

A Myth in Folktale Clothing?

Karen Bek-Pedersen
University of Edinburgh

In this article it is argued that folktales may hold key information pertaining to pre-Christian traditions in Northern Europe. Through cautious application of the comparative method it is made evident that a number of 19th-century Irish folktales concerning Balor have much in common with 13th-century Danish tradition regarding Balderus. Although the Danish and Irish sources each make their own sense of the narrative in question, the closely matching details appear to reveal that they share a common root.

This article is in many ways a follow-up to two previous articles (Bek-Pedersen 2006a and 2006b) that deal with some of the same material. It concerns the substantial narrative complexes that surround, on the one hand, the Irish characters Lug and Balor, Welsh Lleu and, on the other hand, the Norse god Baldr whose name in Danish tradition has been latinised as Balderus.

The parallels that can be (and have been) drawn between the story of Balor and that of Baldr are not only numerous, they are also bewilderingly complex (Rooth 1961: 90-161; Bek-Pedersen 2006a: 6-11). An etymological link between the two names Baldr and Balor may be possible but what really connects them is their strikingly similar death stories and the clear parallels in the descriptions of the characters that participate in the plots (Bek-Pedersen 2006a: 6). These parallels are undoubtedly clear although they are by no means easy to sum up or explain in a succinct and coherent manner. Connecting lines are criss-crossing each other in all directions and on several levels, and the results achieved through comparisons between the separate yet similar traditions vary significantly depending on the character or motif in focus. Therefore, casting the net as widely as I am going to do here, looking to include Irish, Icelandic and Danish traditions, necessarily makes for a high degree of complexity if all aspects are taken into account. However, my present focus will be

limited to just one part of the larger story complex, namely the birth story.¹ This is a good example of how a narrative can be held in oral tradition for a significant length of time and still remain very much the same.

The starting point for the present exploration are the 19th century Irish folktales concerning Lug and Balor. There are several versions (Curtin 1894; Gruffydd 1928; Larminie 1893), all of which follow the same basic pattern: The evil but invulnerable Balor steals a special cow from a blacksmith; Balor's daughter is kept away from men because it is prophesied that her son will kill Balor, yet under peculiar circumstances she gives birth to a son who later kills Balor with an impossible weapon made by the blacksmith.

In particular two of the folktales are of interest because they contain rather similar accounts of how the boy whose birth Balor tries to prevent is actually born. The first one, *Balor of the evil eye and Lui Lavada his grandson*, is found in Curtin (1894: 296-311):

The evil Balor is the leader of the pirating Lochlin who come to Ireland to fight against the Fir Bolg. Balor steals a particular cow from the blacksmith Gavinin Gow and it seems that, because of the theft, he now rules all of Ireland. The theft of this cow forces the smith to abandon his forge so that he can watch over the cow instead of making weapons for the Fir Bolg. The sons of the queen of the Fir Bolg come to get weapons from the blacksmith and they promise to watch over the cow while he works – but the cow escapes. Balor becomes furious and threatens to burn all of Ireland with his evil eye, which destroys everything it looks at. This is a disaster because Balor is invulnerable; the only person who can kill him is his own daughter's son, and even he can only do it with a special spear made by the blacksmith and only in one specific place at one specific time and the spear must go right through Balor's eye. But the queen's sons will not give up and they set out to bring the cow back to the blacksmith. One of the sons, Cian, is made invisible and so is able to get in to the place where Balor's daughter Ethne is kept. Because Cian is invisible, Ethne becomes frightened when she realizes that there is someone there with her and she screams. But Balor, her father, instead

¹It should be noted that Irish tradition includes two different birth stories. The one explored here is found predominantly in the 19th century folktales; the other one is discussed in Bek-Pedersen 2006b.

of showing concern, threatens to kill her if she is not quiet, so she calms down. Cian eventually sleeps with Ethne and he returns nine months later for the child, Lui, that she gives birth to. Cian, without revealing his identity and whilst working for Balor, is aided by Ethne who helps him to get hold of the cow. Now Cian can finally give the cow back to the smith so the smith can make the magical spear for the boy Lui, and Lui, who has grown up in the meantime, can kill Balor with the spear just as Balor is opening his evil eye to burn all of Ireland.

The second version I want to include here is found in Gruffydd (1928: 72-74):

The robber Balor lived on Tory Island; he had one eye on his forehead and one on the back of his head. He stole a cow from three brothers on the mainland. Because it had been foretold that his grandson would kill him, Balor kept his daughter Ethnea confined in a tower with twelve other women. One of the brothers, dressed as a woman, gained access to Ethnea and slept with her. Later, she bore three sons, whom Balor drowned, but one escaped. The brothers brought up the surviving boy to be a smith. Balor killed the boy's father, but when he had grown, the boy, Lug, killed Balor by thrusting an iron bar into his eyes.

