with Iranian, Indic, Greek, and Germanic systems indicate the presence of three such cosmic realms from Indo-European times, suggesting that the modern Gaelic variants, taken together, may be regarded as a remarkable instance of long-term oral transmission.

The main outlines of the international tale type ATU 20C (AT 2033), more familiar to the English-speaking world as 'Chicken Little', can be summarised as follows (adapted from Uther 1: 28):

20C The Animals Flee in Fear of the End of the World. (Including the previous [AT] Type 20C.) A chicken (cat, mouse) is frightened by a nut (acorn, leaf) that falls on its head (tail), or another animal is frightened by a noise. The chicken thinks this is a sign of an approaching war (the end of the world, the sky is falling down), and flees in panic together with the rooster (they go to tell the king about the disaster). They meet other animals (e.g. goose, hare, dog, bear, wolf, fox) who come to share their fear and go along with them. Often the animals bear odd or comical names. The misunderstanding is cleared up, or the animals fall into a pit (see Type 20A). In some variants they arrive at the fox's den. The fox invites them inside and eats them.

Considering the popularity of the tale, along with its dramatic eschatological theme, it is surprising how little attention it has received from folktale scholars.

### Modern Gaelic Variants

In terms of understanding the cosmological component of the tale, it is instructive to examine the modern Gaelic variants, which arise from oral traditions that were still strong during the twentieth century, and contain clear and constant references, situated within the familiar international framework, to a major cataclysm. Their potential importance in this regard has been briefly remarked on previously, raising the question as to whether they might retain echoes from medieval or indeed ancient times. A survey of primary sources from fieldwork carried out in Scotland and Ireland since the mid nineteenth century reveals the main characteristics of the Gaelic type:<sup>1</sup>

One character, or two (in some versions a hen, in others human) receives a signal the sky is about to fall on the earth, or simply of the approach of death (*bàs*) or doom (*bràth*). In some variants they are down by the shore, and are made aware of the impending disaster by being struck by an object falling from the sky. They set out to carry the news to others (animals or humans) in succession, all of whom bear distinctive, often comical names, using a formula along the lines of: "Who has seen or heard it?" "My eyes have seen it, my ears have heard it, and my soles (or back[-side]) have felt it". They form a growing procession as they go through the country until they reach a destination of sorts: in many variants a white horse carries them to a river where they are drowned.

We can classify the Gaelic variants into three types according to structure and content. Type 1 consists of Irish

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<sup>1</sup>My thanks to Prof Séamus Ó Catháin and the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore for providing me with copies of transcribed versions of ATU 20C/AT 2033 from their archive.

variants mostly from Galway and Kerry, centering round the theme of heaven and earth falling together. The setting, where specified, is by the seashore, and as a rule they contain the formula 'My eyes have seen it, my ears have heard it' referring to the event and occurring in that order in nearly three fourths of the variants surveyed. This type with its description of the collapse of heaven and earth set beside the sea appears in Gaelic Scotland in a single variant recorded in 1967 from a reciter from Bernera, Harris in the Outer Hebrides.<sup>2</sup>

It is worthwhile to observe the degree to which the further Scottish Gaelic variants, along with some Irish ones, listed under the next two types, differ from this mainly Irish variety. Under the second type comes *Mór nighean Smùid* 'Mór the daughter of Smùid', published in the tenth volume John Francis Campbell's manuscript collection, apparently taken down from a nursemaid in Islay in the second half of the nineteenth century and printed in J.G. MacKay's *More West Highland Tales* (2: 62-66). Like the variants under Type 1, it is a cumulative tale:

Mór the daughter of Smùid falls and thinks that death (*Bàs*) has come. She meets Ewan MacAlc, saying to him, "Beware of death". "Have you seen or heard him?" She replies, "My ear has heard, my eye has seen and my foot has felt". She then encounters a series of characters: Priest Speckled Boy, the One-eyed Man, the Lark that was on the Nest and the Wren that was on the Rock, the Thatcher of the Kiln, the Grinder of the Mill, Little Rory of the Rock, Big Rory of the Rock, and the Old Woman of the Bothy. Finally as they flee together they come to a river and the Horse with the White Trews offers to take them across. They all climb up on his back and the whole group of them are carried away by the river.

Type 2 is found over a wide geographical area. MacKay lists Irish variants from S.W. Waterford, W. Kerry and S.W. Donegal, which is hardly surprising in the light of the contacts between Northern Ireland and the southern isles of Scotland.

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<sup>2</sup>SA 1967/88/A2

A third type with the opaque title *Tuairéadaire Teallaich* appears in two variants recorded in Scotland from South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. Both variants were taken down during the nineteen-fifties, from the famous South Uist reciter Duncan MacDonald and his neighbor Ronald Macintyre (DJ MacDonald MS:8. 690-97; 49, 4556-68). Type 3 is likewise in the form of a chain tale:

