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OTHERWORLD ISLAND GODDESS AND MORTAL HERO

Exploring the Expression in Ancient Irish Mythology  
of a Fundamental Philosophy of Life

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## INTRODUCTION

My thesis is that the pagan Irish tales which tell of a mortal hero's voyage to the otherworld realm of the goddess across the sea, express a fundamental philosophy which is based upon life envisaged as a process of time and as a whole made up of two opposing or complementary parts. They are principles which have found expression in many ways throughout the ancient world; in these tales represented in the relationship between the supernatural goddess and mortal hero, their respective worlds, and the voyage which is necessary to fulfil their union. In relation to this there is, in addition, the effects of historical time (which is the very thing a living mythology works to abolish).

It is in the most ancient tales remaining to us that these elements are preserved, and upon which my argument is based - Echtraí Conle - (The Adventures of Conle), Immram Brain (The Voyage of Bran), Immram Curaig Maele Duin (The Voyage of Mael Duin's Boat). While these fundamental principles dominate, the same tales simultaneously contain evidence of a change in attitudes affected by later influences of patriarchy and christianity upon these old values which reveal traces of a pagan and probably matristic society. For it was after the coming of Saint Patrick that the tales were recorded in script, having already existed as a strong oral tradition for three or four thousand years, probably since megalithic times. As with any myth, an accurate memory of certain stages of culture never appears, for many things are telescoped in them. What survives is a structure of an exemplary behaviour. What predominates in these three tales is an ancient philosophy of life and it is with this that the most of this discussion is involved directly, and the ways in which it is manifested.

The basic form of the tales comprises the mortal hero undertaking a voyage across the seas to the island realm of the otherworld goddess, the island of women, which he usually leaves eventually, after which he may or may not return home to Ireland. The first chapter is concerned with the nature of the goddess and her supernatural



land across the sea, and the hieros gamos or sacred marriage of the goddess and hero which symbolizes the essence of life. These are the basic characteristics of the myths from which is manifested the two basic perceptions of life, which are the subject of the next two chapters. These may be envisaged simply as a circle, which encompasses the whole life. In one respect it is a cycle involving time, and in another it is a binary form comprised of opposing or complementary parts. Either way it is an equilibrium whole. Perhaps the most dynamic manifestation of these principles which still exists are the megalithic structures (which certainly express the same fundamentals), for they interact with the environment to describe these qualities of existence, time and the whole of being. Meanings of the symbols are revealed by the interaction of light and shadow which illuminate or mark specific symbols at specific times. The symbols are limited and relatively consistent, the primary ones being the circle, symbolizing totality and the movement and shape of celestial objects; the quadrangle, totality and the union of opposites, and the idea of a centre; and the spiral, the movement of the sun, moon and stars. Throughout the world archaic peoples have expressed with simplicity and vision these fundamentals which in our age, 5000 years later, are rarely so clearly envisaged by a society of people. The change felt today finds its roots in that change attested to in the two voyage tales, the effect time has brought to them. This change is felt both by way of the contents and by the specific place in history from which we experience the tales. These then are the subject of the final chapter.

The nature of symbols is such that as well as objective meanings, they may contain different subjective meanings for different peoples, times and cultures. I do not intend this as any sort of definitive decoding of absolute meanings, for, were that desirable, it would not be possible, for we cannot experience the myths as they were thousands of years ago, as part of a much larger and living mythology. But the tales can still reveal to us fundamental principles, especially that which is relevant to us and our time (for they contain meaning on various levels of which we recognise what is relevant). Joseph Campbell identifies four functions which a properly operating myth fulfils, and something of which can be recognised in these tales even though they are no more in that wider mythology:



The first is what I have called the mystical function, to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in the mystery dimension of the universe, not so that he lives in fear of it but so that he recognises that he participates in it, since the mystery of being is the mystery of his own deep being as well....the second function of a living mythology is to offer an image of the universe that will be in accord with the knowledge of the time, the sciences and the fields of action of the folk to whom the mythology is addressed....the third function of living mythology is to validate, support and imprint the norms of a given, specific moral order, that, namely, of the society in which the individual is to live...and the fourth is to guide him, stage by stage, in health, strength and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life (Campbell, Myths to Live By, in Loffler, 1983, P.381)







## CHAPTER ONE - Description of the goddess, her island realms and her relationship with the mortal hero.

The otherworld of Irish mythology exists in close contact with the real world in various conceptions, including under ground, in caves, under the sea and on islands. The latter occurs universally among sea faring peoples and islanders, and for the ancient Irish the vast seas to the west contained many and varied islands. Bran's supernatural mistress tells him -

"there are thrice fifty distant isles in the ocean to the west of us;  
Larger than Erin twice is each of them, or thrice" (Meyer, 1895, P.12)

Specific to their geographic nature, the island otherworld contains isolated elements of the real world, so there is a land of sorrow, of laughter, of horses etc. separated from this world by the powerful and ambivalent sea (life giving and death bringing), there is from the outset implied some sort of journey, encompassing a change or development which may be physical and psychical or spiritual. There is also a strong sense of the relation between the two worlds, joined or separated by water, and these two worlds are clearly in contrast to one another.

Among the oldest pagan otherworld islands preserved to us are Tir na mBan (land of women), Tir na mBea (land of life), Tir na nInghen (land of maidens), and Emain. These were followed by the pleasant island and the warlike otherworld islands of Celtic and early christian influence, and finally the Christian terra repromissionis and the islands of hermits and prophets. They reflect evidence of changes in the prevailing attitudes, and social, religious and political conditions over many years. Most significantly it is a development from a female to a male otherworld realm. Despite later influences though, in the journeys undertaken by Bran, Conle and Mael Duin, it is that most ancient otherworld conception that predominates, the exclusively female realm. It and it's goddess are powerful forces that reveal the fundamental philosophy of a matristic society - that of life supporting<sup>1</sup>.

