

‘ Dea quaedam phantastica’

The Mythology of The British Islands

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“ The religion of the British tribes”, [eloquently set forth by Mr. Elton in his *Origins of English History*] “ has exercised an important influence upon literature. The mediæval romances and the legends which stood for history are full of the ‘ fair humanities’ and figures of its bright mythology. The elemental powers of earth and fire, and the spirits which haunted the waves and streams appear again as kings in the Irish Annals, or as saints and hermits in Wales. The Knights of the Round Table, Sir Kay and Tristrem and the bold Sir Bedivere, betray their mighty origin by the attributes they retained as heroes of romance. It was a goddess, ‘ *Dea quaedam phantastica*’, who bore the wounded Arthur to a peaceful valley. ‘ There was little sunlight on its woods and streams, and the nights were dark and gloomy for want of the moon and stars.’

The Gods of The Gaels

Of the two Celtic races that settled in our islands it is the earlier, the Gaels, that has best preserved its old mythology. It is true that we have in few cases such detailed account of the Gaelic gods as we gain of the Hellenic deities from the Greek poets, of the Indian Devas from the Rig Veda, or of the Norse Æsir from the Eddas. Yet none the less may we draw from the ancient Irish manuscripts quite enough information to enable us to set forth their figures with some clearness.

Just as the Olympians struggled with the Giants, the Æsir fought the Jötuns, and the Devas the Asuras, so there is warfare in the Gaelic spiritual world between two super-human hosts. On one side are ranged the gods of day, light, life, fertility, wisdom, and good ; on the other, the demons of night, darkness, death, barrenness, and evil. The first were the great spirits symbolizing the beneficial aspects of nature and the arts and intelligence of man ; the second were the hostile powers thought to be behind such baneful manifestations as storm and fog, drought and disease. The first are ranged as a divine family round a goddess called Danu, from whom they took their well-known name of *Tuatha Dé Danann*, [1] “ Tribe” or “ Folk of the Goddess Danu”. The second owed allegiance to a female divinity called Domnu ; their king, Indech, is described as her son, and they are all called “ Domnu’s gods”. The word “ Domnu” appears to have signified the abyss or the deep sea, [2] and the same idea is also expressed in their better-known name of “ Fomors”, derived from two Gaelic words meaning “ under sea”. [3] The waste of water seems to have always impressed the Celts with the sense of primeval ancientness ; it was connected in their minds with vastness, darkness, and monstrous births—the very antithesis of all that was symbolized by the earth, the sky, and the sun.

Therefore the Fomors were held to be more ancient than the gods, before whom they were, however, destined to fall in the end. Offspring of “ Chaos and Old Night”, they were, for the most part, huge and deformed. Some had but one arm and one leg apiece, while others had the heads of goats, horses, or bulls. [4] The most famous, and perhaps the most terrible of them all was Balor, whose father is said to have been one Buarainech, that is, the “ cow-faced”, [5] and who combined in himself the two classical rôles of the Cyclops and the Medusa. Though he had two eyes, one was

always kept shut, for it was so venomous that it slew anyone on whom its look fell. This malignant quality of Balor's eye was not natural to him, but was the result of an accident. Urged by curiosity, he once looked in at the window of a house where his father's sorcerers were preparing a magic potion, and the poisonous smoke from the cauldron reached his eye, infecting it with so much of its own deadly nature as to make it disastrous to others. Neither god nor giant seems to have been exempt from its dangers ; so that Balor was only allowed to live on condition that he kept his terrible eye shut. On days of battle he was placed opposite to the enemy, the lid of the destroying eye was lifted up with a hook, and its gaze withered all who stood before it. The memory of Balor and his eye still lingers in Ireland : the " eye of Balor" is the name for what the peasantry of other countries call the " evil eye" ; stories are still told of *Balar Beimann*, or " Balor of the Mighty Blows" ; and " Balor's Castle" is the name of a curious cliff on Tory Island. This island, off the coast of Donegal, was the Fomorian outpost upon earth, their real abode being in the cold depths of the sea.

