

Legends of Hair: Tracing the Tonsorial Story of Indo-European King and Hero

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The particular legend (or legend-segment, or motif) I am concerned with in this short study is odd even by legendary standards (whatever they might be) but this legend has a fairly wide distribution in the fund of Indo-European sources. Since it involves or refers to beards and facial hair, as well as head hair, it resonates in a much wider imaginal field identifying corporal (somatic) “signs” or markers, and this is one area I have already, to some extent, explored (see Miller 1998, on “heroic hair”). Contained within this theme we also have contrasting visions or versions of the King and the Warrior-Hero and it also is implicated in an important area involving the cooperation and/or opposition between these two “powerful” figures in the Indo-European thought world (and widely, of course, elsewhere, in other traditions). The legendary theme (which, as my title states, I am provisionally attaching to the Indo-European mythic theater) is this: “The story of the ogre with the mantle made from the beards of kings.”

This theme has, to my present knowledge, three identifiable narrative loci: (1) in several places in the medieval and later Celtic and related materials, especially in the ramified Legend of Arthur; (2) in the Ossete “Nart” tales (especially of interest to us because of other thematic resemblances and possible connections between the Celtic and these Caucasian cultural contexts, resemblances and connections which were already commented on some years ago by Georges Dumézil), and finally (3) in a Scandinavian (Norse) refraction of the theme, contained in a particularly wild and wooly fictional narrative, and intriguing not only in its appearance in this northern “edition” of the theme named but because of what appear to be other thematic and incidental borrowings from other Celtic sources found in this specific (but imaginatively reconstructed, that is, as it is formed from disparate sub-themes and segments) Norse narrative or story.

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The Stories Themselves

(1). The Arthurian citations already show some variations on the basic theme. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regem Britannie* (x.3) has Arthur himself boasting of how a giant named Retho (elsewhere called Rhita) had demanded Arthur's beard with menaces, to add to those royal beards that already decorated his cloak or mantle, but Arthur defeated the monster and took *his* beard instead.¹ In the *Tristan* of Thomas of Britain the defeated ogrish figure is called Orgillos (the "angry one"?), while at a distance, in a late, 16th century song from what is termed the Elizabethan "Arthurian Revival," *King Ryence's Challenge*, it is one Ryence, called the King of North Wales, who claims Arthur's beard but who doesn't get it (Hodder 1999: 74). The beard-hunting ogre or giant appears as well in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (Vinaver 1947: 120-121) and even in a redaction of the Merlin legend (Hodder 1999: 299, fn. 11). We might call the theme distinctly variable in described detail, but well attested in terms of its main narrative components.

(2). On the Ossete evidence collected from this central Caucasian people by a number of scholars, including, of course, Dumézil himself and V. I. Abaev, my specific citation has to do with the "Nart" hero Soslan (also often called Sosyrko), a legendary hero and gallant who wants to impress the young ladies with a mantle trimmed with the scalps and moustaches of his ogrish or monstrous enemies (see Dumézil 1965: 81-83). Claude Sterckx comments on this tale with his usual acuity, recognizing the shift or switch in our base theme: here in Ossetia the hero pursues the ogre or giant with intent to collect scalps rather than the other way around (nor is any king involved) and he also adds that this scalping or sanguinary trophy-taking of a foe's hair was no imaginative flight of fantasy, but was attested to by Herodotus when he described the martial habits of the Scythians, "lointaines ancêtres des Ossètes" and how they dealt with their defeated enemies (Sterckx [forthcoming], citing Heroditus *Historiae*, LIV). The theme of the beard (and the trophy head) is also referred to, again in

¹John Carey (personal communication) suggests that this triumph might be behind Arthur's contemptuous dismissal of Cei's feat in the Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*: Cei's overcoming and beard-hair-plucking of the giant Dillus Farfawg (before Dillus was killed) is lessened and derogated compared to Arthur's own, and in his eyes more significant, victory over an ogrish monster. See Miller, Forthcoming (b).

reversal, in another tale from the same collection of Ossete hero-tales. Here Batradz (Soslan's twinned or complimentary/opposite "Nart" hero, called the "fiery one" of the Ossete legend-narratives) fights, defeats, and takes the head of the Giant with the Multicolored Beard.²

One central problem of the imputed or arguable connection between the Celtic material and that from the central Caucasus was succinctly dealt with or laid out by Dumézil himself (my translation):

"This primary relationship between the Ossetes and the Celts, displayed in terms of important or key characters and a group of themes uncommonly encountered elsewhere, poses large questions: is this a common heritage? Or borrowing? And if there is borrowing, though what intermediaries, in what epoch?" (Dumézil 1978: 90).