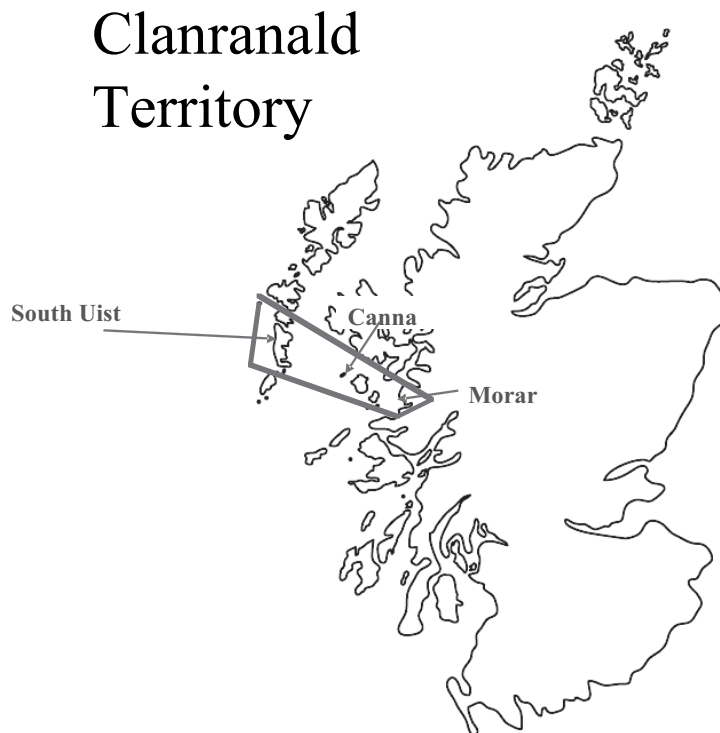
*Tuairéadaire Teallaich* meets *Cromach nighean a' Chromach* on the shore. 'Where are you going?' she asks. 'Fleeing from doom (*bràth*)', he replies. 'Who heard or saw it?' 'I heard and saw it. It was under the soles of my own feet'. They collect *Tamhasg nighean an Tamhasg*, the Ghost of the Fordmouth, *Fàs a chùil an t-sionnaich*, the Grey Man and his son, the *Ciamhain* and his crowd (*cruit*, musical instrument), Deer between two Hills, Fox in a Hollow, Ruairidh Mór of the Crag, *Bloigh Meise*, Cheese-Back, Yellow Blaze on Palm, Two Women Grappling, Woman Harvesting Wisp. Finally they encounter the Lame White Garron of the Peat who says, 'Get up on my back and I will save you'. When they do he takes them out to sea and they are all drowned.

A further variant belonging to this type came to light unexpectedly in 1978 in the course of field work carried out by the writer in the Gaelic areas of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia (MacLellan: 351-53, 417). The title, *Croma-Ghille Cromaidh agus Donna-Ghille Donnaidh*, is partially reminiscent of the South Uist version above:

Croma-Ghille Cromaidh is walking one day along the seashore and the sea comes in about his feet and he becomes frightened. So off he runs until he reaches Donna-Ghille Donnaidh, asks, 'What is wrong?' Croma-Ghille Cromaidh replies 'The day of doom is coming' (*Tha am bràth a' tighinn*). 'Who saw and heard it?' (*Có chunnaic 's a dh'fhairich e?*) his companion asks, and Croma-Ghille Cromaidh replies, 'It is I that saw and heard it. Didn't it come beneath the soles of my feet?' (*'S mis' a chunnaic 's a dh'fhairich e. Nach ann fo'm bhonnaibh a thànaig e?*). Away they go, as in the Uist variant, to spread the news to a succession of characters (the Priest of the Desolate Glen, *a' Chliath 'sa Chruit Fear Liath* and his son, et al.) using the same verbal formula each time and collecting the characters as they go. Finally they reach Big

Fionn Mac Crùslaig, who is engaged in spreading manure. His reaction to the news of the impending cataclysm is less than reverent: 'I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll all stay here together, and it's my strong opinion that if the day of doom comes, we'll certainly notice it. But I believe it will not arrive at all.'

The reciter, Lauchie MacLellan, of Dunvegan, Inverness County, belonged to a noted family of tradition bearers originating in Morar on the Scottish mainland near Skye. A fragment of the same variant, this time originating in the Inner Hebridean Isle of Canna was also recorded also in Cape Breton, and a further one from Arisaig, within a few miles of Morar, has been identified in the SSS sound archive (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> That variants should appear in Arisaig and Canna is of



*Figure 1*

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<sup>3</sup>SA 1954/56/B15

particular interest when we remember that areas of the mainland that included Arisaig, together with the islands of Canna and South Uist, were in constant contact from medieval times, belonging as they did to the territories of the Clanranald of South Uist, an area noted for its cultural conservatism.

The three Gaelic variant types can be set out and compared in the tables below:

Types, Events, Formulae		
Type 1	Event	Formula
	Seaside (location) / +falling object	
<b>Ireland</b>	Heaven >	Eyes Saw
	Earth >	Ear Heard
		Strikes hen's back(side)
Type 2	I. Event	Formula
	'Beware of death' ( <i>Bàs</i> )	Ear heard
<b>Islay</b>		Eye saw
		Foot felt
Type 3	Event	Formula
	Seaside (sea around feet)	Saw
<b>Uist, Canna, Mainland</b> (>Cape Breton) = (Clanranald)	'Doom is coming' ( <i>bràth</i> )	Heard
		Under my soles'

Table 1

In Types 1, 3 there is a clear link, as indicated above, between the initial event occurring at the seaside and the third part of the formula.

In their events and incorporated formulae the modern variants lead to intriguing questions as to whether they retain discernable echoes of earlier cosmological beliefs within an eschatological theme. Such questions can be approached by examining the relation of our variants to what is known of the belief systems in earlier Gaelic society, and elsewhere.