This rule, however, as to the hideousness of the Fomors had its exceptions. Elathan, one of their chiefs, is described in an old manuscript as of magnificent presence—a Miltonic prince of darkness. " A man of fairest form," it says, " with golden hair down to his shoulders. He wore a mantle of gold braid over a shirt interwoven with threads of gold. Five golden necklaces were round his neck, and a brooch of gold with a shining precious stone thereon was on his breast. He carried two silver spears with rivets of bronze, and his sword was golden-hilted and golden-studded." [6] Nor was his son less handsome. His name was Bress, which means " beautiful", and we are told that every beautiful thing in Ireland, " whether plain, or fortress, or ale, or torch, or woman, or man", was compared with him, so that men said of them, " that is a Bress". [7]

Balor, Bress, and Elathan are the three Fomorian personages whose figures, seen through the mists of antiquity, show clearest to us. But they are only a few out of many, nor are they the oldest. We can learn, however, nothing but a few names of any ancestors of the Gaelic giants. This is equally true of the Gaelic gods. Those we know are evidently not without parentage, but the names of their fathers are no more than shadows following into oblivion the figures they designated. The most ancient divinity of whom we have any knowledge is Danu herself, the goddess from whom the whole hierarchy of gods received its name of Tuatha Dé Danann. She was also called Anu or Ana, and her name still clings to two well-known mountains near Killarney, which, though now called simply " The Paps", were known formerly as the " Paps of Ana". [8] She was the universal mother ; " well she used to cherish the Gods", says the commentator of a ninth-century Irish glossary. [9] Her husband is never mentioned by name, but one may assume him, from British analogies, to have been Bilé, known to Gaelic tradition as a god of Hades, a kind of Celtic Dis Pater from whom sprang the first men. Danu herself probably represented the earth and its fruitfulness, and one might compare her with the Greek Demeter. All the other gods are, at least by title, her children. The greatest of these would seem to have been Nuada, called *Argetlám*, or " He of the Silver Hand". He was at once the Gaelic Zeus, or Jupiter, and their war-god ; for among primitive nations, to whom success in war is all-important, the god of battles is the supreme god. [10] Among the Gauls, Camulus, whose name meant " Heaven", [11] was identified by the Romans with Mars ; and other such instances come readily to the mind. He was possessed of an invincible sword, one of the four chief treasures of the Tuatha Dé Danann, over whom he was twice king ; and there is little doubt that he was one of the most important gods of both the Gaels and the Britons, for his name is spread over the whole of the British

Isles, which we may surmise the Celts conquered under his auspices. We may picture him as a more savage Mars, delighting in battle and slaughter, and worshipped, like his Gaulish affinities, Teutates and Hesus, of whom the Latin poet Lucan tells us, with human sacrifices, shared in by his female consorts, who, we may imagine, were not more merciful than himself, or than that Gaulish Taranis whose cult was “no gentler than that of the Scythian Diana”, and who completes Lucan’s triad as a fit companion to the “pitiless Teutates” and the “horrible Hesus”. [12] Of these warlike goddesses there were five—Fea, the “Hateful”, Nemon, the “Venomous”, Badb, the “Fury”, Macha, a personification of “battle”, and, over all of them, the Morrígú, or “Great Queen”. This supreme war-goddess of the Gaels, who resembles a fiercer Herê, perhaps symbolized the moon, deemed by early races to have preceded the sun, and worshipped with magical and cruel rites. She is represented as going fully armed, and carrying two spears in her hand. As with Arês [13] and Poseidon [14] in the “Iliad”, her battle-cry was as loud as that of ten thousand men. Wherever there was war, either among gods or men, she, the great queen, was present, either in her own shape or in her favourite disguise, that of a “hoodie” or carrion crow. An old poem shows her inciting a warrior :

“ Over his head is shrieking
 A lean hag, quickly hopping
 Over the points of the weapons and shields ;
 She is the gray-haired Morrígú”. [15]