I will return to this point in my Conclusion.

(3) The Norse *páttur* or adventure-tale (one of the collected *lygisögur*, which can be translated either as "legends" or as "lying tales") in which this selected theme is so prominent is *Órvar-Oddr*, "Arrow-Odd," in which the bow-bearing hero, Odd, has as a particular foe (among many foes encountered in the course of the story) the monstrous Ogmund Eythjof's-Killer, who is not just a giant (that is, big and presumably rather stupid) but a great sorcerer as well, a shape-changer supercharged with all sorts of malignant powers—and he is the one who wears the cloak in question.³ We might note that Ogmund, awful as he is, does *not* scalp or, worse, take the heads of kings, but merely demands the royal beard and moustache as a form of tribute: "every twelve months they [the kings east of

²Dumézil 1965: 187. Note that in the Soslan citation, the Nart hero, having defeated his enemy, pronounces him a brave man and says that he won't take his head: "your scalp is enough for me" (83). This enemy ("Eltagan, son of Kutsykk") bears either a Mongol or a Turkish name, that is, Soslan's foe is not patently monstrous, but certainly is regarded as exoteric or Other (83, "Notes").

³In Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Fornadarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. I = *ÖO*; translated by H. Pálsson and P. Edwards in *Seven Viking Romances*, 25-137 = *AO*. On giants, see *AO* 76: "The people of Giantland may be a lot bigger and stronger than any other race, and more handsome than most other people too, but they aren't any more intelligent." The rather neatly assembled *trifunctional* identification, in terms of the well-known Dumézilian theoretical schema, is persuasive here: these giants are prominent and potent in F2 and F3 signs - but somewhat lacking in F1 attributes.

the Baltic] had to send him their beards and moustaches" (*AO*, 89; *ÖO*, 293; here "east of the Baltic" points to Permia or Permland, an area notorious for all sorts of witchcraft and wizardry and weird associations and occurrences, as the more flamboyant Norse adventure-narratives frequently report). Despite what he shows as a remarkably lenient attitude toward his royal victims, Ogmund is sufficiently ugly, evil, murderous and treacherous, and he is a most dangerous enemy to the archer-hero Odd, possessing great, in fact, supernatural powers. In addition to his tribute-bearing hairy cloak, it will be his eventual fate (or, more accurately, his end in the tale) that will interest us here.

King's Beard, Hero's Hair.

In terms of what we might call general impressions, or even descriptions of a set and accepted persona or "image," the king and his beard would seem to fit together quite well.⁴ The beard is certainly an obvious sign of male sexual maturity and, often, assumed authority, though in terms of the royal figure this may often be taken as a covert rather than an overt sign, less significant than the king's more abstracted or symbolic *paternal* situation or imaginal stance. Even so, ordinary (or chronological, essentially secular) human maturation is often set aside, ignored, or obscured in the king's case; we have, for example, the contradictory images of the "ever-young" king who is simultaneously "old in wisdom" (Miller 1971: 649-650). Then the iconic *childless* king (named as "father of his people") can, in ritual or acclamatory terms, be set against the nearly universal (and traditional) demand that the king represent or possess, along with his other powers, some sort of ongoing, impelling force or guarantee of fertility (and we can encounter the most vehement strictures against the acceptance of royal sexual neutrality or the deprivation of his potency, by way of any loss of sexual function by wounds or any other cause, including, of course, the "natural" ageing process).⁵ The royal beard (and any free male's beard) most certainly has been seen

⁴*Vide* the ordinary deck of playing cards, or the American comic strip called "The Wizard of Id," with its miniature royal tyrant (whose features in fact much resemble those of the King in the deck of cards). Also, for those whose memories stretch that far, Otto Soglow's old "The Little King" a Hearst paper comic.