### Mythological Personages: Crom and Donn

A feature of the Clanranald variants immediately apparent to those with an interest in early Irish mythology is the presence of what appear to be the names of well-known pre-Christian gods, Crom and Donn; we may well ask what

significance, if any, can the presence of the names have to our story with its cosmic elements. For such pagan theonyms to appear in any modern folktale in Scotland is a rarity, though both names appear briefly in scattered traditions, mostly rhymes, recorded in Scotland from Argyll to the Western Isles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both cases the Irish traditions are more extensive and detailed.

Crom (whose name seems to mean 'crouching, bent over') is best known in the Irish older sources as an important and formidable adversary of St Patrick. In that capacity his name is associated with those most infamous of pagan practices, idolatry and human sacrifice, as described in a passage from the famous medieval compilation of place-name lore, the prose *Dindshenchas* (Stokes 1895):<sup>4</sup>

'Mag Slécht. Whence was it named? Answer: it is there the king-idol of Ireland was, i.e., Crom Cróich, and the twelve stone idols around him; but he was of gold. And until the coming of Patrick he was the god of every people that occupied Ireland. It is to him they used to offer the first-born of every stock and the first-born of every family. It is to him that the King of Ireland, Tigernmas son of Follach, came at Samhain, together with the men and women of Ireland, to adore him. And they all bowed down before him, until their foreheads, and the soft part of their noses, and the caps of their knees, and the points of their elbows, broke; so that three-fourths of the men of Ireland died in these prostrations.'

Such legends, together with their elements of pre-Christian belief, have survived into modern times as part of the oral repertoire of Irish storytellers, proving that 'some pagan cults survived with vigor' until well into the Christian era (Ford: 40-47). Curiously, Crom, or Crom Dubh ('the Dark, Bent One'), the embodiment of pagan deities, does not appear among the pantheon of the older Irish gods, and his name may merely be an epithet meaning 'the Black Croucher', an apt image for the devil. Nevertheless he appears in later

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<sup>4</sup>A parallel account is found in the metrical version of the *Dindshenchas* (Gwynn 1924).

popular legend tradition in a primary role, where he is associated *inter alia* with the festival of Lughnasa, control of the elements and the provision of food (MacNeill: 409-415; Ó hÓgáin: 128).

Donn ('brown' in modern Gaelic, earlier also 'dark') in contemporary Irish folk tradition is likewise surrounded by a variety of associations, some of which (weather, dwelling on hilltops, stock and crops, death and fatal forebodings) he shares with Crom (Müller-Lisowski 1950: *passim*). In a legend from Clare the two are linked in the name of a fairy-king Donn MacCromáin, who presents the owner of a small holding with a fatal gift (*op.cit.*: 169-172). At all periods Donn is frequently portrayed on horseback, in modern legend often exiting from his subterranean dwelling mounted on a white horse (Ó hÓgáin: 166). Unlike Crom, there is little doubt concerning Donn's rich and undoubtedly ancient mythological antecedents among the older gods. Since the medieval period his primary associations are with the realm of death and 'every otherworld place', his most important role being that of 'King of the Dead'; he was one of the sons of Mil, and by some accounts perished during their invasion of Ireland. He was buried in an island off the south coast of Munster known as *Tech Duinn* 'Donn's House' where the dead were believed to assemble (Rees and Rees: 96-97). His role is confirmed elsewhere in a 9<sup>th</sup> century medieval text where he says *Cucum dom thig tísaid uili / iar bar n-écaibh* 'to me, to my house you shall all come after your deaths' (Müller-Lisowski: 148). Regarding his underworld role, parallels have been drawn between Donn and Dis Pater, the Gaulish god of the dead mentioned by Julius Caesar, and comparative evidence indicates that the concept is inherited from Indo-European times. The Indo-European etymology advanced for Donn is \*dhus-no- 'dark in colour', a word that lends itself well to the obscurity associated with the abode of the dead. Comparatists have proposed further parallels between Donn and the Sanskrit Yama, described in the Vedas as the first man to die and lord of the dead. Corresponding to the Indic Yama ('Twin'), both in function and the etymology of the name, is the Norse god Ymir, who was slain by the other gods and his body used to form the cosmos (Puhvel 1989: 183; Rees and Rees: 107-108).



### **The Spatial Context: Celtic Cosmology**

Compared to the wealth and detail displayed in the cosmological system surviving in the written records of their Germanic neighbors in western Europe, ancient concepts of the cosmos among the Celts can only be sketched in the most general terms from classical sources, and from the fragmentary medieval sources that survived the spread of Christianity. There is evidence from a number of accounts from classical times of a belief in a column at the centre of the earth, an *axis mundi*, that supported the heavens that was destined to shatter, bringing about a cataclysm (de Vries: 268). A continuation of this widespread belief may be found in one of the medieval Irish *immrama* (wonderous voyages), where Mael Dúin and his companions encounter a great column of silver, 8 oar-strokes in circumference, without a sod of earth about it, but the endless ocean. They are unable to see its base, or its top on account of its great height (Loth: 366). Alwyn and Brinley Rees (1961: 325) have proposed that such wondrous voyages, with their religious trappings, are remnants of an earlier doctrine: 'the tattered remains of an oral Celtic 'book' of the dead which proclaimed that the mysteries of the world beyond death had been at least partially explored and the stations of the soul's pilgrimage charted'. Regarding life after death, the same authors observe that little remains from Irish sources to indicate what the pre-Christian doctrine was, though classical authors indicate a belief in an afterlife and a realm of the dead (*op.cit.*: 325; de Vries: 256-65). Lucan (*Pharsalia* I.450-68), writing of the Gauls during the first century CE, provides some indication of what the doctrine may have been:

'According to you [the druids] as authorities, the shades do not travel to the silent abodes of Erebus and the pallid dominions of Dis in the deep. The same spirit rules over bodily members (*artus*) in the other world: death is the midpoint of a long life, if you sing things which are rightly known' (transl. Lincoln: 119).