With her, Fea and Nemon, Badb and Macha also hovered over the fighters, inspiring them with the madness of battle. All of these were sometimes called by the name of “Badb” [16]. An account of the the of Clontarf, fought by Brian Boru, in 1014, against the Norsemen, gives a gruesome picture of what the Gaels believed to happen in the spiritual world when battle lowered and men’s blood was aflame. “There arose a wild, impetuous, precipitate, mad, inexorable, furious, dark, lacerating, merciless, combative, contentious *badb*, which was shrieking and fluttering over their heads. And there arose also the satyrs, and sprites, and the maniacs of the valleys, and the witches and goblins and owls, and destroying demons of the air and firmament, and the demoniac phantom host ; and they were inciting and sustaining valour and battle with them.” When the fight was over, they revelled among the bodies of the slain ; the heads cut off as barbaric trophies were called “Macha’s acorn crop”. These grim creations of the savage mind had immense vitality. While Nuada, the supreme war-god, vanished early out of the Pantheon killed by the Fomors in the great battle fought between them and the gods Badb and the Morrígú lived on as late as any of the Gaelic deities. Indeed, they may be said to still survive in the superstitious dislike and suspicion shown in all Celtic-speaking countries for their *avatar*, the hoodie-crow. [17]

After Nuada, the greatest of the gods was the Dagda, whose name seems to have meant the “Good God”. [18] The old Irish tract called “The Choice of Names” tells us that he was a god of the earth ; he had a cauldron called “The Undry”, in which everyone found food in proportion to his merits, and from which none went away unsatisfied. He also had a living harp ; as he played upon it, the seasons came in their order—spring following winter, and summer succeeding spring, autumn coming after summer, and, in its turn, giving place to winter. He is represented as of venerable aspect and of simple mind and tastes, very fond of porridge, and a valiant consumer of it. In an ancient tale we have a description of his dress. He wore a brown, low-necked tunic which only reached down to his hips, and, over this, a hooded cape which barely covered his shoulders. On his feet and legs were horse-hide boots, the hairy side out-

wards. He carried, or, rather, drew after him on a wheel, an eight-pronged war-club, so huge that eight men would have been needed to carry it ; and the wheel, as he towed the whole weapon along, made a track like a territorial boundary. [19] Ancient and gray-headed as he was, and sturdy porridge-eater, it will be seen from this that he was a formidable fighter. He did great deeds in the battle between the gods and the Fomors, and, on one occasion, is even said to have captured single-handed a hundred-legged and four-headed monster called Mata, dragged him to the “ Stone of Benn”, near the Boyne, and killed him there.

The Dagda’s wife was called Boann. She was connected in legend with the River Boyne, to which she gave its name, and, indeed, its very existence. [20] Formerly there was only a well [21] , shaded by nine magic hazel-trees. These trees bore crimson nuts, and it was the property of the nuts that whoever ate of them immediately became possessed of the knowledge of everything that was in the world. The story is, in fact, a Gaelic version of the Hebrew myth of “ the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”. One class of creatures alone had this privilege—divine salmon who lived in the well, and swallowed the nuts as they dropped from the trees into the water, and thus knew all things, and appear in legend as the “ Salmons of Knowledge”. All others, even the highest gods, were forbidden to approach the place. Only Boann, with the proverbial woman’s curiosity, dared to disobey this fixed law. She came towards the sacred well, but, as she did so, its waters rose up at her, and drove her away before them in a mighty, rushing flood. She escaped ; but the waters never returned. They made the Boyne ; and as for the all-knowing inhabitants of the well, they wandered disconsolately through the depths of the river, looking in vain for their lost nuts. One of these salmon was afterwards eaten by the famous Finn mac Coul, upon whom all its omniscience descended. This way of accounting for the existence of a river is a favourite one in Irish legend. It is told also of the Shannon, which burst, like the Boyne, from an inviolable well, to pursue another presumptuous nymph called Sinann, a grand-daughter of the sea-god L  r. [22]

The Dagda had several children, the most important of whom are Brigit, Angus, Mider, Ogma, and Bodb the Red. Of these, Brigit will be already familiar to English readers who know nothing of Celtic myth. Originally she was a goddess of fire and the hearth, as well as of poetry, which the Gaels deemed an immaterial, supersensual form of flame. But the early Christianizers of Ireland adopted the pagan goddess into their roll of saintship, and, thus canonized, she obtained immense popularity as Saint Bridget, or Bride.