The island of women is in some ways parallel to the original conception of Ireland as an island of women, as described in the various 'takings' of Ireland in mythical history



(lebor Gabala) - personified by the Triad Eriu, Banba and Fotla of the Tuatha De Danann; by the primordial cessair; by the goddess Tailtiu of the Fir Bolg, and many others. Likewise is the pagan otherworld personified by a goddess. But unlike the various territorial goddesses, local goddesses and river goddesses associated with the mainland and given individual traits, those of the otherworld islands are anonymous, for it is in relation to the mortal hero that their meaning is created.

They are described primarily in their life supporting functions as territorial goddesses, mother, lover, and fertility goddess. They may be regarded as hypostases of the powerful and multi-functional magna mater.

The Earth Mother is a cosmogonic figure, the eternally fruitful source of everything. She is simply The Mother. All things came from her, return to her and are her. The totality of the cosmos is her body, she gives birth to everything from her womb, and she nourishes all from her breasts. There is no essential change or individuation. Each separate being is a manifestation of her; all things share in her life through an eternal cycle of birth and rebirth (Encyclopedia Britannica)

They remain tied to their land for which they are responsible in their functions as sovereignty and goddess of fertility and the conditions on the islands are manifestations of the goddess's power and her life - supporting functions - the extraordinary character of the natural environment, its beauty, abundance and fertility, the magic qualities of food and drink, the reign of virtues like truth, peace, justice, eternal life, youth and beauty, and the relativity of time, space and matter.

"Then if Aircthech is seen,  
On which dragonstones and crystals drop  
The sea washes the wave against the land,  
Hair of crystal drops from its mane

Wealth, treasures of every hue,  
Are in Ciuin, a beauty of freshness,  
Listening to sweet music,  
Drinking the best of wine." (Meyer, 1895, P.8)

As well as the life giving role - which predominates in the goddess - she also contains the death bringing aspect of the ambivalent magna mater, representing the origin and



fulfilment of all forms of existence. Her roles are embodied also in the female element of the sea over which the hero voyages, which as well as symbolizing the subconscious, is the primeval genesis of all life and at the same time dangerous and life devouring. The two aspects in the goddess are inextricably linked for she cannot fulfil her life giving role without first separating her consort from his own realm of existence.

The active and irrational goddess and her island realm across the sea are always the essential or only part of the pagan hero's journey. It is closely connected with the real world, their interdependence becoming obvious in the figures of the mortal and the goddess. They both recognise the importance of their union for the continuation and development of life on all levels - physical, spiritual, emotional, psychical. Both reach a stage of highest perfection, fertility and productiveness in dual unity. They are in search of each other and as such may be compared to the interdependence and attraction of two antipodes. As the female and prevalent principle, the goddess is the instigator in the establishment of a union with the opposite or complementary principle. She primarily defines her function in relation to the mortal hero - she knows that only through the union of the instinctive and irrational female principle with the rational male principle will the development of life on all levels be achieved. Just as the Great Mother takes her choice of male, so it was the privilege of the supernatural goddess to choose her lover or husband. The mortal hero often needs the help of the woman in order to fulfil a task imposed upon him, a task which is usually a necessary condition to validate his claim to the kingship or to the position of supreme champion. But it is only by the choice of the goddess that he may become her king and consort. If necessary she will go to lengths to entice him to her realm. Bran and Conle were both visited in Ireland by a mysterious women from unknown lands who enticed them to embark upon a journey into the realm of the setting sun. The Adventure of Conle is occupied solely with this powerful enticement. We know nothing of his travels since he cast off from the shores of Ireland, for before he stepped into the crystal coracle to begin the physical journey, he had already in a sense begun his soul journey through the power of the goddess's magic enticements<sup>2</sup>. His partaking of the magic apple left by the goddess (a symbol



of fertility and nourishment of life) signified the initial stages of initiation into the otherworld realm. From this time he was bound to follow the mysterious woman, however painful he felt in leaving his family, home, and mortal existence.

The goddess who enticed Bran entered his royal house through closed ramparts, "clad in strange raiments". This description we are given of her but her power and her life giving functions are again embodied in her description of her extraordinary and fertile lands, and in the silver branch which she left with Bran on her first visit and took away on her second -

"A branch of the apple-tree from Emain I bring,  
Like those one knows;  
Twigs of white silver are on it,  
Crystal brows with blossoms (Meyer 1895, P.4)

Trees and their fruit have an important place in the otherworld, as symbols of the goddess's mysterious power, they offer shelter and nourishment, and display the cycle of birth, death and rebirth with the seasons. Also the tree grows upwards, an upward extension of the earth, reaching into the mysterious realm of the sky. Likewise, birds also have a significant part in the island otherworld, sacred creatures which can inhabit the three worlds of earth, air and water. Coming primarily from the sky, and the soul. It also suggests rebirth and regeneration in its twofold birth, first as an egg and then as a chick. So the goddess by way of her description of her extraordinary realm, her beauty and the music of her magic branch<sup>3</sup> - lures Bran to embark upon a journey to the otherworld. When he arrives but does not venture ashore she hauls his coracle to land by way of a ball of thread which she throws to him and which cleaves to his hand. In her function as sovereignty it is vital that she brings him to her island to fulfil the re-enactment of the heros gamos or sacred marriage which is vital to guarantee the fertility and prosperity of her country, the physical renewal of life, and the continued well being of her people. It is a ritual which is central in initiation rites and is essentially a female rite instigated by the goddess to initiate the hero into supernatural knowledge. The ritual wedding comprises two main elements - a libation offered by the goddess to her consort during the feast (which is a partaking of the fruits of the earth), and the procreation of new life. When eventually Bran and his company wish to leave to return home, the goddess is



opposed to their decision but allows them to leave with the warning not to set foot on Ireland. They find the warning to be true for by the supernatural nature of time in the otherworld they have in fact long outlived their mortal lives, so chose to return again immortal into the oceans, where they are within the power of the goddess (though we know nothing more of their adventure). Mael Duin and his seventeen companions also in their travels come upon a pagan island of women, brought by a "swift green sided wave" (Oskamp, 1970, verse 28). Met by the queen and a beautiful girl, they were brought to a fortress where a bath of bright liquid was being prepared. After bathing with the queen and her seventeen daughters they feasted and slept together, the queen having chosen Mael Duin as her consort. This multiple re-enactment of the sacred ritual emphasises the importance given the rite. The goddess is in need of a consort because her previous king died leaving no male successor. So when after three months the voyagers try to leave she pulls them back to shore by throwing magic clew which clings to Mael Duin's hand each time he catches it. Finally they succeed in leaving by cutting off the hand of Diuran who next catches it. "The multitude, suddenly sorrowful, wept after them who were on the endless sea" (Oskamp, 1970, verse 28), for the goddess had lost her consort who was vital for the hieros gamos which symbolises the essence of existence whereby life on all levels is maintained. It is a universally felt fundamental, in Jungian terms an archetypal symbol which arises out of the psyche's collective unconscious.



