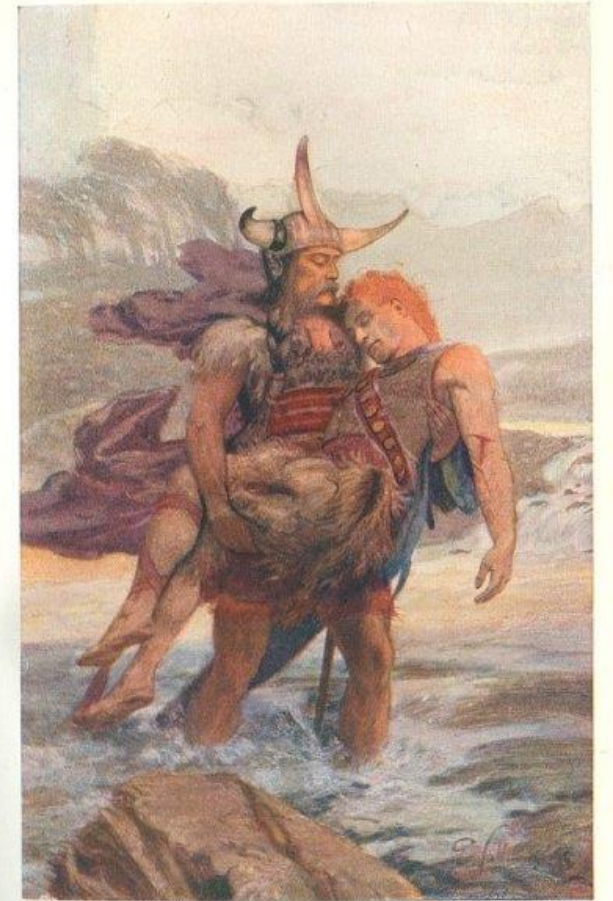


Irish Myths

Dr. Frances Clynes



CUCHULAINN CARRIES FERDIAD ACROSS THE RIVER



Prifysgol Cymru

Y Drindod Dewi Sant

University of Wales

Trinity Saint David

Background

- 'An oral tradition spanning approximately four thousand years. Besides the sheer duration of this interval, we must reckon with the momentous cultural developments which it included: the conversion of the Irish to Christianity and also, almost certainly, the arrival of Celtic language in Ireland.'
- John Carey, "Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis"



Background

- Arrival of Christianity - Early 5th Century CE
- Church Hierarchy Legally Established – 6th Century CE
 - Reading and writing
 - Bible and Latin literature
 - Around 700 CE
 - Myths written down in Old Irish (600-900 CE) and Middle Irish (900-1200 CE)
 - Prose and Poetry
- Written tradition and oral traditions existing simultaneously - but different