Angus was called *Mac Oc*, which means the “ Son of the Young”, or, perhaps, the “ Young God”. This most charming of the creations of the Celtic mythology is represented as a Gaelic Eros, an eternally youthful exponent of love and beauty. Like his father, he had a harp, but it was of gold, not oak, as the Dagda’s was, and so sweet was its music that no one could hear and not follow it. His kisses became birds which hovered invisibly over the young men and maidens of Erin, whispering thoughts of love into their ears. He is chiefly connected with the banks of the Boyne, where he had a “ brugh”, or fairy palace; and many stories are told of his exploits and adventures.

Mider, also the hero of legends, would seem to have been a god of the underworld, a Gaelic Pluto. As such, he was connected with the Isle of Falga—a name for what was otherwise, and still is, called the Isle of Man where he had a stronghold in which he kept three wonderful cows and a magic cauldron. He was also the owner of the

“ Three Cranes of Denial and Churlishness”, which might be described flippantly as personified “ gentle hints”. They stood beside his door, and when anyone approached to ask for hospitality, the first one said : “ Do not come ! do not come !” and the second added : “ Get away ! get away !” while the third chimed in with : “ Go past the house ! go past the house !” [23] These three birds were, however, stolen from Mider by Aitherne, an avaricious poet, to whom they would seem to have been more appropriate than to their owner, who does not otherwise appear as a churlish and illiberal deity. [24] On the contrary, he is represented as the victim of others, who plundered him freely. The god Angus took away his wife Etain, while his cows, his cauldron, and his beautiful daughter Blathnat were carried off as spoil by the heroes or demi-gods who surrounded King Conchobar in the golden age of Ulster.

Ogma, who appears to have been also called Cermait, that is, the “ honey-mouthed”, was the god of literature and eloquence. He married Etan, the daughter of Dianecht, the god of medicine, and had several children, who play parts more or less prominent in the mythology of the Gaelic Celts. One of them was called Tuirenn, whose three sons murdered the father of the sun-god, and were compelled, as expiation, to pay the greatest fine ever heard of—nothing less than the chief treasures of the world. [25] Another son, Cairpré, became the professional bard of the Tuatha Dé Danann, while three others reigned for a short time over the divine race. As patron of literature, Ogma was naturally credited with having been the inventor of the famous *Ogam* alphabet. This was an indigenous script of Ireland, which spread afterwards to Great Britain, inscriptions in ogmic characters having been found in Scotland, the Isle of Man, South Wales, Devonshire, and at Silchester in Hampshire, the Roman city of Calleva Atrebatum. It was originally intended for inscriptions upon upright pillar-stones or upon wands, the equivalents for letters being notches cut across, or strokes made upon one of the faces of the angle...The origin of this alphabet is obscure. Some authorities consider it of great antiquity, while others believe it entirely post-Christian. It seems, at any rate, to have been based upon, and consequently to presuppose a knowledge of, the Roman alphabet.

Ogma, besides being the patron of literature, was the champion, or professional strong man of the Tuatha Dé Danann. His epithet is *Grianaineach*, that is, the “ Sunny-faced”, from his radiant and shining countenance.

The last of the Dagda's more important children is Bodb [25] the Red, who plays a greater part in later than in earlier legend. He succeeded his father as king of the gods. He is chiefly connected with the south of Ireland, especially with the Galtee Mountains, and with Lough Dearg, where he had a famous *sídh*, or underground palace.