Later accounts from medieval Ireland, doubtless influenced by Christian belief, portray a further Otherworld, this time brighter, more pleasant, and not subject to the passage of

time. *Mag Mell* 'The Pleasant Fields', *Tír na n-Óg* 'Land of the Young', etc. is often located somewhere beyond the ocean and is comparable to the Elysian Fields of classical literatures (de Vries: 265-67; cf. Puhvel 1989: 108-109, 138-40).

It is evident from classical sources that the ancient Celts conceived of the end of the world; they also feared, and thus believed, that the world would end in a cataclysm. Strabo provides an account of Alexander the Great's visit to Celts on the Adriatic around 335 BCE:

"Ptolemy, the son of Lagus, says that during this campaign some Celts living near the Adriatic arrived seeking good will and friendship. Alexander received them warmly and while they were sharing a drink asked them what they feared the most, thinking they would say him. They answered that they feared nothing except that the sky might fall down on them but that they honoured the friendship of a man like him more than anything." Ptolemy I (s.v. Strabo 7.3.8; Koch: 23-24).

Beyond such fragmentary survivals and their parallels in neighbouring cultures - e.g. the shivering of the cosmic ash Yggdrasil from pre-Christian Scandinavian cosmology - later sources in prose or poetry contain little to throw light on older doomsday scenarios in Ireland or elsewhere in the Celtic world. *Immacallam in dá thuarad* 'The Colloquy of the Two Sages' an eschatological text in MSS dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, contains strong similarities in its apocalyptic vision to the Norse *Völuspá/Ragnarök*, portraying the collapse of the social order and destruction of the material world, but does not aspire to a cosmological scale (Stokes 1905: *passim*).

Despite the scarcity of surviving records in the literature, comparative work on Indo-European eschatology has lent indirect support by providing a probable context. Based on comparisons of Norse (*Völuspá/Ragnarök*, and *Brávellir* in Saxo Grammaticus), Irish (the Second Battle of Mag Tured), Indic (*Kuruksetra* in the *Mahābhārata*) and Latin (the Battle of Lake Regilius) mythical and historical accounts, O'Brien (1976) reconstructs a ten-stage model for an Indo-European eschatological battle leading to a final cataclysm. Interestingly, the Irish comparanda are seen to adhere to the reconstructed

pattern in his system more closely than those of the other groups (*op.cit.*: 318). On a larger scale, Bruce Lincoln (1986: 131-36), comparing Norse, Greek and Iranian traditions, sees the related eschatologies in Indo-European traditions as belonging to a cosmic cycle consisting of a cataclysm followed by a regeneration of the cosmos and the beginning of another age.

### **Cosmological Formulae?**

Direct accounts bearing on concepts of the cosmos are thus at best suggestive for older Irish traditions, but a study of formulae in their various contexts has yielded more fruitful results. William Sayers in an insightful series of comparisons draws attention to a passage in the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley':<sup>5</sup>

*Mono tháeth in fhírmiminti cona frossaib rétlad for dunignúis  
in talman nó mani thí in fharrgi eithrech ochargorm tulmoing in  
bethad nó mani máe in talam, ... gu brunni mbrátha 7 betha ...*

'Unless the firmament with its showers of stars fall upon the surface of the earth, or unless the blue-bordered, fish-abounding sea come over the face of the world, or unless the earth quake ... we shall never ..

(Sayers: 100; LL version ll. 4731ff).

Here the breaking of an oath is associated with the catastrophic collapse of the cosmic order and the rupture of the boundaries separating the three cosmic regions of sky, earth and sea, corresponding to the elements air, earth and water. The same formula, with the sky falling, the earth quaking or opening up, and the sea flooding over the world occurs in other MS versions of the *Táin*, as well as in further medieval Irish sources: "In all cases we have the negative consequences of a violation of natural boundaries, a maleficent example of the liminal situations so characteristic of early Celtic literature" (Sayers: 105). Sayers, followed by others, has noted that the formulae express a tripartite cosmic structure that may be related to the elements present in the medieval Irish motif of the Threefold Death (*op.cit.*: 107; MacMathúna

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<sup>5</sup>A Gaelic oral version of this, the most famous of all early Irish epics, was recorded on the island of South Uist, Scotland in the 1950s.

