

# THE GODS OF THE CELTS AND THE INDO-EUROPEANS

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INNSBRUCK 1994

the earliest Irish texts (dating as early as the sixth and seventh centuries AD) give ample confirmation to Poseidonios's statement that the druids were not only priests but judges and lawyers who studied in schools for up to twenty years (Binchy 1978: ix; Caesar, *de Bello Gallico*, VI, 13-4: *annos nonnulli vicenos in disciplina permanent*). To judge from the accomplishments of the later *filid*, in their schools the Irish druids apparently memorized an enormous corpus of prescriptive law, preserved and handed down orally in poetic composition. The Irish sources also confirm that the *ollamhain filed* were lawyers as well as poets, who could extemporize esoteric compositions at a whim to either praise or satirize (as in *Bretha Nemed*). They were the custodians of the foundation myths and pseudo-histories of the kingly dynasties they served. The druids and the *ollamhain filed* then played a larger role in Celtic society, a role which went beyond originally being the priests of the yearly cycle of religious festivals and its corpus of accompanying mythology, all as in Indian, preserved orally.

## The Means by which PIE Myth, Ritual, and Laws Were Preserved

By its very nature the corpus of material which could be preserved in the institutionalized oral literature of the Greeks, Indians, Romans, and Celts, as Havelock has noted, had to be poetic.

[Poetic] language of this kind becomes [a sophisticated instrument overlaid upon the vernacular of an oral society or, to change the metaphor, an enclave of contrived speech existing within it, the vernacular. The responsibility for maintaining it is likely to fall into the hands of specialists. These become the "bards of the people" (Heraclitus) and also the musicians, seers, prophets, priests. They guard the formulaic language noted by Parry as the basis of oral poetry -- a language also likely to become a somewhat archaic one... since it is built on the instinct to conserve rather than to create.... But by what means can the general tradition be taught and commended to the population at large so that they share it and live by it? ... The poets of orality were... aware of the emotional impact of the poetry they employed. (Havelock 1986: 73-5).

More important than the impact, only poetry with its regular rhythmic patterns and repetitions of similar sounds could provide a channel which could be memorized readily without error and taught orally in an institutionized fashion by the specialized and highly organized priest/poet/lawyers of the various IE cultures (see Meid 1978; Olmsted 1991: 259-307).

When recorded history begins in each area, India, Greece, or Ireland, the earliest attestations of mythic, legal, and gnomic thought (usually presented in a poetic format) reflect the recent adoption of writing. The earliest attested literary works in Greece (such as those attributed to Hēsíodos and Hómēros) manifestly reflect their oral origins (see Parry 1987; Havelock 1982). As Havelock has noted, the first Greek writing simply records the earlier oral poetry.

The alphabet was not originally put at the service of ordinary human conversation. Rather it was used to record a progressively complete version of the "oral literature" of Greece..., which had been nourished in the non-literate period and which indeed had sustained the identity of the previous oral culture of Greece. Although today we "read" our Homer, our Pindar, or our Euripides, a great deal of what we are

"listening to" is a fairly accurate acoustic transcription of the contrived [poetic] forms in which oral speech had hitherto been preserved. (Havelock 1982: 86).

Much the same situation existed in Ireland as in Greece. The earliest mythic record (from the 6th or 7th century AD) is recorded in poetic meters, reflective of the same oral origins as the earliest legal poetry. Binchy (1978: ix) has discussed the oral origins of the earliest portions of Irish law (CIH) and has outlined the process by which this oral material was recorded in the earliest manuscripts. Much the same process occurred for the earliest mythic material as well.

[Irish law] is concerned with secular institutions formulated by a privileged caste of jurists who, like the *filid* [poet-lawyers] (from whom they were never completely separated), had developed as an independent branch of the original druidic monopoly of culture. But though the basic structure of their law was pre-Christian (as was that of classical Roman law), it was profoundly affected by the adoption of Christianity.... Indeed, since one of the most significant by-products of the religious revolution was the gradual replacement of an oral culture by written documents, we must attribute the first formulation of the law-tracts in writing to the spread of this new art from the monastic schools to the traditional schools where the *fénechas* had hitherto been preserved by 'the memory of the ancients, transmission from one ear to another, the chanting of poets' (1896.23f., etc). (Binchy 1978: ix).