⁵Though this is closely associated with the idea that the king must be physically whole, "undamaged" - has his sight, for example.

to have numenal, possibly quasi-religious, and even magical potency, as frequently noted in our I-E sources, and we see this in cases of oaths sworn on, or by, the beard, or on the other side of the coin by insults devised and made by his enemies to attack an individual's essential identity (by touching or pulling this individual's beard or even, merely, commenting on it in derogatory terms).⁶ What we might call the final or sempiternal identification of king and his royal (or imperial) beard would be visible in the old image of the "ideal" or perfect monarch, the mature but *ageless* "Sleeping King," who waits for his people's call, as Charlemagne does in some concealed place, while his mighty beard grows, we would say magically, right through a marble table (see Morrissey 1997: 21). We do not have to go far to see that the royal honor and identity, and so by extension an identification of the communal honor and identity of his people and realm, can certainly be bound up in his beard, and so by extension any insult to this beard, or even more any attempt to remove it entirely is that much graver, more portentous, and more symbolically dangerous.

The contrast we see set against the hirsute mark (or "sign") of the warrior-hero is usually clearly visible. Again, the question of how the results of the ordinary somatic process of maturation are viewed enters here early on and we have a continuing enigma, that is, of the phenomenon of the extraordinarily precocious hero who may arrive at his storied physical prime, as displayed in his successful combat with rivals or enemies, before he has even left the state of being "a beardless boy", that is, he is seen as an adolescent and even still in his *early*, sexually immature, adolescence.⁷ Heroic *head-hair*, usually but not always, is much more of a significant marker than is the beard of full male maturity, and this is the case from the time (or myth-time) of the "long-haired Achaians" of the *Iliad*, or of Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata* with his "long and plentiful" hair (Miller 1998: 42, and fn. 4). The *chevelure* of the warrior is often intertwined with explicit and "natural"

⁶See the notorious case, as reported by Livy, of the Gaulish warrior who touched the beard of the seated, motionless Roman senator Marcus Papirius (evidently thinking him an image) during the Gaulish invasion of Rome; the old Roman reacted violently, thus betraying his humanity, and the slaughter of all the older men who had stayed behind in the city (rather than moving into the Citadel) followed: Livy: V.xli.8-10; see also fn. 7, below.

⁷The youth Connla, who fought (and was killed by) his father, Cú Chulainn, is described as "without beard or pubic hair" in "Aided óenfir Aife", §5.

animal associations (and my colleague Will Sayers would see vegetative or floral associations as well, with grass, bushes, tree-branches and the like: see Sayers 1991: 155) and this long and florescent hair, either wild, or tamed and dressed, is an appropriate adjunct to and mark of this figure, eventually if paradoxically merging him, in his own sexual identity and gender, with the feminine, the virginal and thus the sexually *potential*.

I say that the beard *usually* is less important as the mark of the hero-warrior, but I am pleased to note that, in the most recent issue of the journal *Emania*, P. K. Ford argues that in the case of the warriors of Ulster, of the Ulaid, the wearing of the beard was evidently obligatory, both for the king (Conchobor boasted “a forked beard, very curly, golden yellow”) and also for those warriors of the Ulaid like Fergus, who had “a thick, forked beard” and Sencha mac Ailella “A bright and very curly beard, forked and tapering...” and so on.⁸ More, the warriors of Ulster who didn’t actually *have* beards were forced to wear false beards (made of grey wool) when they took part in the Battle of Oenach Macha (Ford 2006: 68-69), evidently to show that they were true, mature, and immediately recognizable Ulstermen, that is, “the bearded ones.” Finally, it was the beardlessness of their young champion Cú Chulainn that proved that he was *not* actually of the Ulaid (and so was proof against the curse that had been laid on them).⁹ Sayers has argued (and Ford generally accepts this assertion) that it was likely that “the cut of the hair and beard may also have signaled tribal affiliation” in Iron Age Ireland (Sayers 1991: 188). No one has yet identified any specific tribal “cuts” or coiffures (or anything like the exaggerated and even bizarre hair-styles that Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus had described for certain German tribes, that is for the warriors of the Suebi, the Alemanni, and some others) but we might tentatively accept that such tonsorial “cuts” and differentiations did exist in old Ireland (see Miller

⁸Ford, “Ul na n-Ulad. Ethnicity and Identity in the Ulster Cycle,” 70-71, quoting the *Táin*, both Recension I and the Book of Leinster versions. In the same issue of this journal see Sayers’s description of the bearded hero Conall Cernach: Sayers 2006: 76.