1997: 533, 540), and the doomsday aspects of the formulae recall the classical accounts given above of the heavens falling. As to the order of the three regions, the sky as a rule is first, with some variation in the sequence or earth and sea; but the prevailing pattern in the examples studied is the descending order of heaven – earth – sea. MacMathúna (1997; 1999) traces the frequent replacement of the ‘inherited triad’ *nem* (sky), *muir* (sea), *talam* (earth) by the heaven-earth opposition of Christianity, which in turn is reflected in a number of the modern Irish oral versions of ATU 20C. Also in common with the modern folktales is the ending of the older formula (*mani ...*) *gu brunni mbrátha* ‘(unless...) never’ (lit. ‘to the day of doom’), with the identical word *bráth* retained in the Scottish variants. It is likely that at least the aquatic element of the medieval eschatological tradition has survived into modern times in Scotland in the form of a rhymed prophecy predicting a cataclysmic flood engulfing Ireland and Islay and likewise incorporating the word *bráth*:

*Seachd bliadhna ro’n bhráth*  
*Thig muir thar Éirinn ri aon tràth*  
*‘S thar Ìle ghuirm, ghlais*  
*Ach snámhaidh Í Chaluim chléirich*

Seven years before the day of doom  
 The sea will come over Ireland in a single watch  
 As well as Islay green and grassy,  
 But Iona of Columba the cleric will float.

(Carmichael 2: 348).

The phonetic similarity in Gaelic between the words *bráth* ‘doom’ and *bás* ‘death’ together with their similar semantic ranges offers the most plausible explanation for the appearance of the latter word in variants of the modern folktale in both Gaelic traditions. Only the Scottish Clanranald variants have been conservative enough to retain the original *bráth* present in the earlier oath formulae.

Returning to the modern folk variants of our story, it is evident that the tripartite cosmic structure in early Irish belief revealed by the oath formulae and other contemporary medieval sources bears a close relation to later oral tradition, as Sayers (116 n. 53) suggested it might. Following the earlier

paradigm, a comparison of the structures of Types 1-3 above shows that when we combine the three variant types of the folktale, it is apparent that together they provide a more detailed version of the tale, particularly when we fill in the gaps covered by the more general concepts *bràth/bàs* 'doom/death' to restore a full paradigm:

Types 1-3	Event	Formula
	Heaven ( <i>nem</i> ) 1	Eyes Saw 1,2,3
<b>Ireland and Scotland</b>	Earth ( <i>talam</i> ) 1	Ears Heard 1,2,3
	Seaside (sea around feet) ( <i>muir</i> ) 1,3	Struck Back(side) 1 Foot Felt 2 'Under My Soles' 3

Table 2

A common variant of Types 1 and 2 would be based on the falling object from the sky striking the hen, an effective symbol for the catastrophic meeting of heaven and earth. Curiously, the reference to the aquatic realms in the events column of Types 1 (Ireland) and 3 (Clanranald) is always found at the beginning of the narrative, while it is always assigned last place in the formulae (the association is explicit in Type 3), when it occurs at all, and the same holds for the falling object variants. I would suggest that the placing of the water element in initial position, and its demotion from an element to a setting ('the shore') has something to do with a suppression of explicit cosmic structure brought about by the growing influence of Christian doctrine. The order and nature of the events were changed because they openly referred to specific cosmic realms; the corresponding formulae (which will be examined in more detail below) were perceived as less of a challenge to christianisation and retained their original order.

At this stage we may ask how fragments of such an apparently ancient system of structured belief persisted in oral form into our own time. The most likely channel of transmission was a process, perhaps lasting centuries after the establishment of Christianity in Ireland, where the formula in which the belief system was encoded survived by being grafted onto the ostensibly neutral genre of a children's tale. In this

context ATU 20C, an international tale with cosmic and eschatological overtones, could not be a better candidate for attracting and harbouring an item of cosmological lore whose social and sacred contexts had been superseded by another system.

### **Cosmic Structure and Indo-European Ideology**

The formulaic nature of the earliest Irish evidence provides an indication that the concept of a tripartite cosmic structure whose realms correspond to three elements may well be an inherited one. A structure of this kind has been regarded as an extremely archaic concept in Europe for some time (Grambo 1973: 92), as well as being widespread. Nevertheless, little work along these lines has been carried out by comparative mythologists for Indo-European traditions to date. It is possible, however, to draw comparisons from a variety of literatures over a wide geographic area which indicate that a tripartite cosmological structure of this kind with its constituent elements – or one very like it – existed from common Indo-European times.

One of the most fruitful comparisons to this end was made by Georges Dumézil (1938) in his study of the Armenian god Vahagn, whose name derives from the Iranian dragon-slayer Vr̥θragna. The Armenian ritual poem describes how heaven and earth were in tumult, as was the purple sea, and on the sea was a red reed from which a flame issued. Out of the flame a small adolescent emerged at speed with hair of fire, a moustache of flame, and eyes like the sun. This was Vahagn, the slayer of dragons. Dumézil draws attention to an episode in Indic from in a postvedic source, Book 5 of the Mahābhārata, where the dragon-slayer Indra, after breaking the prohibition against killing a Brahman by his slaying of the serpent Vr̥tra, flees to the ends of the worlds and conceals himself in a lotus plant in the waters, thereby provoking cosmic disorder. After an unsuccessful expedition by his wife to persuade him to return, the god Agni is charged with searching the cosmos, seeking through the realms of the earth and air without success until, following orders, he enters the third realm, the waters, and finds Indra, now the size of an atom, within a lotus fiber. Dumézil points to the comparison as an apt example of

the value of later Sanskrit sources for the reconstruction of prehistoric mythologies.<sup>6</sup> Further on in the same work (169) he draws attention to an additional allusion to the three cosmic realms in an episode where Vr̥thagna gives to Zoroaster the gift of unlimited vision in the sea, on land, and in the sky – the cosmos in ascending order.