In India the *Dharma-sūtras*, the earliest works on law (mostly legal aphorisms) (see MacDonell 1899: 217-223), were also preserved by commentators who were separated from the originals by several hundred years. In India the commentators all spoke classical Sanskrit, preserved as a language of culture much in the same way as was Medieval Latin in the West or Greek in Byzantium. In Ireland, however, the process of later manuscript transmission and preservation was slightly different from that in Greece or in India. Irish law, for example, gives "the canonical tracts only in the form ... transmitted by scribes working several centuries after it had been compiled" (Binchy 1978: xiii).

In India classical Sanskrit language had been enshrined in *Pāṇini's Grammar*. In Ireland, however, the commentators attempted to modernize the language of the classical text at a date at which these texts were only partially understood. "The possibilities of corruption by subsequent generations of uncomprehending scribes are almost unlimited" (Binchy 1978: xiii). Fortunately most of these problems of corruption to be found in the legal texts are avoided in the mythic texts, which were set down in many cases in earlier manuscripts in the classical Old Irish in which they were first recorded.

One should note, however, that although these Old Irish mythic texts may contain tales, aspects of whose narrative structures and referenced characters are very old, the material culture of the texts nearly always was brought up to that of the period of the language in which the texts were composed. As Mallory recently pointed out (at the 1993 Harvard Celtic Colloquium), phrases descriptive of weapons, clothing, and other material forms refer to things familiar to the redactors of the tales themselves. As with the semantic referential field of the words as well, descriptive prose changes in its referential field to keep pace with the material culture. At least in the prose texts, an archaic phrase, whose meaning could not keep up with the changing material culture and which was no longer comprehensible, would be changed to become understandable, or it would be dropped altogether. An analogous process is portrayed vividly in the case of Medieval stained-glass windows in cathedrals. Here for example, texts of the *Gospels* and events recorded in *Genesis* are portrayed as if they concerned contemporary Europeans. Thus Biblical warriors, Roman or Judaic, are portrayed

as knights in full suits of armor, and Biblical cities are depicted as Medieval walled towns. Nonetheless, the Biblical narration depicted is clear even to the modern observer.

Previous to the adoption of writing, these three IE cultures, the Vedic Indians, the Greeks, and the Irish had preserved their institutions orally through a specialized priest/poet/lawyer elite. Aspirants to this class were required to undergo a long period of training in schools or colleges in which learning transpired in large recitation classes. Such an elite, when properly trained in memorizing poetic material and engaged in periodic recitation contests, is capable of orally preserving vast amounts of traditional material. Such a process of information preservation goes far beyond the feats of common singers of tales (as witnessed by the Brahmanic Vedic recitations and the example of the public recitations in Greek given by a modern Western intellectual who has memorized the whole of the *Iliad*).

We must be careful to distinguish between the institutionalized oral preservation of cultural tradition and individual or familial folklore. In the case of folk songs and folk tales, individual singers or families of singers may easily innovate and transform what they have learned from others. Learning takes place from father to son, mother to daughter, master to apprentice, etc. Anyone, merchant, knight, or peasant, no matter what his capacity, may take part in the process. The folk ballads collected together by Childe were preserved by an illiterate peasantry during a phase when the nobles, clergy, and townsmen were literate. However, the capacity for accurate transmission and preservation is limited in this folklore process. There will be many variations; material, of necessity, will be of limited content.

Institutionalized oral poetic preservation of tradition in a settled agricultural society (such as that of PIE society), which knows no writing but which has a rich economic basis from which to support a hierarchical class differentiation, is completely different from folklore. Teaching occurs in formalized institutional settings. Each teacher has a large number of carefully selected students. Instruction takes place in large classes, which usually repeat by rote the words of the ancient masters (a process outlined at an early date in the Vedic *Mandūkā-* hymn; RV: 7, 103, 5). Lacking writing, one cannot peruse or pursue in private a large number of competing view points or variations.