## CHAPTER TWO - The cycling nature of existence.

For an ancient people living closely with their environment the cyclical rhythm of nature and life is deeply rooted and ever present. They experience nature as a cycle of eternal return which may undergo changes but basically knows no beginning or end. Life renews and regenerates itself continuously, as new birth succeeds old, the daylight and the seasons recur, as the nature of the waves and tides of the sea, as the cycling path of the sun and moon, and the life of the moon dying to be reborn etc.

In the words of Mircea Eliade:-

It is the moon which discloses par excellence the flow, passage, waxing and waning, birth, death and rebirth, in short the cosmic rhythms, the eternal becoming of things, time.....due to lunar symbolism, prehistoric man was able to become conscious of the temporal modality of the cosmos well before systematic thought had succeeded in extricating the concept of "becoming" and expressing it in adequate terms (Eliade, 1992, p.4)

The universal influence of the celestial sun, moon and stars is likewise deeply felt in Irish Mythology. The Senchas Mor manuscript tells of seven divisions above the earth consisting of the moon, mercury, venus, the sun, mars, jupiter and saturn. Of the stars they believed "as a shell is about an egg, the firmament is around the earth. "For them twelve constellations represented the year and the sun" runs through one each month <sup>4</sup> (Thorn, 1865). One of the most fundamental expressions of this movement and time, is the spiral, of which there are numerous representations on megalithic stones. At the entrance of Newgrange a standing stone marks time by it's casting shadows which on the winter solstice sunrise falls upon a vertical line engraved in the entrance stone, a line which divides right and left handed spirals, marking the changes in direction of the shadows of the sun. Every year the longest time of darkness makes way for the lengthening hours of daylight. It is a very simple expression of the continuity and changing nature of existence. Everything changes all the time, while change itself is unchanging.

A voyage across the ever-moving waves of the sea implies cycle and movement, a







sense of duration of time which encompasses a development from one mode of being to another. The vastness of the sea is like the unrefined openness of the vast void of death which is a separation from this world, which is a coming to an end of this mode of being, which is life. The fear of this crisis of existence inspires the imagination, so in the void is created a continuity which enables life after death in another world. So death, instead of terrifying, becomes a connecting link between the real world and the other world. For the hero, the cyclical nature of the voyage takes the basic form of his leaving his native land to be united with the supernatural mistress of the island realm, which he may later leave to return to Ireland, or he may find he can never return. It comprises aspects of death (departure from homeland), rebirth (arrival in otherworld island) and transformation (any change and development resulting from otherworld experiences). Life itself may be seen as a voyage which every human being undertakes, in the course of a lifetime moving continuously towards completion and perfection in various, more or less significant stages, for example from youth to adulthood, in the tales passing through symbolic death and rebirth from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult. The development may be of a spiritual, social, political, economic, psychical, emotional or magic nature and always involves some relation to time.

Whatever the various reasons and outcomes of the voyage for the mortal hero, the immortal goddess is in each the active force. Just as the succession and recurrence of the seasons is unchanging, so, as the mortal represents change does the immutable goddess represent the unchanging nature of change. Emphasizing the aspects of stability, eternity and everlasting recurrence, her realm and her activities are intended to maintain the continuity of life. Omnipresent, she is endowed with eternal life, like the land she personifies she is ever-present and ever-beautiful and her consorts change and succeed one another. Her most prominent roles as daughter, lover, wife and mother reflect the cyclical conception of the origin and course of life which is destined to end in order to be renewed. And so, the double symbolism in the hero's act of leaving Ireland for the land of women - a dying in order to be born again, to experience a new beginning. On the island of women, at rest, he is restored to a prenatal paradise, simple, nourishing, peaceful, protected and sensuous, where there





is only being. Mael Duin is told "if you stay here, you will not die: untroubled rest, smooth, soft clothing you will receive here" (Oskamp, 1970, verse 28). Life does not have the faults of this world - there is no personal ownership, ambition, theft and so on - but instead there is love, openness, truth and respect:

"Unknown is wailing or treachery  
In the familiar cultivated land  
There is nothing rough or harsh,  
But sweet music striking on the ear.

Without grief, without sorrow, without death,  
Without any sickness, without debility,  
That is the sign of Emain -  
Uncommon is an equal marvel (Meyer, 1895 p.6)

The voyage though is not merely a regressus ad uterum but represents a part in the spiritual and psychical development of human life, a re-experience of the womb on a different level. It is a conscious re-experience of an unseparated world which is only possible by separation from this world. It is a re-experience through which the mortal hero is aware of the cycling nature of existence. The unchanging nature of change Mircea Eliade terms the eternal return (Eliade, 1974). Just as the three days of darkness are necessary before the rebirth of the moon, so is human death necessary for regeneration. Anything that exists in life by its very nature loses vigour -

to recover vigour it must be reabsorbed into the formless  
if only for an instant, it must be restored to the primordial  
unity from which it issued - must return to chaos (on  
cosmic plane), orgy (on social plane), darkness (for seed),  
water (baptism on human plane, atlantis on historical  
plane....) Eliade, 1974)

So the mortal hero has to undergo symbolic death before his regeneration, but whereas nature recovers only herself, he recovers the possibility of transcending time and living in eternity (which is achieved for archaic peoples in a living mythology which through re-enactment of rituals that are without beginning or end, historical time is abolished).