The folktales quite clearly relate to the older Irish material concerning *Cath Maige Tuired*, the Second Battle of Moytura, a battle of eschatological dimensions that shows the gods, the Túatha Dé Danann, in fierce combat against the monstrous Fomoiré who have taken over Ireland. The long story of this battle carries strong indications of belonging to a pre-Christian Irish mythology though it has probably undergone some changes in order to survive a millennium or more into the Christian period; how the story was told by the pagan peoples of Ireland is something we will never know. The two manuscripts that contain the story of *Cath maige Tuired* are both from the first half of the 16th century and the differences between them are marginal to the topic at hand. The following is summarised from Gray (1982):

The Túatha Dé Dannan made an alliance with the Fomoiré wherein Balor of the Fomoiré gave his daughter Ethne to Cían of the Túatha Dé Dannan. Ethne later bore the glorious child Lug Samhildánach who was skilled in all the arts. But the alliance between the two sides breaks down and the narrative continues with a detailed account of the

battle that ensues. Lug arrives among the Túatha Dé Dannan to fight against Balor. Balor has an eye which paralyses those he looks at, but Lug puts out the eye with a shot from his sling. Balor dies and the Túatha Dé Dannan win the battle.

The sling-shot provides a small but significant detail, firstly because Lug is otherwise always associated with a spear and secondly because the sling-shot is so reminiscent of the biblical story of David and Goliath (Ó hÓgáin 1991: 44). The sling is Lug's weapon in both versions of *Cath Maige Tuired* but they are the only sources to connect Lug with a sling, all other sources connect him with a spear (Davidson 1993: 59; MacKillop 2004: 306).² It is the spear that is Lug's special weapon, and it is a spear that we find also in the folktales. It seems as if the learned manuscript tradition has added this biblical gloss to the story whereas the folk tradition has maintained the original attribute. What is interesting about this is that it might indicate that the folktales could hold more keys to the pre-Christian mythology than we sometimes believe them to do.

The birth of the glorious child Lug and the theft of cattle are very minor points in the extant versions of the mythological battle – these accounts emphasise the battle itself, describing everything pertaining to it in great detail in that very characteristic Irish way which can significantly extend a story. But in the folktales the situation is almost reversed so that the circumstances surrounding the birth of Lug and the theft of the cow take up most of the narrative, with the actual battle taking up a relatively small part. It is this birth story that is interesting in the present context.

Irish tradition on its own does not allow us to discover much more about the birth of Lug, we just have these 19th century folktales. But that the story has at least a few more centuries behind it becomes clear if we involve some comparative material from Norse tradition, namely the story-complex surrounding the Old Norse god Baldr.

The myth of Baldr, too, is part of a rather complex body of narrative material that is difficult to sum up briefly, especially because the Danish and Icelandic traditions differ widely from

²The spear of Lug ensured victory in battle and was one of the four treasures of the Túatha Dé Dannan. One of Lug's by-names, Lamfada 'Of the long arm / hand', suggests a power to wield weapons over distance; both spear and sling would fit in with this.

each other. Yet, it is evident that the Danish and Icelandic traditions on the one hand and the Irish and Welsh sets of stories on the other relate to each other in some sort of way. Whereas the Irish material is fairly consistent in telling the same story of how the heroic Lug kills the evil but invulnerable Balor, the Norse material presents very different versions of the Baldr-myth that do not look as if they are immediately compatible.³

The best-known versions of the Baldr-story are the Icelandic ones from 13th and 14th century manuscripts of the *Edda*.⁴ This story is told in three poetic sources:

In the eddic poem *Völuspá* 31-33 it is said that the mistletoe became a deadly missile when Höðr threw it at Baldr. Baldr's brother Váli will be born to avenge him. Váli, when he is but one night old, will carry Höðr to the funeral pyre (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998: 10-11).

In the eddic poem *Baldrs draumar*, Baldr has sinister dreams foreboding evil. Óðinn, Baldr's father, goes to consult a long-dead seeress in the underworld. Concealing his identity, Óðinn draws information from her. She says that Baldr will die at the hands of Höðr and that Váli, yet unborn son of Rindr and Óðinn, will avenge him when just one night old (Gísli Sigurðsson 1998: 380-383).

Also a stanza by the *skáld* Kormákr, found in *Skáldskaparmál* of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* refers to the story, stating that Yggr (a *heiti* or by-name for Óðinn) won Rindr by magic (Faulkes 1998: 9).