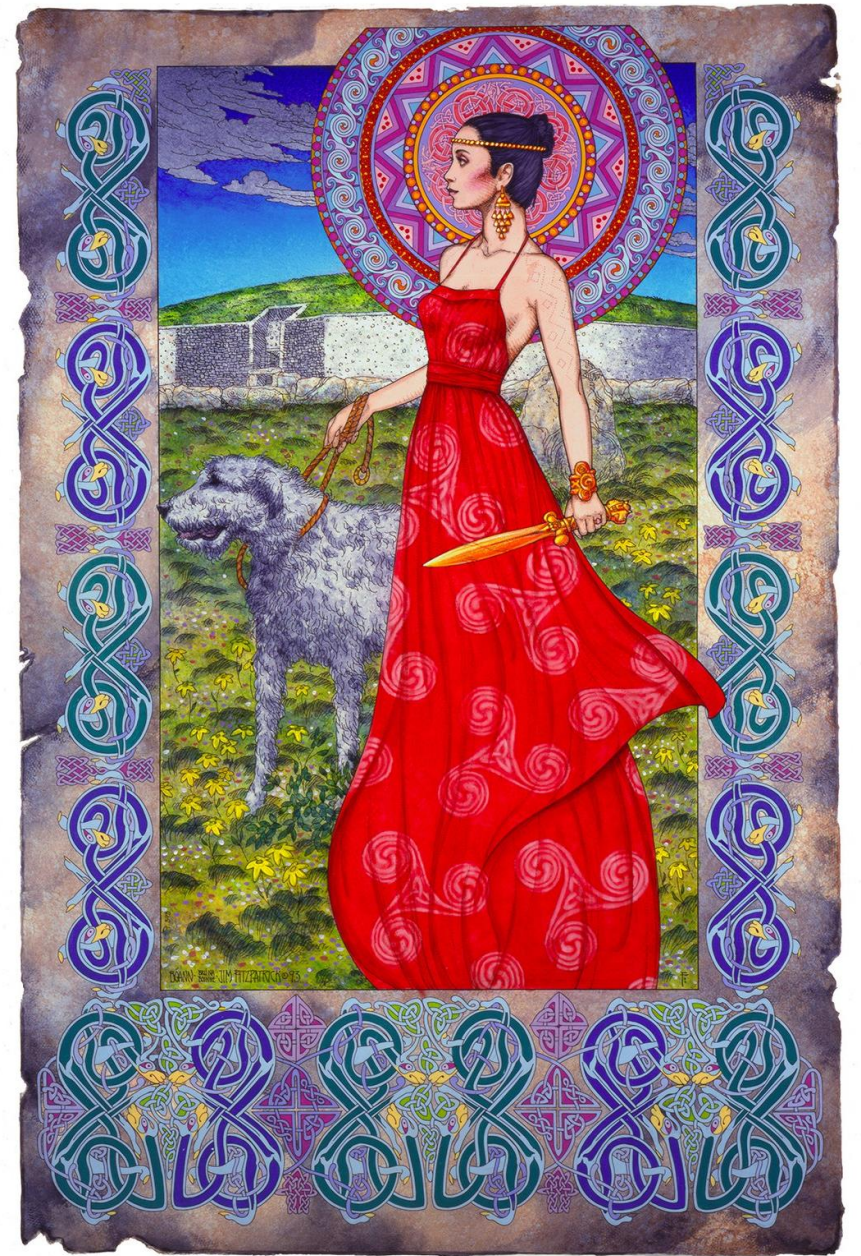
Impact of Christianity

- Euhemerisation
 - Gods and goddesses became human or saints
 - Literary figures and heroes
 - Death of the Immortals
- Secularisation
 - Functions separated from pre-Christian worship
- Reconfiguring the myths to match stories from the Bible
- Biblical dates



Chronology

- Before Christianity the myths were not viewed chronologically
- There were all just set in the past
- Christian writers tried to align certain figures with Jesus Christ
- Dates were set for all four cycles
- Mythological Cycle stretched back to Adam and Eve