Innovation even within the confines of different schools may be limited by the practice (as in India, Gaul, Rome, and Ireland) of colleges of priests (or later poet/lawyers) meeting periodically in recitation contests, etc (as with the Irish *filid* in *Imbolc na Tromdhaine*; Connellan 1860: 1-132). With highly intelligent individuals memorizing the same standardized (and usually poetic) body of information, and where the whole key to advancement is the *accurate* ability to memorize large quantities of information, the channels of transmission are far less innovative than in individualized oral folklore. Such channels of transmission are also capable of preserving within a single "corpus" a much larger body of information than in folklore. Individuals may stay in the schools for twenty years before they are rated a master. Such an educational process (although text aided) continued throughout Europe into the early Medieval period (Ariès 1962: 137-88). Here a would-be scholar would repeat the same standardized recitation classes until mastery was attained.

Such channels of oral preservation of information can be highly accurate or "conservative". Innovation is minimalized. Such a process, assuming a common PIE origin, explains why the earliest written sources in India, Greece, or Ireland show so many similarities, even though the earliest *Vedas* are separated from the source by a little less than 1500 years, while the earliest Irish myths and laws are separated from the source by nearly 3000 years.

Though it eventually led to the demise of the whole oral process, the written word also preserved the earlier poetic oral material by transcribing it into the initial manuscripts. With the advent of writing, however, one could ponder an individual text in private and write at one's leisure. With the advent of writing, individual philosophies and the resulting separate lines of thought proliferated like weeds on fallow ground. Thus, ironically, institutionalized

oral transmission could be more conservative than writing in the transmission of myth or ritual.

Although in Ireland and India, the oral development of the social institutions during a preliterate phase is historically attested, in Greece the case has only been admitted recently. Prejudice against the accomplishments of peoples who cannot read or write holds a strong sway among learned men of books. However, during the so-called Grecian Dark Age period, 1100 to 700 BC, writing died out altogether. The largely oral-literate society, in which all of the laws and myths had been kept during the Linear-B period (Linear-B was used only for lists and inventories), continued even through the early phase of the literate society following the invention of alphabetic writing around 700 BC (Havelock 1986: 82-3).

According to Havelock, oral literature continued to play the same dominant role in Greece it had held during the earlier preliterate period until as late as 450 BC. Like the poetic laws and myths of the Celtic Irish and formulaic hymns of the Vedic Indians, for the greater part, Greek laws, myths, and even pre-philosophical speculations were formulated within a preliterate oral poetic tradition (Havelock 1986: 12-3).

The earliest poetry from Ireland, Greece, and India (examples of which may be found from throughout the text of this work) most likely derives from a common PIE prototype. For a reconstruction of the PIE verse line, I would see a long line of around 16 syllables (4 cola) (corresponding to the Greek Sapphic verse line), a medium line of around 12 syllables (3 cola) (Watkins's "longer line"), and short line of around 8 syllables (2 cola) (Watkins's "shorter line") (see Olmsted 1991: 259-309). Watkins has outlined the basic nature of the gnomic-epic verse usually utilized to preserve traditions in various IE culture areas. Watkins also projects for this verse type a common PIE ancestry. One should note, however, that Watkins analyzed only the 2-cola and 3-cola verse line.

What is of significance is that this gnomic-epic verse ... with its paroemiac close, whether of 10, 11, or 12 syllables, was the relatively longer line; it contained three cola, and was opposed to a relatively shorter line of similar structure but only two cola and fewer syllables. This dual organization, the opposition of a longer to a shorter line, is a characteristic feature of all three metrical systems inherited from Indo-European, Greek, Vedic, and Slavic; it may safely be attributed to the common original. (Watkins 1963: 195).