These three sources give clear indications of a revenge motif attached to the Baldr myth and are consistent in their employment of the names in that revenge motif: Óðinn, Váli and Rindr. In particular the allusion to Óðinn's employment of magic in order to win over Rindr is of interest but also the insistence that Váli will kill Höðr at an extremely young age could be taken to explain the curious time-lag in the Irish folktale where Lui seems to grow up very quickly.⁵

³Their compatibility becomes apparent when the focus is shifted away from the portrayals of individual characters to the more general themes of the narrative (Lindow 1997: 20-28).

⁴Of the material cited here, *Völuspá* is found in the manuscript Gks 2365 4to from c. 1270, *Baldrs draumar* in AM 748 I 4to from c. 1300-1325, and Kormákr's stanza in, amongst others, Gks 2367 4to of *Skáldskaparmál* from c. 1300-1350.

⁵In Curtin's version, a longer time period is inserted into the folktale at this

A fourth version of the Baldr myth is told in *Gylfaginning* 49 of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and this is possibly the best known version of them all. The reason I am not including *Gylfaginning* here is that that version of the story does not contain the part which I am presently interested in – it goes off in a different direction after Baldr dies.⁶

The Danish version is known from the 13th century Latin work by Saxo Grammaticus: *Gesta Danorum*, book 3.⁷ In the present context, it is exactly the Danish story of Balderus (the Latin version of Baldr's name) that is interesting. My focus at present is a part of the story which often comes into Baldr-scholarship only as an aside, namely the account of the birth of Balderus' avenger.⁸

The long (and long-winded) story told by Saxo goes as follows:

The hero Hotherus and the evil Balderus are rivals for the kingship of Denmark and for the hand of the beautiful Nanna. Balderus, who is a son of the god Othinus, cannot be killed except by a special sword which it is near impossible to obtain. Yet, Hotherus manages to gain possession of the sword and eventually he kills Balderus.

This is followed by the revenge story, and Saxo devotes a significant amount of attention to the account of how Bous, the avenger, is born:

After Balderus is killed, Othinus is told that Rinda will bear him a son who will avenge Balderus. Othinus sets out, disguising himself, and tries to gain access to the girl by

point, allowing Lui to grow up, although it is simultaneously maintained that Balor is just about to destroy all of Ireland.

⁶The relevance of each version is obviously dependent on the focus of any given study of Baldr but I disagree with those who rely solely on the *Gylfaginning* version. There is no evidence that this is the authoritative version, it is simply the account that is best known to most modern scholars. There is a danger of skewing our findings if we decide to read all other accounts through Snorri's, as though it constituted a checklist for the Baldr myth. The mere fact that Snorri's revenge story concerns only Loki and not Höðr whilst bearing absolutely no resemblance to the remaining Icelandic sources is in itself noteworthy.

⁷The textual transmission of Saxo's work relies almost entirely on the 1514 edition printed in Paris (Friis-Jensen 1987: 12). However, medieval manuscript fragments do not differ substantially from the printed text and it is generally assumed that the Paris edition reflects its medieval exemplar with a high degree of accuracy (Friis-Jensen 1987: 12; Boserup 1981: 13-14).

⁸John Lindow (1997: 152-157), however, does give it a lot of attention in his book on Baldr.

working for her father but without any luck. On Rinda's third refusal of him he strikes her with a rune-staff so that she becomes like a mad person. He then approaches her father one final time. Dressed as a woman and claiming to know the art of healing, he tells her father that he can cure Rinda, but that she must be tied down to her bed due to the strong medication. While she is thus unable to resist and her father has turned his back and left her, Othinus rapes her. The son later born by Rinda is Bous.⁹ He proves a very keen fighter, and Othinus summons him to avenge his brother's death. Bous later kills Hotherus, although he himself dies from his wounds on the same occasion.

Thus, we see that there is a rather high degree of similarity between the birth stories attached to Lui and Bous: 1) The woman whom it is almost impossible for the man to get near to. 2) The employment of magic, disguise and deception in order to get into her abode. 3) The way in which her father (unwittingly) compels his daughter to submit to the man's sexual advances. 4) The fact that the man later on summons his son to carry out the deed that he was born to perform – to *avenge* Balderus or Baldr, or to *kill* Balor.¹⁰

The correspondences between the two Irish folktales summarised above and the Danish account given by Saxo are rather close and, I would argue, so close that it does seem as if we are looking at different versions of what is in fact the very same story. I mean 'story' in the most general sense but I do believe that the Irish and Danish strains present us with stories of a somewhat different nature, which brings up the tricky issue of the terminology alluded to in the title of this article. When is a myth a myth and when is it a folktale? The distinction I wish to make is simply that a myth is a form of meta-narrative often concerning gods whilst a folktale is more of an 'ordinary' narrative often concerning humans (Raudvere 2002: 40-41). Myths, as stories about gods, are almost by definition attached to a belief system and, in the case of the present material, a non-Christian belief system. Myth and folktale can overlap significantly in terms of plot, and often they do, but the folktale

⁹The names Bous and Váli bear no relationship to each other. It is clear that the characters fulfil the same role in the story complex and the reason for this shift in names is obscure.