The theme of the fugitive in the three realms appears in a further tradition from the periphery of the ancient Iranian world: that of the Scythians as recounted by Herodotus (4: 131-32). The Persian king Darius upon receiving a bird, a mouse, a frog and five arrows as gifts from the Scythians interprets their message as one of surrender. His self-aggrandising view is promptly challenged by another in the company: 'Unless, Persians, ye can turn into birds and fly up into the sky, or become mice and burrow under the ground, or make yourselves frogs, and take refuge in the fens, ye will never make escape from this land, but die pierced by our arrows.'

The earliest recorded cosmic structure in Indic sources is conventionally represented as three levels consisting of heaven, atmosphere and earth. These in turn are integrated

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<sup>6</sup>A further comparison, not mentioned by Dumézil, appears from a more westerly region of the Indo-European world. The Greek philosopher Empedocles in his discourse on the eternal interplay in the universe between the forces of love and strife describes how the end of the world's golden age was brought about by animal sacrifice involving the spilling of blood and sacrificial dismemberment. He then describes the consequences of the ritual killing on a cosmic scale (Lincoln: 52-53):

Whenever some one of those daimōns who were apportioned long lasting  
life,  
Should defile his dear limbs with gore [...]  
He will wander for three thousand years away from the blessed ones,  
Springing forth in forms of mortal bodies through time,  
Exchanging one painful path of life for another.  
For the force of the force of the air drives him to the sea  
And the sea spits him onto the surface of the land: Earth (sends him)  
To the beams  
Of the radiant sun, which toss him to the eddies of air.  
One receives him from the other, and all abhor him.'

Here Empedocles lists his four elements, but the sky-earth-sea triad appears within them, and the theme of separation from the company of the gods after a slaying and dismembering, to become a wanderer or fugitive in the cosmic realms, is consistent with the story of Indra in the Mahābhārata.

into a set of homologies involving the human body and sacrificial practices (Lincoln: 7, 56). Yet passages from the earliest Indic texts, those of the Rig Veda, indicate the possibility of an alternative set, contemporaneous or earlier, along the lines of that Dumézil has noted for postvedic and Iranian traditions. A passage concerning funerary rites (RV 10.16.3) contains the following:

Rv 10.16.3

*sūryam cakṣur gachatu vātam ātmā dyāṃ ca gacha pṛthivīm ca  
dharmaṇā  
apo va gacha yadi tatra te hitam ośadhīsu prati tiṣṭhā śariraiḥ*

‘Your eye must go to the sun, and your self (must go) to the wind.  
You must go to heaven and earth, according to what is right –  
Or you must go to the waters ... (*op.cit.*: 124).

In RV 10.2.7 (cf. 10.46.9, 10.45.1) Agni, the god of fire who played a central role in locating Indra in the Mahābhārata episode, is said to be born of the sky, the earth and the waters, and of the god Tvastr. (Brown: 91).

Rv 10.2.7

*yaṃ tvā dyāvāpṛthivī yaṃ tvāpas tvastā yaṃ tvā sujanimā  
jajāna*

‘Thou whom the Heaven and Earth, thou whom the Waters, and Tvastr, maker of fair things, created...’

Upon his creation by the gods Agni became known throughout the three cosmic levels (10.88.8):

*sūktavākam prathamam ād id agnīm ād id dhavir ajanayanta  
davāḥ | sa eṣāṃ yajño abhavat tanūpās taṃ dyaur veda taṃ  
pṛthivī taṃ āpaḥ*

‘First the Gods brought the hymnal into being; then they engendered Agni, then oblation.  
He was their sacrifice that guards them: known to the heavens, the earth, the waters.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Cf. The passage from the Old Irish *Senchus Mór* (1, 22), where the druids, practitioners of the sacrifice, ‘claimed that they made the sky and earth and



A passage concerning the functions of the healing gods, the Ásvins, attests to the links between a heaven-earth-waters cosmic structure and the medical doctrine that was inherited from Indo-European times and corresponds to Dumézil's three functions (RV 1.34.6; Puhvel 1970: 381 fn 19):

Rv I:34.6

*trir no ásvinā divyāni bheṣajā triḥ pārthivāni trir u dattam  
adbhyaḥ*

'Thrice, Ásvins, grant us the medicines of heaven, thrice those of the earth, and thrice those of the waters'.

Greek sources contain evidence for the same belief, and are of particular interest not only because they derive from some of the earliest recorded traditions, but because their form, which is that of an oath naming the three cosmic realms, parallels closely the Irish oaths examined above. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus, confined on an island with the sea nymph Calypso and longing to depart, is assured by her that she intends to subject him to no hardships on his release:

ἴστω νῦν τόδε γαῖα καὶ οὐρανὸς εὐρύς ὑπερθε  
καὶ τὸ κατειβόμενον Στυγὸς ὕδωρ, ὅς τε μέγιστος  
ὄρκος δεινότατός τε πέλει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι,

'Now let the earth be my witness in this, and the wide heaven above us,  
and the dripping water of the Styx, which oath is the biggest and the most  
formidable oath among the blessed immortals' (Od. 5, 184-6).