This eternity Conle chooses over a mortal existence in his homeland:

"On a high throne sits Conle among the ephemeral Dead,  
waiting for fearful death. The immortal living invite you;  
they will summon you to Tethra's folk, who see you every  
day in the gatherings of your native land among your dear  
familiar." (Jackson 1971, P144)

Unlike Bran and Mael Duin, Conle's act of leaving Ireland was, he knew, for eternity. Compared to the other two adventurers, there is a greater sense of loss in Conle's departure. His father does all he can to stop him leaving and together with the enticement of the goddess the two modes of being are directly in contract to one another. Conle has to chose, and just as the goddess's magic wins over the druid, so does Conle's longing for her and her immortal realm overcome his love for his people, life as he knows it, and the pain and sorrow he feels at learning. In the Plain of Delights he will feel no such sorrow of leaving for in his immortal life there will be no departures. So he goes with the goddess in her boat of crystal to the Land of Living -

"I see the sun setting:  
Although far, we shall reach it before night,  
It is the country which delights  
the mind of everyone who goes about it;  
There is no race there save women and maidens"

He was never since seen around the shores of Ireland.

Bran on the other hand after spending some time on the Island of Women tries to return home but by the relativity of time in the otherworld finds that so many mortal years have passed that he cannot touch again the soil of Ireland without falling to ash. So he again leaves his homeland, choosing immortality. In the otherworld he has found the possibility to escape the eternal and irreversible cycle of time and of life and death, by transcending the human condition he has won Nirvana. For his companion Nechtan however, who returned to mortal earth, "great was the folly to life his hand against age". Mael Duin too was offered eternal life and to be "no longer wandering from island to island in the ocean" but he chooses instead mortality, returning home having achieved personal development by his experiences. By the re-







experience of his subconscious he has experienced and achieved a new level of being. The inevitable termination of the hero's harmonious life with the goddess also reflects his fear of the ambivalent Magna Mater, life giving and devouring. The wish to be united with a lover and re-united with the mother involves both desire and fear<sup>5</sup> Of this type of mythical motif Eliade writes:

It is certain that it preserves traces of a late "matriarchal" mythology in which signs of the "masculine" (heroic) reaction against the omnipotence of women (=mother) are already discernible....sometimes the hero, though invited to share in the semi-divine woman's beatific condition and hence in her immortality, accepts unwillingly and tries to escape as soon as possible to rejoin his earthly wife and his companions.....The love of such a semidivine woman becomes an obstacle rather than a help for the mortal hero...(Eliade, in Löffler, 1983)

This is true for Mael Duin and for Bran in his leaving the island of women initially but at the same time his fear of mortality is greater and he remains in the other world which is the realm of the goddess. Conle on the other hand, though he too feels the desire and fear, accepts positively her offer and never looks back. Either way, for the mortal hero it is a significant part in his spiritual and physical development.



### CHAPTER THREE: - The Dual Principle.

The ancient Irish were deeply affected by the fundamental duality, which in nature is manifested in various ways, as the day consists of light and dark half and the year a summer and winter half, as warm is opposed to cold and life to death and so on. It is a principle of profound meaning and many expressions. The Brehon Laws give evidence of the year divided into a bright half and a dark half - Samh and Gamh - the boundaries marked by the feasts of Beltain (sun's fire) and Samhain (probably summer end) which correspond with solar alignments of megalithic structures. Basically it is two opposing or complementary elements each of which are vital to make the whole. Symbolically day and night may be a microcosm of time and the whole world, as in this tale from the Book of Leinster:-

"....let me be granted"; said the Mac Oc,  
"a day and a night in they own dwelling". That was given to him.  
"Go now to thy following", said the Dagda, "since thou hast  
consumed they time". "It is clear", said the Mac Oc, "that night  
and day are the whole world and it is that which has been given  
to me". Thereupon Dagda went out and the Mac Oc remained  
in his sid (Rees, 1990 P.88)

The central principle of megalithic structures is based upon the interaction of light and shadow, and of the carved symbols, one of the primary ones is the quadrangle which seems to embody totality and the idea of the unification of opposites. In sky imagery the sun and moon represent two opposite principles, and stars multiplicity. Together they express time and space and the whole universe.

A central principle in Irish mythology, it is equally so in the voyage tales. The hero himself with the process of journey embodies the dualities of life and death in his symbolic rebirth. Primarily though it is a principle manifested in communications between human and supernatural world. While the human world is associated with the rationality of the daylight hours, the supernatural realms are closely linked with the dark hours of the night; day being order - the explained, the seen and night the



realm of sleep, of dreams and the unconscious, of chaos and shadows, the fusion of all forms and the unformed. Ancient voyage and adventure myths personify dualities through the figures of the mortal man and supernatural goddess. The man is named and given some history, and often the other major points of his life are recorded in other tales. Bran, Conle and Mael Duin are all first of all established in their real world with their family and home, for example Mael Duin "...was of the Eoganacht of Ninuss by origin. Ailill Ochair Agha was his father....his mother was a young nun...." (Oskamp, 1970). For him, his family and his place become the external reasons for his journey across the sea. He and the other heroes represent the rational forces of Logos. The supernatural woman on the other hand is a chthonic deity, mysterious and unnamed. She does not exist within real historical time but rather is omnipresent as Mother Earth, representing the active and instinctive forces of nature, the irrational, erotic principle. The woman from the Lands of the Living explains her visit to Conle -

I have fallen in love with Conle the Redhaired, and I summon him to the Plain of Delights.....Come with me Conle the Redhaired, with your bejewelled neck and eyes like a candle flame!" (Jackson, 1971, P143)

The subsequent union of goddess and hero is the union of man and nature, real and supernatural, time and timelessness, flesh and spirit, logos and psyche, etc. which is the mode of being of the absolute, the co-incidentia oppositorum (Eliade, 1992). It is a binary structure expressed in the Chinese I Ching, the ancient book of wisdom based on the oneness of man and the surrounding cosmos, and of the complementary pairs of opposites Yang and Yin which are inherent in the whole and which in the sacred diagram of t'ai-chi-tu are united, forming the very essence of life, and similarly in

the conjunction of the Serpent (symbol of the chthonic shadows and the non-manifested), and the Eagle (symbol of the solar light and the manifested)....or the paradoxical coexistence in the same divinity of polar and antagonistic principles. In Vedic India, the Sun, prototype of the Gods, is also the "serpent", Agni, the God of Fire, is at the same time an "Asura Priest", i.e. essentially a "demon". (Eliade, 1992 P.5)



In Irish mythology the three worlds - animal, supernatural, and this world - may sometimes be united in the her, like Cuchulainn who is of semi-divine parentage and was in his childhood identical with a hound.