The Poseidon of the Tuatha Dé Danann Pantheon was called Lêr, but we hear little of him in comparison with his famous son, Manannán, the greatest and most popular of his many children. Manannán mac Lir [26] was the special patron of sailors, who invoked him as “ God of Headlands”, and of merchants, who claimed him as the first of their guild. His favourite haunts were the Isle of Man, to which he gave his name, and the Isle of Arran, in the Firth of Clyde, where he had a palace called “ Emhain of the Apple-Trees”. He had many famous weapons—two spears called “ Yellow Shaft” and “ Red Javelin”, a sword called “ The Retaliator”, which never failed to slay, as well as two others known as the “ Great Fury” and the “ Little Fury”. He had a boat called “ Wave-sweeper”, which propelled and guided itself wherever its owner wished, and a horse called “ Splendid Mane”, which was swifter than the spring wind, and travelled equally fast on land or over the waves of the sea. No weapon could hurt

him through his magic mail and breast-plate, and on his helmet there shone two magic jewels bright as the sun. He endowed the gods with the mantle which made them invisible at will, and he fed them from his pigs, which, like the boar Sæhrimnir, in the Norse Valhalla, renewed themselves as soon as they had been eaten. Of these, no doubt, he made his “ Feast of Age”, the banquet at which those who ate never grew old. Thus the people of the goddess Danu preserved their immortal youth, while the ale of Goibniu the Smith-God bestowed invulnerability upon them. It is fitting that Manannán himself should have been blessed beyond all the other gods with inexhaustible life ; up to the latest days of Irish heroic literature his luminous figure shines prominent, nor is it even yet wholly forgotten.

Goibniu, the Gaelic Hephaestus, who made the people of the goddess Danu invulnerable with his magic drink, was also the forger of their weapons. It was he who, helped by Luchtainé, the divine carpenter, and Credné, the divine bronze - worker, made the armoury with which the Tuatha Dé Danann conquered the Fomors. Equally useful to them was Diancecht, the god of medicine. [27] It was he who once saved Ireland, and was indirectly the cause of the name of the River Barrow. The Morrígú, the heaven-god’s fierce wife, had borne a son of such terrible aspect that the physician of the gods, foreseeing danger, counselled that he should be destroyed in his infancy. This was done ; and Diancecht opened the infant’s heart, and found within it three serpents, capable, when they grew to full size, of depopulating Ireland. He lost no time in destroying these serpents also, and burning them into ashes, to avoid the evil which even their dead bodies might do. More than this, he flung the ashes into the nearest river, for he feared that there might be danger even in them ; and, indeed, so venomous were they that the river boiled up and slew every living creature in it, and therefore has been called “ Barrow” (boiling) ever since. [28]

Diancecht had several children, of whom two followed their father’s profession. These were Miach and his sister Airmid. There were also another daughter, Etan, who married Cermait (or Ogma), and three other sons called Cian, Cethé, and Cu. Cian married Ethniu, the daughter of Balor the Fomor, and they had a son who was the crowning glory of the Gaelic Pantheon—its Apollo, the Sun-God,—Lugh [29] , called *Lamhfada* [30], which means the “ Long-handed”, or the “ Far-shooter”. It was not, however, with the bow, like the Apollo of the Greeks, but with the rod-sling that Lugh performed his feats ; his worshippers sometimes saw the terrible weapon in the sky as a rainbow, and the Milky Way was called “ Lugh’s Chain”. He also had a magic spear, which, unlike the rod-sling, he had no need to wield, himself ; for it was alive, and thirsted so for blood that only by steeping its head in a sleeping-draught of pounded poppy leaves could it be kept at rest. When battle was near, it was drawn out ; then it roared, and struggled against its thongs ; fire flashed from it ; and, once slipped from the leash, it tore through and through the ranks of the enemy, never tired of slaying. Another of his possessions was a magic hound which an ancient poem, [31] attributed to the Fenian hero, Caoilte, calls—

“ That hound of mightiest deeds,
Which was irresistible in hardness of combat,
Was better than wealth ever known,
A ball of fire every night.

“ Other virtues had that beautiful hound
(Better this property than any other property),
Mead or wine would grow of it,

Should it bathe in spring water.”