⁹Ford also cites a poem included in the Yellow Book of Lecan, in which one of the “characteristics and prohibitions” of the beard is that the wearer should not “mock” or “beard” others nor allow his own beard to be mocked: Ford 2006: 72.

1998: 53).¹⁰

We are, at any rate, taken back to and engaged with the complex of heroic or kingly facial hair, leaving behind such associated “signs” or variations (in respect to the male head) as baldness or tonsure (always ambiguous—a condition both for derogation and as a sign of honorable and even powerful status) and the substitution of the cutting of the hair (or of some sort of scalping) for actual, fatal decapitation. The beardlessness of *most* warrior-heroes seems accepted and assured and can even have a semi-comic resonance in certain hero-tales.¹¹

Parsing the Legend

We can quickly identify a triad of figures involved in the normative working out of our theme: the ogrish or monstrous figure, the king-victim, and an interfering hero-warrior. The Ossete evidence removes the king; these sources from the central Caucasus have no kings inserted into or made part of the “Nart” political or ideological structure, and in analyzing the tales for their trifunctional content and associations Dumézil found and used the group of “intelligent ones” or the “guardians of tradition,” the *nomarchs* among the Narts (the Alægataë) as figures using or representing the exercise of sovereignty (that is, F1; see Dumézil 1968: 462ff.). The “Nart” heroes Soslan (and Batradz as well) go directly after gigantic or ogrish enemies to get their beards (taking the giant’s spectacular multicolored beard along with his head, in Batradz’s case) and so they eliminate the middleman; the two heroes act simply in pursuit of dramatic proofs of their own reputation and their heroic prowess. The *normative* narrative has the ogre/giant possessed of both the malignant will and the supernatural force to take from kings the somatic sign of their “paternal” overlordship and even of their sovereignty and so to reduce their honor and to shame their manhood (and, in the

¹⁰ Editor’s note: Just such evidence has recently come to life. An Irish bog-body from Clonycavan, Co. Meath, bears a hairstyle very close to the Suebian knot type found on Scandinavian bog-burials (JPM).

¹¹ Referring to the Balkan (Christian Serb) tale included in the Marko Kraljevi cycle, “The Wedding of Prince Marko,” where the “Bulgarian girl” whom Marko will eventually wed tells the importunate Venetian “Duke” (Doge) that she wants “a breadless young man” and not a bearded (old) man for a bridegroom, whereupon the too-eager old Venetian has his beard shaved off, but to no avail (Pennington/Levi: 41).

Norse tale, in fact, to do this serially, every twelve months).

The role of the hero (most clearly shown in the Celtic-Arthurian and the associated or derived Norse examples) is to counter or ignore the supernatural force of the supernatural or monstrous figure, defeat him (or it), and salve the honor of the king and so of the realm he rules. The lesson seems to be that the ogre-magician has overreached himself, and has intruded into an area where simple physical force (heroic force, the exercise of the heroic *mètier*) can in its turn reduce and defeat his ambition and re-balance the political and social scenario, bringing the polity (the microcosmos) back into equilibrium, and putting or forcing magical (non-human) power back into its proper place. How to do this? Heroes (of the epic marque) of course are not supposed to have magical or supernatural powers, though they may wield magical weapons or have cloaks (or helmets) of invisibility or the like (and we recall that so-called “invulnerable,” and thus, arguably, immortal, heroes are never completely secure in this state, as we see in the well known instances of Siegfried and Achilles or, for that matter, the case of the Ossete “fiery” Nart hero, Batradz: see Miller, forthcoming [a]). As for the tales of Arthur’s defeat of the beard-hunting ogre (whatever this monster may have been named), I think that there is no doubt that when Arthur is victorious over his ogrish foe he is *not* acting as a king, but as a warrior-hero (or possibly as a war-king).¹² King Arthur’s “doubled” or ambiguous nature or character, especially the young Arthur (who in the Welsh *Triads* is called an obsessive womanizer, a Red Ravager, a scurrilous bard, and other quite uncomplimentary things) is not infrequently underlined in the early Welsh elements of his legend (see Miller 1989).