¹⁰Arguably, Lug Samhildánach is also an avenger because his killing of Balor can be seen to avenge the death of Nuadu Argatlam, leader of the Túatha Dé Dannan whom Balor kills during the battle of Mag Tuired.

lacks the magnitude that is present in the myth. If Jack overcomes the giant then this is beneficial for Jack, at most for the whole kingdom; if a god overcomes a monster this has an impact on the entire universe. Whereas the tale about Baldr is therefore clearly a myth (his death is followed by the Old Norse eschatology, Ragnarök), the tale about Lui and Balor is ‘merely’ a folktale.¹¹ The tale about Balderus appears, in fact, to fall somewhere in between.¹²

The birth story discussed here is attached to narrative complexes that display a significant amount of correspondences: the Balor story and the Baldr story (Rooth 1961: 90-161; Bek-Pedersen 2006a). Although the Celtic and Norse sources each make their own sense of the birth story, it does not appear coincidental that the story occurs in comparable contexts.

It should be also added that the differences between the traditions are as intriguing as the similarities and that we cannot equate the story complexes as such or argue that they are truly the same. It is clear, though, that the stories discussed here each make sense in their respective traditions; Baldr, Balderus and Balor share significant traits but by no means are

¹¹Exactly where the line should be drawn between these two terms, both of which are, of course, modern and as such are never used in the sources themselves, is not easy to determine. Nor is there any complete scholarly agreement regarding this issue, certainly not on an interdisciplinary level; at best, the borderline takes the form of a grey area.

¹²Some of the differences between the Danish and Icelandic traditions is due to the different cultural climates characterising the two countries in the early medieval period. Whereas Icelandic tradition was concerned with the preservation of the old vernacular poetry for younger generations of poets (probably in connection with the fact that Icelanders had a reputation for being the best poets among the Scandinavians and the fact that Iceland lost its independence to the Norwegian crown in 1262-1264, thus spurring on a surge of interest in the Icelandic national self-image), Saxo was commissioned by the king and archbishop of Denmark to write for his fellow countrymen a national history that would prove to other nations that Denmark was their equal (cf. Friis-Jensen 2000: 98-101). To some extent, this accounts for the more sympathetic attitude towards the heathen gods in early Christian Iceland: the prime aim was to preserve the knowledge and therefore preserve the mythology. In early medieval Denmark, Saxo could not very well express much sympathy towards the heathen gods, and we also note that his most detailed descriptions of heathendom are deferred to areas outside of, or at least on the outskirts of, the contemporary national boundaries of Denmark (Friis-Jensen 1994: 216-219; Friis-Jensen 2000: 101).

they exactly equal to each other. The Irish Lug or Lui is born under peculiar circumstances so that he can kill the evil Balor; the Norse Bous or Váli is born under the same peculiar circumstances so that he can avenge the evil Balderus, or the good Baldr. Explaining the similarities does not seem overly difficult, they may be due to a common root or to cultural interaction over a period of time. Explaining the differences, however, would be a much more demanding task though also probably a much more interesting one; if the similarities are genuine, then how do we account for the very significant points at which the traditions deviate from each other? I leave the question open.

It is, however, not impossible that the parallels drawn here could potentially be due to other things than the tenacity of oral memory (it cannot, for example, be ruled out that the story known from later Irish tradition has come from Saxo) but with the source material available to us it is as difficult to disprove as it is to prove a direct connection. What I have presented above is merely based on observing what is found in the sources and should not be taken as absolutely conclusive.

The plots of the stories about the birth of Lui and the birth of Bous are really very similar. Exactly what this tells us about Irish mythological tradition potentially rearing its head disguised as the stuff of folktales is hard to say, but it does seem to tell us that this particular 19th century folktale has a depth of some 6-7 centuries behind it. It is tempting to take a fresh look at Irish folktales with this in mind. The point of this article has been to draw attention to the fact that comparative methods of working with mythology and folklore can be very fruitful as long as it is done with due caution. As for the many folktales and folktale motifs for which no proper comparative material can be found to prove their potentially substantial time depth, we simply cannot tell how old they truly are.

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