This marvellous hound, as well as the marvellous spear, and the indestructible pigs of Manannán were obtained for Lugh by the sons of Tuirenn as part of the blood-fine he exacted from them for the murder of his father Cian. A hardly less curious story is that which tells how Lugh got his name of the *Ioldanach*, or the “ Master of All Arts”.

These are, of course, only the greater deities of the Gaelic Pantheon, their divinities which answered to such Hellenic figures as Demeter, Zeus, Herê, Cronos, Athena, Eros, Hades, Hermes, Hephaestus, Aesculapius, and Apollo. All of them had many descendants, some of whom play prominent parts in the heroic cycles of the “ Red Branch of Ulster” and of the “ Fenians”. In addition to these, there must have been a multitude of lesser gods who stood in much the same relation to the great gods as the rank and file of tribesmen did to their chiefs. Most of these were probably local deities of the various clans the gods their heroes swore by. But it is also possible that some may have been divinities of the aboriginal race. Professor Rhys thinks that he can still trace a few of such Iberian gods by name, as Nêt, Ri or Roi, Corb, and Beth. [32] But they play no recognizable part in the stories of the Gaelic gods.

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The Gods Arrive

The people of the goddess Danu were not the first divine inhabitants of Ireland. Others had been before them, dwellers in “ the dark backward and abysm of time”. In this the Celtic mythology resembles those of other nations, in almost all of which we find an old, dim realm of gods standing behind the reigning Pantheon. Such were Cronos and the Titans, dispossessed by the Zeus who seemed, even to Hesiod, something of a *parvenu* deity. Gaelic tradition recognizes two divine dynasties anterior to the Tuatha Dé Danann. The first of these was called “ The Race of Partholon”. Its head and leader came as all gods and men came, according to Celtic ideas from the Other World, and landed in Ireland with a retinue of twenty-four males and twenty-four females upon the first of May, the day called “ Beltaine”, sacred to Bilé, the god of death. At this remote time, Ireland consisted of only one treeless, grassless plain, watered by three lakes and nine rivers. But, as the race of Partholon increased, the land stretched, or widened, under them some said miraculously, and others, by the labours of Partholon’s people. At any rate, during the three hundred years they dwelt there, it grew from one plain to four, and acquired seven new lakes ; which was fortunate, for the race of Partholon increased from forty-eight members to five thousand, in spite of battles with the Fomors.

These would seem to have been inevitable. Whatever gods ruled, they found themselves in eternal opposition to the not-gods—the powers of darkness, winter, evil, and death. The race of Partholon warred against them with success. At the Plain of Ith, Partholon defeated their leader, a gigantic demon called Cichol the Footless, and dispersed his deformed and monstrous host. After this there was quiet for three hundred years. Then—upon the same fatal first of May—there began a mysterious epidemic, which lasted a week, and destroyed them all. In premonition of their end, they foregathered upon the original, first-created plain—then called *Sen Mag*, or the “ Old Plain”, so that those who survived might the more easily bury those that died. Their funeral-place is still marked by a mound near Dublin, called “ Tallaght” in the

maps, but formerly known as *Tamlecht Muintre Partholain*, the “ Plague-grave of Partholon’s People”. This would seem to have been a development of the very oldest form of the legend which knew nothing of a plague, but merely represented the people of Partholon as having returned, after their sojourn in Ireland, to the other world, whence they came and is probably due to the gradual euhemerization of the ancient gods into ancient men.