This brings us to the Norse *þátrr*. The main frame of the tale is completely coherent with our central theme: the hero Arrow-Odd defeats the ogrish being who possesses that bearded mantle, presumably freeing “the kings east of the Baltic” from their yearly barbering and consequent humiliation. However, in this narrative Ogmund Eythjof’s-Killer was not through with Arrow-Odd, nor Odd with him; the hero continues to pursue the monster, and in a gruesome scene Odd seizes Ogmund just

¹²The “King Ryence” episode, which is worth further investigation, would seem to have the King of North Wales engaged in overreaching as well, and again Arthur falls back into a warrior-hero posture in order to bring Ryence low.

as the sorcerer was disappearing into the ground; Odd grasps Ogmund's beard and jerks it, tearing off the beard and most of his face "right down to the bone" (AO 91; ÖO, 296). What is striking here is the similarity of this incident with two episodes in the Welsh "Arthurian" tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*: here we must note the final fate of Ysbadadden Chief-Giant, who is also "shaved" of "his beard, and his flesh and skin right down to the bone" (Ford 1977: 157, Bromwich and Evans 42, ll. 1235-1236); and also the tale's scene involving the ogre-giant Dillus Farfawg, in which Cei knocks the giant Dillus into a hole in the ground and then takes from him the beard-hairs that will allow the Quest to go on (Ford 1977: 150; Bromwich and Evans: 34, ll. 959-960).¹³

"Arrow-Odd" is a long, rambling and complicated adventure-tale, stuffed with incident, skaldic verse interpolations (in one of which Odd is claimed to have thrown down the old Norse gods and introduced Christianity to a land called Bjalka), and all sorts of other inventions, including an intriguing variation on the *Vater-Söhnes-Kampf*.¹⁴ But the Norse were very open to and welcomed, most especially, the Arthurian materials from the Celtic lands, and I think it very likely that in "the deep history of stories" the "ogre with the cloak made from the beards of kings" came to them by this route, along with some other images specifically borrowed, I believe, from the Welsh quest-tale cited above. Fairly gruesome plot-lines were never particularly offputting to a warlike people who, along the way, had invented the "blood-eagle."

Conclusion

The theme investigated here exposes its three main characters to a final judgment: what is "meant" by the drama of king, ogre, and warrior-hero? What I would conclude is that the king represents, is synecdochal for, the integrity of community

¹³In fact Ogmund returns to the narrative as a sinister masked figure named Quillanus who assumes the rule in Novgorod; again Odd fights him, but neither can overcome the other; Odd eventually decides that his opponent can't be beaten, "being as much a phantom as a man," their quarrel ends, and Ogmund/Quillanus is out of the saga (AO 116-120; ÖO 333-337).

¹⁴See Miller 1994/1996. Odd begat a son on a Giantess on one of his adventures, and the half-giant son, Vigdir, later sought out and encountered him - but this son was killed by Ogmund, not by Odd. Odd later slew Ogmund's son, Svart: see AO 92, ÖO 298. The old father-son pattern and confrontation is skewed in interesting ways here.

and social continuity, and these good things are threatened and even torn down by what amounts to a diabolical assault. The gigantic or ogrish being, though, acts only for himself, not for any community or polity, and it would seem that he can only be conquered in “single combat” (by the ideal individual fighter, the warrior-hero, counting Arthur as such in these particular entries in his wider legend). Furthermore, the Ossetic variation and construction of the theme, with the elision of the king-figure as victim, should probably be taken as showing that this is the most archaic version of the story, noting but setting aside Dumézil’s query regarding the possible early contact between Celt and “Scythian” and what may have been exchanged at that point, or what may have grown separately out of an even older, proto-I-E theme. I might also venture to suggest the working out of a ‘generational’ (or temporal) conflict: the mature (older) king is threatened by a being who is essentially ageless (inhuman), and then is rescued, and his honor redeemed, by a young or younger hero. At any rate, as I think we can agree, “the ogre’s cloak made from the beards of kings” continues to cover and conceal a number of fascinating narrative strands and topics, all worthy of further investigation.

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