The passage itself indicates that there was some degree of significance attached to the oath, which may explain why it occurs twice more in early sources, both times *verbatim*, suggesting its formulaic nature. In the additional instances the

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sea and so forth, the sun and moon and so forth' (cited in Lincoln: 63). Another of Indra's allies, the god Visnu, the 'wide-strider', strode out as Indra departed to combat the serpent Vrtra (RV. 4.18.11). Visnu was also known as the 'three-stepper' in reference to 'his crucial primordial three strides that somehow measured out and affirmed the habitable universe for gods and men alike' (Puhvel 1987: 56).

oath is likewise made by a female divinity: in the Iliad (15, 36-38) it is Hera speaking to an angered Zeus; in the Homeric hymn to Apollo (84-86) Leto swears 'the gods' powerful oath' that a temple to the god will be built on a certain spot.

Corroboration of a specific sky-earth-sea/waters cosmic structure for Indo-European likewise appears at various times in history and in various genres in the traditions of the Germanic peoples. An example from a West Germanic modern oral source - coincidentally or not - closely parallels the theme of the fugitive between cosmic realms. In the Scottish ballad *The Twa Magicians* (Child no. 44) a shape-shifting lady, pursued by a blacksmith with similar abilities, changes herself into a dove to fly up in the air, then into an eel to swim in the water, and finally as a hare to run on a hill (Lyle 1979: 79). In this connection Child cites the Welsh tale of Gwion Bach (appearing in manuscripts from the sixteenth century and associated with the conception story of the bard Taliesin), pursued on land, in the water and in the air and undergoing the appropriate theriomorphic transformations suited to earth, land and sea (*op.cit.*: 79-80). Doubtless the most dramatic example from Germanic, and one showing close parallels with the medieval Irish traditions, is the eschatological passage in the Old Norse poem the *Völuspá* 'The Sybil's Prophecy' with its description of Ragnarök, the violation of boundaries and the collapse of the cosmos (Pálsson: 54, 89):

54. Sól tér sortna,	The sun will turn black,
sígr fold í mar,	the earth will sink into the sea;
hverfa af himni	bright stars will vanish from the sky.
heiðar stiornur.	Fires will burn against flames,
Geisar eimi	and immense heat play against
við aldrnara,	heaven itself.
leikr hár hiti	
við himin siálfan.	

Sacrificial practices recorded in early Germanic sources are also useful in providing some indication of the homological associations between Dumézil's three functions and the cosmic levels examined here. They suggest the presence of a tripartite society in ancient times, where three varieties of post-battle human sacrifices were carried out corresponding to the social hierarchy (Ward 131-33). The techniques described

are hanging (1<sup>st</sup> function), wounding with a weapon (2<sup>nd</sup> function) and sacrificial drowning or live burial (3<sup>rd</sup> function). In the examples given the descending order is usually retained, with the third function sacrifice as a rule in last place. Ward then draws attention to close Celtic parallels from ancient and medieval records. A revealing instance is recorded in the *Commenta* to Lucan, where human victims were sacrificed to Esus by hanging, to Taranus by burning, and to Teutates 'the people's god' by drowning in a vat.<sup>8</sup> The second function mode of sacrifice, burning, is regarded as the Celtic counterpart of the Germanic death by wounding (*op.cit.*: 134-35). The later sources from medieval Irish literature echo the same practice in the well-known accounts of the Threefold Death (cf. Sayers: 107). All of the comparisons from Germanic and Celtic accounts point back through time toward an inherited Indo-European sacrificial practice solidly integrated into a larger, pervasive tripartite ideology.

#### **Archaic Structures Observed in a Folktale**

If we accept that comparative evidence, often wide-ranging, can be deployed to shed light on individual items within a specific culture, it is worthwhile re-examining the formulae contained in ATU 20C in the context of the foregoing comparisons. Relative to the variations in the 'events' of the story, we have noted that the 'formula' column has remained relatively stable. The question, of course, is what relation the formulae, which are all expressed through the sensory modalities (visual, auditory, tactile), can have to the cataclysmic events in the tale, or to an inherited tripartite ideology. Bruce Lincoln has outlined a system of homologies between macrocosm and microcosm among Indo-European speaking peoples relating to the human body, cosmology, the elements, the senses, etc. that provides at least a partial answer. In this scheme the heavens, the first-function realm, are identified with the upper body; the sun and the eye being 'the two orbs involved in the act of vision' are regularly associated in Indo-European cultures, as witnessed by the derivation of OIr. *súil* 'eye' from a form of IE \**sāwel-* 'sun' and cf. the passage from RV 10.16.3 above. Homological links

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<sup>8</sup> For Esus, Taranis, Teutates see Puhvel 1987: 168-72

between the acoustic sense and the earth are less clearly represented, but have been advanced as part of a set comprising the other four senses (Lincoln: 12). The final cataclysm as portrayed with its violation of the boundaries maintaining the natural order in the older Irish sources describes the tumultuous and dramatic acoustic effect (*in fúaim ⁊ in fothrom, in sestán ⁊ sésilbi*)<sup>9</sup> of the heavens falling onto the earth, or of the earth itself ‘quaking or splitting as the underworld thrusts upwards’ (Sayers: 104-105). Although the place of the tactile sense is not clearly stated for the tripartite system, the fact that physical contact with the approaching catastrophe in the modern folktales occurs with the back(side) or feet, i.e. the lower part of the body, reveals clear links with the concepts of the third function and its attendant homologies.

