

MYTHICAL SOURCES OF MATH II: THE BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE OF LLEU LLAW GYFFES

Lugh, Cú Chulainn and the Birth of the Hero

In the great bull-wars of Ireland, as recounted in the famous *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, there was a moment when Cú Chulainn lay wounded, and his charioteer could see a strange figure approaching:

'What kind of man is he?' Cú Chulainn asked.

*'It is soon told: a tall, broad, fair-seeming man. His close-cropped hair is blond and curled. A green cloak is wrapped about him, held at his breast by a bright silver brooch. He wears a knee-length tunic of kingly silk, red embroidered in red-gold, girded against his white skin. There is a knob of light gold on his black shield. He carries a five-pointed spear in his hand, and a forked javelin. His feats and graceful displays are astonishing, yet no-one is taking any notice of him and he heeds no one: it is as though they couldn't see him.'*⁸⁷⁴

This mysterious warrior is none other than Lugh himself, who goes on to describe himself as Cú Chulainn's 'father from the *Sídhe*'. Beyond this, no further explanation is given for the appearance of this mythological being on the battlefields of Heroic Age Ireland at this critical juncture. After fighting in the Ulster hero's stead for two days, and treating his wounds with magical herbs, Lugh promptly disappears, and no more is said about him. This impromptu, anachronous intervention of a figure from the mythological past reveals an important characteristic of the Medieval Celtic worldview, as well as giving us an important insight into how such audiences would have understood the continuing significance of a magical figure such as Llew Llaw Gyffes. The key to this problem lies in a closer analysis of exactly what was meant when Lugh described himself as Cú Chulainn's 'father from the *Sídhe*'. Within this conception, which we will refer to as the *doctrine of the avatar*, lies an important application of the typological principles to which we have already alluded – the historiographic conception referred to here as the 'cyclic nature of time'.

An account of the birth and conception of the hero Cú Chulainn is found within the *remscéla* or 'foretales' of the *Táin* tradition. In many respects, this is account typical of many other Celtic birth tales (a genre known as *comperta* in the Gaelic world). It begins with the compulsive pursuit of some magical animals (cf. pp. 178 n. 304), which lead the men of Ulster to the sacred landscape of the Brug

Na Boyne, where they were stranded by the onset of night and a freak snow-storm. They find shelter in an isolated cottage, where they are made welcome by a man and his pregnant wife. During the night the wife goes into labour, and Deichtine (the Ulster king's sister) helps her give birth. At the same time, a mare belonging to the man gives birth to two baby foals. These foals are given to the infant. But, as the story tells:

... when morning came there was nothing to be seen eastward of the Brug – no house, no birds – only their own horses, the baby and the foals. They went back to Emain and reared the baby until he was a boy

He caught an illness then and died. And they made lamentation for him, and Deichtine's grief was great at the loss of her foster-son. She came home from lamenting him and grew thirsty and asked for a drink, and the drink was brought in a cup. She set it to her lips to drink from it and a tiny creature slipped into her mouth with the liquid. As she took the cup from her lips she swallowed the creature and it vanished.

She slept that night and dreamed that a man came towards her and spoke to her, saying she would bear a child by him – that it was he who had brought her to the Brug to sleep with her there, that the boy she had reared was his, that he was again planted in her womb and was to be called Sétanta,⁸⁷⁵ that he himself was Lugh mac Ethnenn, and that the foals should be reared with the boy.

The woman grew heavy with a child, and the people of Ulster made much of not knowing its father, saying it might have been Conchobor himself, in his drunkenness, that night she had stayed with him at the Brug.

Then Conchobor gave his sister in marriage to Sualdam mac Roich. She was ashamed to go pregnant to bed with her husband, and got sick when she reached the bedstead. The living thing spilled away in the sickness, and so she was made a virgin and whole and went to her husband. She grew pregnant again and bore a son, and called him Sétanta⁸⁷⁶

875 Sétanta lit. 'He who finds the paths'. This was Cú Chulain's birth name

876 TBC p.23

This account is interesting for a number of reasons, not least because of its formal similarity to the circumstances surrounding the birth of Lleu in the Mabinogi. As with the hero of the Fourth Branch, the matter of the conception, birth and paternity of Cú Chulainn is shrouded in ambiguity. In both cases, the conception is mysteriously associated with the recent death of a certain fosterling, the provenance of whom seems to point towards the Indigenous Underworld. In the Mabinogi, this fosterling is Pryderi who, like the unnamed boy in the *compert* of Cú Chulainn, exhibits totemistic links to a foal (or pair of foals) born on the same night as himself. In both the *compert* and the Fourth Branch account shame, arising from the implication of brother-sister incest, surrounds the (re)birth of the hero. At some stage during this mysterious pregnancy, the mother delivers ‘living thing’ or ‘small something’, which is either ‘spilled out’ during sickness or emerges, placenta-like, alongside the normal infant birth.