Following the race of Partholon, came the race of Nemed, which carried on the work and traditions of its forerunner. During its time, Ireland again enlarged herself, to the extent of twelve new plains and four more lakes. Like the people of Partholon, the race of Nemed struggled with the Fomors, and defeated them in four consecutive battles. Then Nemed died, with two thousand of his people, from an epidemic, and the remnant, left without their leader, were terribly oppressed by the Fomors. Two Fomorian kings—Morc, son of Dela, and Conann, son of Febar—had built a tower of glass upon Tory Island, always their chief strong-hold, and where stories of them still linger, and from this vantage-point they dictated a tax which recalls that paid, in Greek story, to the Cretan Minotaur. Two-thirds of the children born to the race of Nemed during the year were to be delivered up on each day of Samhain. Goaded by this to a last desperate effort, the survivors of Nemed’s people attacked the tower, and took it, Conann perishing in the struggle. But their triumph was short. Morc, the other king, collected his forces, and inflicted such a slaughter upon the people of Nemed that, out of the sixteen thousand who had assembled for the storming of the tower, only thirty survived. And these returned whence they came, or died—the two acts being, mythologically speaking, the same. [33]

One cannot help seeing a good deal of similarity between the stories of these two mythical invasions of Ireland. Especially noticeable is the account of the epidemic which destroyed all Partholon’s people and nearly all of Nemed’s. Hence it has been held that the two legends are duplicates, and that there was at first only one, which has been adapted somewhat differently by two races, the Iberians and the Gaels. Professor Rhys considers [34] the account of Nemed to have been the original Celtic one, and the Partholon story, the version of it which the native races made to please themselves. The name “ Partholon”, with its initial *p*, is entirely foreign to the genius of Gaelic speech. Moreover, Partholon himself is given, by the early chroniclers, ancestors whose decidedly non-Aryan names reappear afterwards as the names of Fir Bolg chiefs. Nemed was later than Partholon in Ireland, as the Gaels, or “ Milesians”, were later than the Iberians, or “ Fir Bolgs”.

These “ Fir Bolgs” are found in myth as the next colonizers of Ireland. Varying traditions say that they came from Greece, or from “ Spain”—which was a post-Christian euphemism for the Celtic Hades. [35] They consisted of three tribes, called the “ Fir Domnann” or “ Men of Domnu”, the “ Fir Gaillion” or “ Men of Gaillion”, and the “ Fir Bolg” or “ Men of Bolg”; but, in spite of the fact that the first-named tribe was the most important, they are usually called collectively after the last. Curious stories are told of their life in Greece, and how they came to Ireland; but these are somewhat factitious, and obviously do not belong to the earliest tradition.

In the time of their domination they had, we are told, partitioned Ireland among them: the Fir Bolg held Ulster; the Fir Domnann, divided into three kingdoms, occupied North Munster, South Munster, and Connaught; while the Fir Gaillion owned Leinster. These five provinces met at a hill then called “ Balor’s Hill”, but afterwards the “ Hill of Uisnech”. It is near Rathconrath, in the county of West Meath,

and was believed, in early times, to mark the exact centre of Ireland. They held the country from the departure of the people of Nemed to the coming of the people of the goddess Danu, and during this period they had nine supreme kings. At the time of the arrival of the gods, their king's name was Eochaid [36] son of Erc, surnamed "The Proud".

We have practically no other details regarding their life in Ireland. It is obvious, however, that they were not really gods, but the pre-Aryan race which the Gaels, when they landed in Ireland, found already in occupation. There are many instances of peoples at a certain stage of culture regarding tribes in a somewhat lower one as semi-divine, or, rather, half-diabolical. [37] The suspicion and fear with which the early Celts must have regarded the savage aborigines made them seem "larger than human". They feared them for the weird magical rites which they practised in their inaccessible forts among the hills, amid storms and mountain mists. The Gaels, who held themselves to be the children of light, deemed these "dark Iberians" children of the dark. Their tribal names seem to have been, in several instances, founded upon this idea. There were the *Corca-Oidce* ("People of Darkness") and the *Corca-Duibhne* ("People of the Night"). The territory of the western tribe of the *Hi Dorchaide* ("Sons of Dark") was called the "Night Country". [38] The Celts, who held their own gods to have preceded them into Ireland, would not believe that even the Tuatha Dé Danann could have wrested the land from these magic-skilled Iberians without battle.