Early Irish cosmological structure as encoded in the oath formulae appears relatively straightforward, since it is limited to a world routinely accessed by the senses. However the presence of the underworld god Donn (and Crom with his like characteristics) in the modern folktale variants raises further possibilities regarding structure, at least for Celtic cosmology. Put simply, does the folktale suggest a broader cosmological structure than that contained in the perceptible triad, and if so, how would it relate to the earlier proposed structures? A useful theoretical construct, based on Dumézil’s work, has been developed by N.J. Allan where a fourth function (F4), characterised by ‘Otherness’ and ‘possessing not only a negative but also a positive aspect’ is proposed (Allen 1996: 13; 2000: 105-106, 129-40). Lyle (1980; 1990: 1-5), also proposes a fourth category along with the classical triad, which consists of a representation of the whole added to the three components, drawing on examples from Ireland and Rome.

In cosmological terms, the Celtic Otherworld, appropriately represented by Donn, the king of the dead, would be the obvious choice for a fourth function, since, in the god’s own words (*Cucum dom thig tíssaid uili / iar bar n-écaibh* ‘to me, to my house you shall all come after your

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<sup>9</sup> Both alternating pairs are formulaic. The first is still routinely drawn on in Scottish Gaelic folktales to describe the approach of a giant. The second appears in various MS versions of the *Táin*, and elsewhere (DIL ‘S’: 199-200).

deaths') it represents the whole as being the inevitable destination of all classes of society. Remnants of cosmological belief among the Celts are also easily compatible with the positive and negative aspects of a fourth function existing outside the sphere of mortality and day-to-day perception. As we have seen, two otherworlds are described: *Mag Mell*, with its pleasant, non-transitory aspects, and the obscure 'kingdom of Dīs' / *Tech Duinn*. It is these traditions, ultimately surviving from Indo-European ideology, that can best account for the otherwise curious presence of the pre-Christian theonyms Crom and Donn in the Clanranald variants of the folktale.

### **Folklore and Comparative Mythology**

The above comparisons from the Celtic world, and from the Indo-European world of 2-4 millennia earlier, indicate that we have a folktale containing particular corresponding items, additionally supported by structural correspondences, that are recognizable as part of an established conceptual framework for Indo-European society, mythology, and cosmology. The survival of extremely archaic cosmological themes and formulaic representations, all located within a recognised structure, also of great antiquity, leads to larger theoretical issues that have been with us since the beginnings of the study of the folktale. In a time where the historical aspects of folklore are receiving less attention than in the past, ATU 20C, on the basis of the comparisons above, would seem to be one of the most remarkable examples known of the kind of historical survival over extended periods of time termed 'gesunkenes Kulturgut', bringing to mind the Grimm Brothers romantic and widely discredited nineteenth century view of vernacular folktales as being 'broken-down myths' (Thompson: 368-72). This leads to the next question: over what length of time can the oral transmission of identifiable cultural items occur with little or no support from written sources? To my knowledge there are no written Gaelic versions of ATU 20C surviving from before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The older Irish formulae gathered by Sayers have an obvious bearing on the modern tale in their specific contents as well as in the wider contexts of cosmological belief that they represent, but there is no evidence of manuscript transmission from medieval times

that would have accounted for the characteristics of the recent vernacular variants. We should note, in fact, that the latter contain associated features such as the formulaic presence of sensory modalities associated with the classic functions, as well as otherworld theonyms, that are not associated with the cosmological triad in manuscript sources but are consistent with the body of archaic Celtic and Indo-European cosmological belief. Further examples of medieval or ancient materials appearing in oral traditions recorded during the twentieth century include patrician legends from Ireland (Ford 1983); William Hansen's (2002) work on modern international tales and their earlier variants in classical sources; Albert Lord's noting of similarities between the Serbo-Croatian 'Return Song' and the *Odyssey* of Homer, raising the possibility of a 'continuous tradition of Return Songs in the Balkans from at least Homeric times'; and broader questions of continuity posed by Lord through analytic comparisons of formulae and other narrative features in modern and ancient Greece (Foley: 44, 50).

For the comparative mythologist, the Goidelic evidence from various periods lends support to the concept of an identifiable cosmic structure at some stage in Common Indo-European times. We have seen that the concept of a tripartite cosmos containing the descending realms of heaven, earth and sea and corresponding to Dumézil's three ideological functions is widely distributed in the Indo-European world, and is intimately linked to ideas of cosmic order, eschatology, sacrifice and medical doctrine. The modern folktale materials reinforce William Sayers' views, and in various of their aspects suggest additions to the incomplete picture available to us from written medieval sources. For folklorists the Gaelic variants of ATU 20C can serve to demonstrate that identifiable cosmological traditions of extreme antiquity are capable of surviving through oral transmission unto our own lifetime. In a folktale tradition of the extent and depth as that shared between Ireland and Scotland, we can look forward to further basic research and interpretation as likely to reveal much more concerning the historical significance of modern tales, and having a bearing on the analysis of traditions that existed centuries ago in medieval times, or millennia ago in prehistory. It is evident from our study that the materials available do not

lend themselves easily to analysis, nor to neat and tidy formulations, but the methodical use of modern folklore materials to investigate ancient narratives and belief systems, though in its infancy, is well placed to develop.

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