Further, these myths as they were created and lived as part of a wider mythology were of an oral tradition which (as different to the preserved script) established a union of form and content (abstract terms symbolically expressed through concrete form), of body and soul, of spiritual and physical (as a cultural heritage embodied in an individual. The relation of words and music has a similar effect, and in the otherworld realms across the sea the power of the word, which is characteristic of the manifest world, is replaced by the creative, transforming and therapeutic powers of music. The supernatural woman who visits Ireland to entice Bran to her realms uses a magic branch which produces sweet music inducing sleep, the realm of dreams and subconscious. Living surrounded with the many musics of the natural environment it's magic quality was well known to ancient peoples, and finds expression universally -

In the Satapatha Brahmana, words and chant (rik and Saman) are equated with Earth and Heaven respectively, and in China "night behaviour" (Li) and music are similarly contrasted: "music.....is of the order of heaven, Li.....is of the order of earth....music was made manifest in the genesis of all things, and Li has it's abode in their completion. It is a universal belief that words have a creative power; they symbolize the manifest world. Music, on the other hand, brings us into harmony with the non-manifest, and to understand music, is to be at the secret source of Li".....(Rees, 1990, P.137)

The initiation of the mortal hero into the supernatural realm begins with his journey, by trusting in the positive forces of nature and the supernatural (guidance of magic creatures and supernatural beings, shipping or oars etc.) and next with his acceptance of the magic food and drink offered by his mistress. It is completed with their sexual union, the re-enactment of the sacred marriage, whereby the hero attains the wisdom of both worlds. It establishes physical, spiritual and emotional unity, and guarantees fertility and equilibrium wellbeing in the land. In the terms of Carl Jung the two, who represent the female and male principles would be the anima and animus, which is the



sacred union reveal their identity to each other and so lessen the original opposition of the male to the female. The dual principles become one through a love instigated by the goddess, which represents the highest order of love, and which cannot be absolutely realised in the real and rational world. At the same time it too embodies a duality, for love's joy as aroused by the goddess is in the savour of eternity, while love's pain as caused by the hero (his inevitable departure) marks the passage of time. The love symbolizes an existence in a higher plane where history and time and the boundaries of the real world are abolished. For the mortal it is a new mode of being, a new and widened kind of consciousness gained based on the re-experience of the subconscious on a different level. This transcendent plane of absolute realities is the freedom of a world which is at once open and mysterious. The desire to transgress the boundaries of the real world and penetrate into the realms of the imagination is met.

Just such a desire probably induced the creation of the tales in the first place, the instinctive drive to fill the void of the unexplored vast sea to the west, to fill it with imagination - the creation of an otherworld. The ancient otherworld islands - such as Tir na mBan (Land of Women), Emhain Abhlach (Emain of the Apple-trees), Tir na nOg (Land of Youth) Tir Tairnginie (Land of Promise) - attest to the breadth of the imagination of traditional peoples. Likewise, their megalithic stones and mounds are evidence of the deep effect of the other vast space, the sky. In a living mythology, the world is a living cosmos, articulated and meaningful, it is open. People too are open for they speak back through dreams and imaginative life, ritual initiation ceremonies, totems, and so on. So at it's best, a living mythology achieves an equilibrium state of dualities where mankind is not isolated in the cosmos, but opened towards a world of transcendent values, knowing he is something more than a human being (Eliade, 1963).

So the dialogue between the mortal hero and the supernatural woman from the realm of the setting sun represents a dialogue between their two worlds, the mortal world and supernatural world, and between the two principles embodied in the male logos and female psyche. It is a fundamental principle felt and expressed in a fundamental way, but containing the essence of being.



## CHAPTER FOUR - Effects of time and change upon the ancient philosophy.

While the ancient matristic principles predominate in Immram Brain, Echtraí Condle and Immram Curaig Maele Duin, they are not isolated, for alongside them there exist new perspectives, the influences especially of patriarchy and christianity <sup>6</sup>. The contents of the tales mark the meeting of two entirely different worlds - a world of ideas and imagination based on simple physical reality and a world of abstract logic. It is a new culture questioning the values of the old, the first to be questioned being the values of memory. It changed from being a myth participated in on many levels and opening out with the world around, into the written word - which by our age has come so far to the detriment of memory and the senses that by comparison we are only getting one separated level. On the other hand it is by the written word that they exist.

The new influences effect significant changes upon the central relationship between the supernatural goddess and mortal hero, between the female and the male principles and upon time. New realms have been opened up for the imagination, so there appear new reasons for the voyage (such as penance, sacrifice, resurrection), new islands (Christian terra repromissionis and the islands of hermits and prophets) and new inhabitants (holy men, anchorites, ascets or other exiles). Seen as they appear in the tales, side by side with the ancient pagan values, the new influences have a clearly negative quality, just like in the more ancient parts the real world takes on negative, male elements in comparison to the positive and life-giving goddess realm across the sea. The otherworld of patriarchy and christianity, then, takes also these male elements, to the ultimate demise of the goddess and feminine element who are increasingly banished from their former realm. Throughout the pagan otherworld it is the mortal hero who is effected by change; he has to undergo symbolic death to be reborn as the initiated consort of the eternal, ever-present, all-embracing Mother Earth. Under the increasing power of patriarchy and influence of christianity this is turned about so that the goddess and her central position are now the subject of the major change. Power, activity and truth are shifted from the