Constructed cadenced patterns of quantitative durational rhythm form the basis of ancient Sanskrit and Greek poetry, since Sanskrit and Greek were tonal rather than accented (stressed) languages (see Kurylowicz 1970: 421-30). Tone, itself, had no effect on the poetic meters. Thus, ancient Sanskrit and Greek are characterized by the elevation and duration of the vowel sounds rather than by the intensity of breath. Syllabic placement of tone served grammatical purposes and was a distinctive marker of significance, rather than following positional rules as in the placement of stress in the accentual languages of western Europe.

Meillet (1922: 141-2) demonstrated that the PIE language had a tonal pattern close to that found in Greek and Sanskrit, many of whose cognate words show elevation of tone in identical positions. Unlike the differential application of tone apparent in the Greek and Sanskrit languages, Latin, Germanic, and Celtic languages show a variation in the application of stress to different syllables. Although few rules can be stated for the differential application of tone (the placement being grammatical rather than positional; MacDonell 1916: 448-469), within each stressed language there are exact rules for the application of stress.

Just as Old Irish was stressed rather than tonal, the earliest Irish poetry was also stressed rather than syllabic. In opposition to Greek and Vedic quantitative syllabic meters, all from the East and all showing similarities suggestive of a development from a common syllabic

prototype, in the West one may set forth Celtic, Latin, and Germanic stressed meters, all showing similarities equally suggestive of development from a common stressed prototype.

Thus, Watkins (1963: 195) was apparently wrong in his attempt to see the later Irish syllabic meters resulting as a *direct* Celtic development of a common PIE syllabic meter (as represented by the Greek, Sanskrit, and Slavic syllabic meters). Nonetheless, I would suggest that the Irish syllabic meters are *indirect* developments of PIE syllabic meters, since the stressed meters of the West can be seen themselves as developments from the earlier PIE syllabic meters. The development of the later Irish syllabic meters must be seen by way of the intermediate and intervening stressed meters, which arose from the earlier syllabic meters with the development of stress in Common Celtic.

As noted in Sanskrit and Greek syllabic meters, Western stressed meters also show a long, a medium, and a short line. Again as with the syllabic meters, these stressed meters show a midline caesura, but usually after the stressed unit corresponding to the mid-line colon of the Greek or Vedic meters. Thus the Western stressed meters exhibit a 2/2 stressed *long line* with 4 stresses, a 2/1 stressed *medium line* with 3 stresses, and *short line* with 2 stresses. If a hypothetical Western metric unit composed of a stressed word and the surrounding unstressed words is equated with the preceding Eastern poetic colon, normally of 3 to 5 syllables in length, then the two poetic systems would be structurally similar in their basic metric units (see Olmsted 1991: 259-309). Significant as well, both Vedic and Irish poetry show a similar utilization of 4 lines organized into a stanza or a quatrain. The 4-line quatrain of the western meters is especially suggestive of the Vedic stanza composed of four *pādāh*. It is this combination found in both Celtic and Sanskrit poetry, of a 2-unit short line, a 3-unit medium line, and a 4-unit long line, all organized into 4-line quatrains, which is suggestive that all these meters share a common PIE origin.

It seems clear that these two poetic systems (stressed and syllabic) have a common origin behind them, just as the Eastern tonal and Western accentuated languages are all derivable from PIE. Too much has been made of the distinctions between these two metric systems. Clearly languages lacking stress have to devise some other means, such as syllable count, for establishing the poetic line. Conversely languages with stress can do away with the necessity of syllable count and count stress alone instead of homosyllabic cola. The neat geographical division of east and west, setting the two metric systems apart, suggests that one developed from the other shortly after an initial PIE dispersal.