The ambiguity has sometimes been attributed to textual corruption, or some other confusion in the process of transmission.⁸⁷⁷ However, this catch-all explanation of such anomalies within medieval texts (particularly those from the Celtic world), much over-used by critics of a previous generation, is now being questioned. Such an account of a conception and birth may be at odds with our contemporary understanding of the reproductive process. But it is consistent with traditions found elsewhere within the Medieval Celtic world. The motif of dual paternity, with a mortal and divine father simultaneously involved in the conception of a hero, appears in the Celtic tradition and elsewhere in myth and international folklore in general. Far from being a ‘confusion’ of the medieval texts involved, or even a primitive misunderstanding of the mechanics of reproduction, this motif is best understood as a symbolic representation of the interrelated processes of causality, fate and incarnation.

As Rees and Rees have pointed out ‘the [conception] myths must be regarded as symbols ... of what birth is from the point of view of the unseen world ... the child’s birth is destined, the parents are chosen, the time and place ordained, and the earthly life of the child ‘pre-figured’ before he is conceived ... In every conception there is a third factor. The child may derive its biological inheritance from its earthly parents, but it is also the incarnation of a supernatural essence’. This ‘supernatural essence’ is represented as entering the mother either in the form of a visitation by a god in a dream or in a magical disguise; or sometimes by the swallowing of a fly, a worm or some other miniscule creature. Often the conception follows soon after the death of another significant figure, and the hero is therefore seen as a doublet or reincarnation of this recently deceased individual. In many cases (such as that given above), there is a combination of some or all these factors, resulting in the characteristic polygenetic account of the conception and birth of the hero.

Such explanations are inimical to modern habits of thought, which have a strong (and sometimes irrational) predilection for linear, causal explanations: ‘x happened because of y’, ‘y is therefore the cause of x’. More traditional aetiological systems, on the other hand, often ventured rather more complex, multi-tiered explanations: e.g. ‘x happened *in conjunction with both* y and z’. The causal origin

877 e.g. Gantz. *Early Irish Myths and Legends* (1978) p. 130

is less important than these symbolic, associative parallels. This rather looser form of reasoning is something we have already encountered in the Mabinogi, for example with the circumstances surrounding Pryderi's post-natal disappearance (p. 247); as well as the ambiguity of the relationship between the 'Badger in the Bag' incident and subsequent events of the Second and Third Branches (pp. 428-429 above). The particular problem of the polygenetic circumstances of the hero's birth, and his dual mortal-divine paternity, are best apprehended within an acausal, multi-tiered associative system of this kind.

The relation between a mortal hero and divine figure (or one from the Indigenous Underworld) is something we have already touched upon (e.g. pp. 317, n. 575). For the sake of convenience, we will refer to this complex of belief as *the doctrine of the avatar*, from the Sanskrit *avatara* meaning the mortal incarnation or 'descent' of a divine entity. Indeed, there is a precise cognate for this word in both of the main Medieval Celtic languages: *auē* in Middle Welsh, *ui* in Old Irish, both of which mean 'heir' 'great-great-grandson' or simply 'descendant'; reminding us that the ancestral bloodline or family-tree was the most natural context for this idea of heroic reincarnation. The importance of demonstrating genealogical descent from an ancestor of renown lay partly in an implicit belief that the spirit of that ancestor would be most likely to return to tribe through one of his descendants. The phenomenon of 'inherited characteristics', understood by the twenty-first century mind as an expression of genetic code and biological determinism, would have been apprehended in pre-industrial societies in terms of ancestral spirits, and the cyclic nature of time.

Seen in these typological terms, the appearance of Lugh beside his *auē* Cú Chulainn – centuries after the former was supposed to have lived and died - would have not have seemed incongruous to Medieval Celtic audiences. Indeed, this notion of divine paternity, and an intimate connection between past and present, bears directly on a further and deeper understanding. The paradoxical notion of a matrix of connections between events that encompass both the causal and the acausal, the mechanistic and the symbolic principles provides the key to an understanding of the Mabinogi, and perhaps a number of other expressions of medieval thought besides.

We will return to a fuller discussion of this problem in our concluding analysis of the magical logic of the Mabinogi. For now we will continue our discussion of Llew Llaw Gyffes and his origins in the magico-religious belief systems and traditions of prehistoric Europe. Here, as for the mythological material in the other chapters, we will find that an understanding of this historical/anthropological background will enhance and complement the synchronic reading of the symbolism involved, which we will be considering on pp. 539 ff. below.