female to the male, and important pagan aspects like fertility, sexuality and abundance are replaced by asceticism, chastity and virginity. Mael Duin chances upon a pagan island which has been effected by these influences. It is inhabited only by a single woman who lives in a fortress with a bridge of crystal leading to it's portal from which the voyagers fall back when they try to cross, until, on the fourth day, the lady hauls their boat ashore and leads them to the house where couches are prepared and she provides magic food and liquor. But she refuses to lie with the hero-"...when she was sought for the leader on account of his.....desire she said she did not know actual sin at all." (Oskamp, 1970, verse 17). Instead she casts the voyagers and their boat magically back into the sea while they slept. So the quintessence of the hero's visit to the island of women is nullified by the new idea of chastity, which advocates platonic love and adoration rather than sexual desire. By this new principle, deprived of her activity and initiative, the woman is prevented from acting in the manner of the unnamed pagan goddess, whose choice of a mortal consort was based on the principle of fertility and manifested in their sexual union. The reference to the magic food and intoxicating drinks seems to allude to the libation the pagan sovereignty offers her consort, but they are denied the fulfilment of this initiation and so the only aspect of the original goddess that has survived in this island is that of divine nourisher. This life giving role too is eventually denied and taken over by God, as in one of the last islands of Mael Duin's voyage described by the man who lives there

"...after seven years, after I had fasted three days - a powerful dispensing, merciful is my King - I always have a half-loaf of bread and a morsel (of fish). The full of my crystal cup, it is a very great action, every night a dispensing of provision, sound and savory liquor"  
(Oskamp, 1970, verse 33)

So just as the conditions in the pagan island realm manifest the power of the goddess and female principles, so these later islands reflect a denial of the same. They reinforce and emphasize the new characteristics of asceticism, sterility and purity. Despite the presence of a perfect natural environment in some of the islands the christian pilgrims rarely partake of the simple sensuous delights, on the one hand because of their ascetic life-style for which God's provisions of bread and fish are



sufficient, and on the other hand because of the negative qualities now attributed to the originally positive qualities of food and drink. Some anchorite islands reflect asceticism in the purist sense - the hermits live on bare and barren rocks in the sea, finding shelter in a cave and living off the sufficient food received from God, with periods of fasting. The sea too can take on negative, dangerous and death bringing aspects, over which God can guide the voyagers to safety. There is a new element of fear <sup>8</sup> and a new attitude towards death because of the idea of reward and punishment for good and bad done in this world. Instead of the previous spontaneity and vitality there is punishment, pain and the horror of hell. The islands give evidence of the existence of an abode of resurrection which can only be reached by those who live by christian belief. Ideas of heaven and hell reinforce the finality of mortality, as compared to pagan otherworlds where life is a continuation of life in this world, renewing itself in eternal return just as nature does.

The experience of time as a whole has significantly changed. A living mythology in it's wider sense (involving initiation rites, taboos, rituals, the re-enactment of things which always have been and always will be re-enacted, things which simply "are", without question) serves to transcend or abolish historical time. Myths, containing evidence of their development over a period of time, are between the level of pure principles (symbol, magic, metaphysics) and that of immediate historical reality (memories of happenings and people). The clerical voyage emphasizes the later, for it is intended to fit into a historical frame in order to strengthen reality, so time, space and matter here is congruent with reality, as opposed to the pagan island realm where timelessness and the experience of the relativity of time regarding the length of stay is characteristic and also the relativity of space regarding the distance of voyage out and voyage back, and the relativity of matter regarding the visibility and invisibility of the islands, or the seeming character of the sea sometimes as firm ground. For us the chronological time contained in the tales is also effected by our specific viewpoint and relation in history, a society in which our place is constantly established within history. It is significant that in our age these myths, which are no longer a lived part of that wider mythology which we cannot know, are most often represented in studies which go to quite elaborate lengths to try to establish this



historical time quite firmly and accurately. It is a symptom of our rational times which have been arrived at directly along the lines established by the influences of patriarchy and christianity to which these tales attest.

So in the tales the elements of rationality begin to dominate over irrationality, real over unreal, mortality over immortality, unbalancing the ancient understanding of dualities. The denial is represented in the changed relationship between hero and goddess and their realms. Manannan Mac Lir seems to embody an early aspect of patriarchy, probably from celtic aristocratic warrior society. He is more or less the only representative of patriarchy in what is at that time still a predominantly female island realm. Bran meets him whilst voyaging to the Land of Women and hears his prophesis of times to come -

"We are from the beginning of creation  
Without old age, without consummation of earth,  
Hence, we expect not that there should be frailty,  
The sin has not come to us.

An evil day when the Serpent went  
To the father to his city!  
She has perverted the times in this world,  
So that there came decay which was not original.

....A noble salvation will come  
From the King who has created us,  
A white law will come over seas,  
Besides being God, he will be man" (Meyer 1895, P.22)

Woman then, as the active and instigating part in the relationship between Adam and Eve instigated the fall and mortal condition of the human race.

The relationship of dual principles ultimately achieves non- existence as the supernatural woman and the sensuous elements of her sovereignty are banished from her otherworld realm. The realm across the sea then becomes purely a realm of all the principles represented previously in the mortal voyager, so, instead of a dual principle there becomes only one omnipotent power. Rational logos and conscious thought is now central to the detriment of intuition, the psyche and the subconscious.

It is an attitude which has retained its domination so that in its logical development to the present time it has become an intrinsic part of society. We are constantly being told by society to use only the one side in our "real" lives, and so the other side is pushed down further and not so easily found and benefited from. So man increasingly builds a world for himself that is logos, in comparison to the ancient megalithic structures which find both principles aligned to the source of this philosophy, which was nature, including vast voids filled by imagination. At the same time, while logos still has the major power there are increasingly questions being asked of society and a desire or need to be re-united with the otherworld and with the whole psyche. It is something people are increasingly finding expression of and ways to re-experience and re-enact the cycle of the eternal return and the dual principle, re-establishing in a new way those elements which have been undermined, often directly through ancient teachings particularly Oriental and Occidental. The cycle of change of which the tales are evident would seem to be continuing.