They seem also to have been considered as in some way connected with the Fomors. Just as the largest Iberian tribe was called the "Men of Domnu", so the Fomors were called the "Gods of Domnu", and Indech, one of their kings, is a "son of Domnu". Thus eternal battle between the gods, children of Danu, and the giants, children of Domnu, would reflect, in the supernatural world, the perpetual warfare between invading Celt and resisting Iberian. It is shadowed, too, in the later heroic cycle. The champions of Ulster, Aryans and Gaels *par excellence*, have no such bitter enemies as the Fir Domnann of Munster and the Fir Gaillion of Leinster. A few scholars would even see in the later death-struggle between the High King of Ireland and his rebellious Fenians the last historic or mythological adumbration of racial war. [39]

[1] Pronounced *Tooăha dae donnann*.

[2] Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, 1886. Lecture VI—"Gods, Demons, and Heroes".

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] De Jubainville : *Le Cycle Mythologique Irlandais*, chap. V.

[5] De Jubainville : *Cycle Mythologique Irlandais*, chap. IX.

[6] From the fifteenth-century Harleian MS. in the British Museum, numbered 5280, and called the *Second Battle of Moytura*.

[7] Harleian MS. 5280.

[8] "In Munster was worshipped the goddess of prosperity, whose name was Ana, and from her are named the Two Paps of Ana over Luachair Degad." From *Coir Anmann*, the *Choice of Names*, a sixteenth-century tract, published by Dr. Whitley Stokes in *Irische Texte*.

[9] Attributed to Cormac, King-Bishop of Cashel.

[10] Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, 1886 "The Zeus of the Insular Celts".

[11] Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, 1886 "The Gaulish Pantheon".

[12] *Pharsalia*, Book I, l. 444, &c.:

"Et quibus immitis placatur sanguine diro

Teutates, horrensque feris altaribus Hesus ;
Et Taranis Scythicae non mitior ara Dianae”.

- [13] *Iliad*, Book V.
- [14] *Op. cit.*, Book XIV.
- [15] It commemorates the battle of Magh Rath.
- [16] The word is approximately pronounced *Bive* or *Bibe*.
- [17] For a full account of these beings see a paper by Mr. W. M. Hennessey in Vol. I of the *Revue Celtique*, entitled “ The Ancient Irish Goddess of War”.
- [18] De Jubainville : *Le Cycle Mythologique*. Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 154. The *Coir Anmann*, however, translates it “ Fire of God”.
- [19] *The Second Battle of Moytura*. Harleian MS. 5280.
- [20] The story is told in the Book of Leinster.
- [21] Now called “ Trinity Well”.
- [22] Book of Leinster. A paraphrase of the story will be found in O’Curry’s *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, Vol. II, p. 143.
- [23] Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 331.
- [24] Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 331.
- [25] Pronounced *Bove*.
- [26] Lêr—genitive Lir.
- [27] Pronounced *Dianket*. His name is explained, both in the *Choice of Names* and in *Cormac’s Glossary*, as meaning “ God of Health”.
- [28] Standish O’Grady : *The Story of Ireland*, p. 17.
- [29] Pronounced *Luga* or *Loo*.
- [30] Pronounced *Lavāda*.
- [31] Translated by O’Curry in *Atlantis*, Vol. III, from the Book of Lismore.
- [32] Rhys : *Celtic Britain*, chap. VII.
- [33] De Jubainville : *Cycle Mythologique*, chap. V.
- [34] Rhys : “ The Mythographical Treatment of Celtic Ethnology”, *Scottish Review*, Oct. 1890.
- [35] De Jubainville : *Cycle Mythologique*, chap. V. Rhys : *Hibbert Lectures*, pp. 90, 91.
- [36] Pronounced *Ecca* or *Eohee*.
- [37] Gomme : *Ethnology in Folklore*, chap, in “ The Mythic Influence of a Conquered Race”.
- [38] Elton : *Origins of English History*, note to p. 136.
- [39] It has been contended that the Fenians were originally the gods or heroes of an aboriginal people in Ireland, the myths about them representing the pre-Celtic and pre-Aryan ideal, as the sagas of the Red Branch of Ulster embodied that of the Celtic Aryans. The question, however, is as yet far from being satisfactorily solved.

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