Meillet (1922: 141-2) demonstrated that the accentuated IE language systems are later than the tonal (also see Kurylowicz, 1952). The later historic loss of final syllables as an effect of stress in the Romance and Celtic languages gives further argument for the priority of the tonal system. If the Western stressed languages developed from an earlier tonal prototype, one must accept the stressed meters as having developed from quantitative syllabic meters. Murphy (1961: 7) has outlined the development of stressed meters in the West. He notes that the Western languages "having lost the sense of quantitative rhythm owing to the disturbing influence of the development of stress, adopted a [verse] system ... based on stress and alliteration". As noted, these languages then switched from a verse line composed of set number of cola, the final of which had a fixed cadence, to a system of verse based on a set number of stresses in place of the cola. As a decoration they used alliteration in place of the fixed cadence.

Thus the apparent PIE cola of fixed syllabic length ending in a word division was transformed into a unit composed of a stressed word and its surrounding enclitic and other unstressed elements, originally of approximately equal syllabic length to the cola of the preceding period. As the accentuated stress destroyed the ability to hear the subtler sounds of the original pattern of duration, the necessity for a cadence pattern of fixed syllabic length disappeared. But even in the West a tendency toward end-line rhyme caused a repetition of similar stress patterns in the final words of rhyming lines.

The functions of these meters, whether East or West, was similar. Whether East or West, they served various gnomic legal and mythic as well as heroic functions. Gnostic poetry has preserved hundreds of pages of legal and mythical material in Celtic Ireland. The law verses go back to the sixth century in manuscript tradition. The Irish laws and myths, poetic in their earliest surviving format, were apparently developed through a long history of oral tradition, to be incorporated into the manuscript tradition with the beginning of the Christian period. This Irish gnomic poetry bears a remarkable similarity to the earliest Welsh poetry as well as to early poetry from Iceland and Rome. It is the same poetic meter, ultimately of PIE origin, which preserves our earliest information on Irish mythology.

There are also parallels between Ireland and India in seeing breath as the source of divine and poetic inspiration. The following two passages (in a 2/2 stressed meter) from the *Bretha Nemed* tract have obvious parallels to Yoga or Zen.

Do-glind anáil  
 ailibh caoinibh // inghen gaoithe  
 fairneis anma // tuarusgbháil bethad  
 eisimh teisimh // eallaing teallancc  
 sruth sáor // siris bronnghaotha  
 buime con-ail // curpa daoine  
 esconga ima ling // cuirp féthe. (CIH III: 1128, 1-5).

I select breath  
 through fair desires, daughter of wind,  
 declaration of name, characteristic of life,  
 ...  
 sound, noble, constant breast sound,  
 mother which nourishes the body of man,  
 eel which leaps, substance of breeze.

Fo cen aoi  
 ingen tsoifis // siur chelle  
 inghen menman // miadhach mordha  
 moaighthech mainbthech // moaighes druacha  
 dluthaibh cerda // ceird chaomh choir  
 con-can bretha // beridh darbha  
 muchaidh ainbfios // in-féd anba  
 insluinne gach ran // gach recht gach miadh  
 gach mes gach saor // gach soifétheadh gach suidhiughadh  
 gach n-ord gach n-ard // gach n-airiomh gach n-airenach.  
 (CIH III: 1129, 11-14).

Welcome inspiration,  
 daughter of wisdom, sister of reason,  
 daughter of mind, noble and exalted,  
 great and worth, which increases ...,  
 which knits together art, art fair and proper,  
 which utters judgement, which brings plenty,  
 which stifles ignorance, which tells ...,  
 expresses every verse, every law,  
 every judgment, every freedom, every eloquence, every arrangement,  
 every order, every height, every reckoning, every chief place.

So too in India, the inspiration of controlled breathing in inducing states of meditation is legend. I cite but a single passage from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, which conceived breath in much the same way as the Irish *Bretha Nemed*.

The introductory (sacrifice) is expiration, the concluding (sacrifice) is out-breathing, the *Hótr* is common, for expiration and out-breathing are common, for the arrangement of breaths, for the discrimination of breaths. (*Adhyāya II*, ii, 1; Keith 1920: 111).

Taken together the Irish and Vedic sources suggest that even during the PIE phase, priests had already developed the concept of controlled breathing to induce a meditative state, whereby one could perceive the immortal soul substance behind all being.