## CONCLUSION

The aim of this work has been to explore the expression in the tales of ancient fundamentals of existence. They seem to be envisaged as two main elements, one being the cycling nature of life, and the other the idea of dual principles inherent in the whole. It is manifested in the goddess and hero, and, in their sacred union if it fulfilled. The outcome is for the goddess a fertile land and the continued well being of her people (if the hero stays as Conle did), and for the hero his outcome is well expressed in the process of the voyage which is a process of development on a spiritual and psychical level; it is a voyage from the conscious to the subconscious to a new consciousness. Further, the tales contain alongside this fundamental expression, and in opposition to it, a result of time and new influences brought to Ireland by other voyagers. We find that the expression of the fundamentals of existence has new voice which advocates rather, the non-expression of these particular aspects.

Central is the place of the supernatural goddess and her realm. A hypostasis of the ever-present, multi-functional, powerful and ambivalent Magna Mater, she gives life and nourishes life. It is the life-giving roles that predominate, for even in the symbolic death into which she guides the hero, it is a dying to be reborn, regenerated into an eternal life. Her functions and powers are represented also in her land which is abundant and nourishing. She is the active and sensuous force who instigates the hieros gamos for the continuation of the eternal cycle and for the union of the opposite principles, embodied in her instinctive mythos and her mortal consorts rational logos, which fulfils the wholeness of being. But she does not reign in omnipotence of such power as the Christian God, her reign is in fact a negation of the absolutely female, but rather aims towards the vital union of male and female principles. It is she and all she represents that are the active forces in maintaining the fundamental principles and, likewise, it is she and the life she maintains that is strongly opposed and eventually abolished by the new influences. It is likely that Mael Duin's and possibly Bran's departures from the island of women were effected, for, by leaving, the goddess is deprived of her consort for the ritual re-enactment of



the hieros gamos and well being of her land. The fear that seems to be present is, in Bran's case, overcome by the goddess as she then faces him with the bigger fear of mortal death, and so he returns into the otherworld ocean. It seems highly likely that the fear of the powerful role of women was at the source of these changes towards patriarchy. For an archaic peoples women naturally have a mysterious power and would seem to be the natural and sole source of life and nourishment - hence such a wide existence of the Great Goddess universally. In time the powerful role of women was questioned universally, and patriarchy began to establish itself, and so the goddess is deprived of her life functions and even more so with Christianity when a totally new beginning was given to the world - with an omnipotent male as the creator, and woman in the form of Eve came from the body of Adam, so the roles have been turned around, and in further answer to the active, instinctive and sensuous goddess, woman (Eve) is blamed now for the fall of mankind, for, tempted by the pleasures offered by the Serpent, she accepts the fruits of the tree of wisdom and then leads Adam into sin. So woman is given a heavy burden of guilt (though Adam's such easy beguilement hardly fulfils patriarchal man's power).

So the ancient fundamental of life takes on another dimension and one not only expressed in the contents of the tales but by our own wisdom of historical time. Similarly to the tales themselves, our experience of them involves a conflict between rationalism and intuitive faith. Clearly we do not experience them in their fullest sense, nor can we, but there is now a growing interest and an awareness of the value of realities that cannot be fully reconciled with reason or explained by history or science.

That of which he is unconscious and unaware is itself far superior to the empirical science and realistic art of the educated man....wisdom did not begin with us (Rees, 1990, P.23)

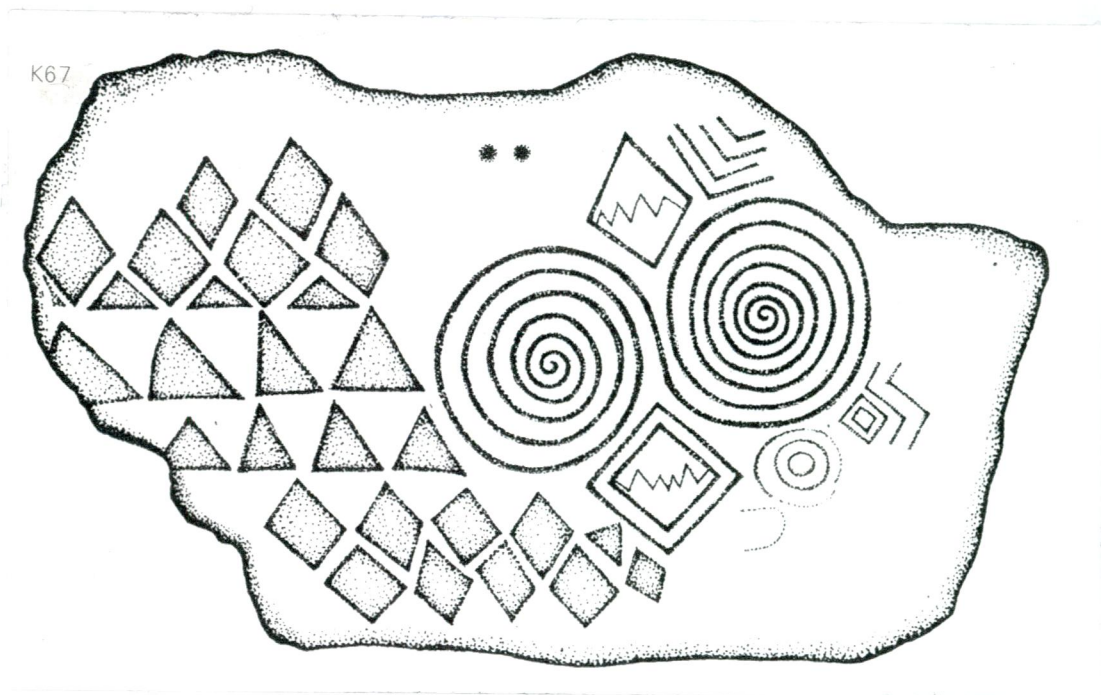
Religion and science have broken down the mystery of myth which, as has happened in many primitive cultures, results in disequilibrium of life - which is what these tales themselves express. So the expression of an ancient fundamental of life became a non-expression of the same, and the later abolished the former, especially in later

myths and in the perpetuation of the new principles into our time. But the myths still have effect and effects particular to our time, and by way of the two values side by side and our perspective, we realise these principles are fundamental and we have a place in a vast cycle of change, and we realise that the world is open and nothing is absolute.





1. Stone K67



2. Stone K1

The entrance stone



The quadrangle and the spiral, images of the universe in it's totality.  
Newgrange







3. The Paleolithic Venus of Laussel. Les Eyzies, Dordogne, France, CA 20,000 - 18,000 B.C.E.









4. Women performing the Dance of the Hours, originally mimicking the eternal movement of the stars and the great orbs, the celestial circle dance. Spain, Upper Paleolithic, after 10,000 B.C.E.

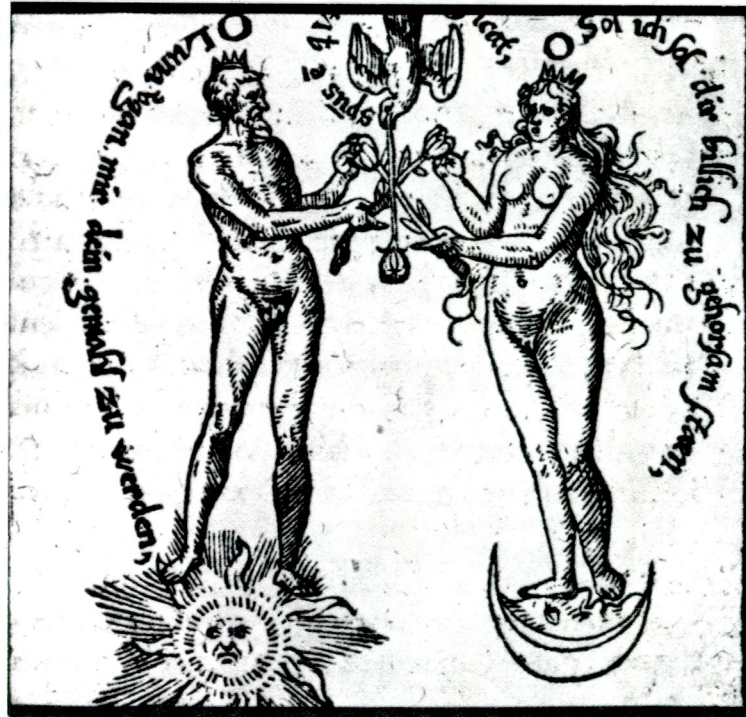




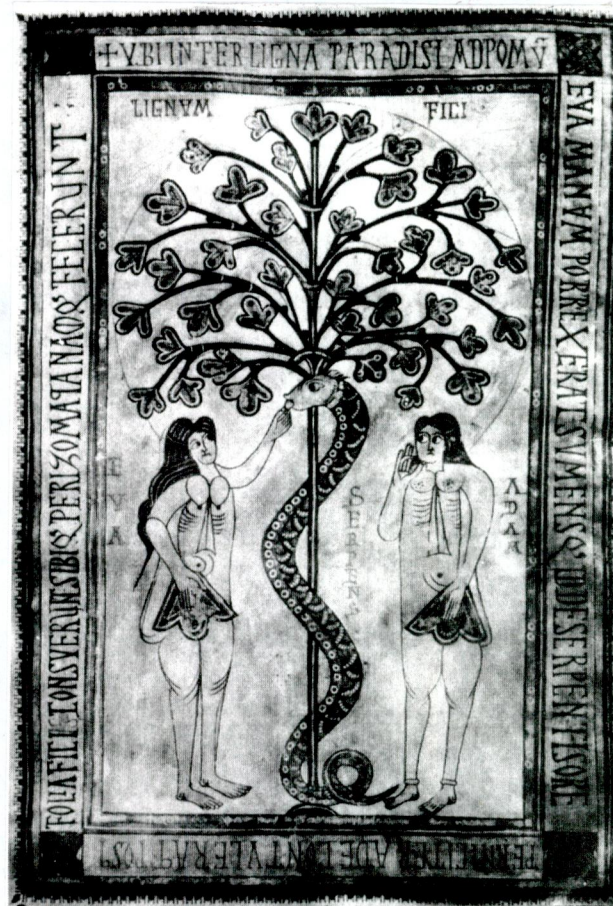




5. Woodcut symbolizing the male and female principles united



6. Adam and Eve, Spain, 976 C.E.  
Former symbols of fertility and abundance take on a negative role







#### ENDNOTES:

1. Women throughout Irish mythology have a prominent and independent position which may be related to their physical and religious significance as the source of new life. The ancient law tracts (Senchas Mor) also express this powerful and privileged position, especially the law of divorce whereby women were entitled to divorce their husbands for such reasons as if he were impotent, extremely fat, barren or landless.
2. The role of the supernatural woman as guide to the hero on his voyage may be compared to the female tutelary spirit of the shaman, his "celestial bride". Like the hero, the shaman has access to another world, a sacred realm that is only within reach of chosen mortals. Dreams, trances, and initiatory sickness mark the transition from this to the other world where the hero and shaman are reborn, and energy restored. Like the goddess, the shaman's celestial bride is his divine nourisher, and she too provides magic food and intoxicating drink.
3. The tree and the bird have central places in mythology universally, often a part of rituals and the shaman's flight into the other realms. In ancient times he had only to climb a tree to reach paradise.
4. See chapter three p16 on the quality of music.
5. Similar to Oedipus myth and Freud's arguments (ref. Appasissi, Richard. Freud for Beginners).
6. There is further evidence of these influences in the later voyage tales - The Voyage of Sredgus and Mac Raigla, The Voyage of the UiCharra - where the pagan island of women no longer exists; and in the adventure tale The Sick-bed of Cuchulainn which is very much a Celtic realm, an aristocratic and warrior society.





7. Fetach) meaning unknown; perhaps "wanting".
8. See fear of the mother pg. 13
9. This side, represented in the goddess, is still much mor a part of traditional peoples, such as Australian Aborigines, though their songs too are diminishing, enticed by the powers of western society.



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