Boánn of the Mythological Cycle

19th Century

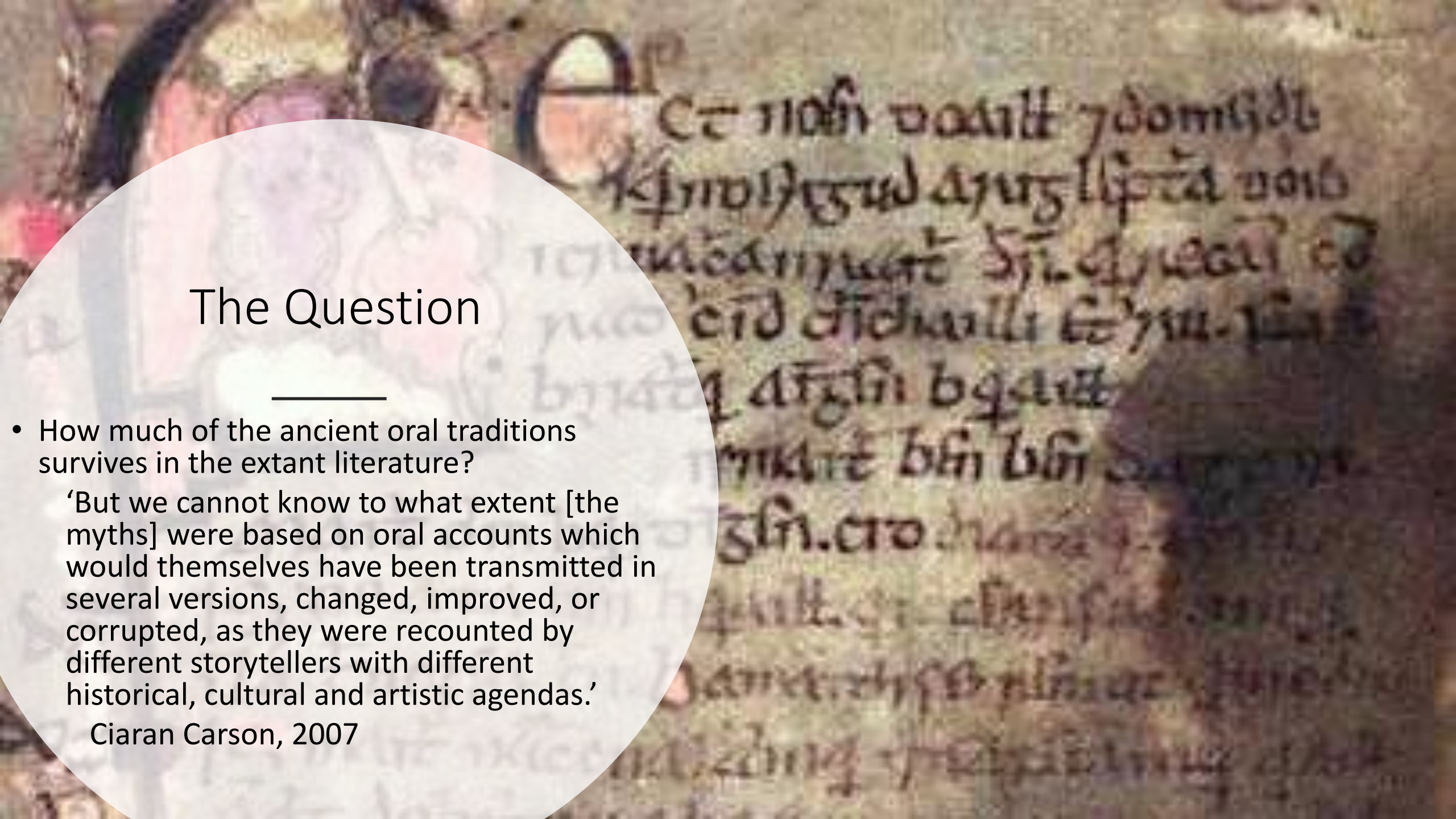
- Gaelic Literary Revival
 - Revival of Irish culture
 - Promote a sense of nationhood
 - 'It is true that we have no hope of an armed thrust at the might of England, but we can tear to pieces the calumnies with which she strives to hide her exploitation. We can retrieve our ancient culture and our language. ...The sagas and hero-tales even now are spreading amongst us as oil spreads upon water, iridescent and unescapable ... these are building up our nationhood: these and the Gaelic language.'
 - Ella Young, *Flowering Dusk: Things Remembered Accurately and Inaccurately*, pp. 65 – 66.



19th Century

- Role of women
 - ‘There are two distinct bodies of Irish literature: first, oral and written literature in Irish, which forms an unbroken tradition from the Middle Ages to the present day; second, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-Irish literature, written in English. These two literatures are linked by their use of the same corpus of early Irish tales, but they are separated by language and culture. The two cultures have, therefore, very different interpretations of the same plots and characters. The conception of women alters greatly from one culture to the other.’
 - Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen ni Houlihan*, p. 1





The Question

- How much of the ancient oral traditions survives in the extant literature?
‘But we cannot know to what extent [the myths] were based on oral accounts which would themselves have been transmitted in several versions, changed, improved, or corrupted, as they were recounted by different storytellers with different historical, cultural and artistic agendas.’

Ciaran Carson, 2007

Nativist

- The scribes incorporated large amounts of the early non-Christian oral tradition into the myths
- Although Christianised the flavour of the original myth remains
- Pre-Christian and Pre-Celtic belief can be found in the medieval literature
- Requires an enduring oral tradition
- View is 'long out of date in the academy'
 - Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals*, p. 47



Nativist

- The mythological beings who live in the Sid are the same Gods who were worshipped by the monument builders
 - ‘Can it be they who planted the first seeds of Irish oral literature and should one begin to think of this not as a window on the Iron Age but as one on the late Neolithic?’
 - Michael O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*, p. 48.



Newgrange

Passage 18.95m in length

Runs SE – NW

Leads to cruciform inner chamber

Floor of chamber 2m higher than entrance

On same level as floor of inner chamber

90cm high X 1m wide

Aligned with rising Sun on Winter Solstice



Nativist

- Muiris O'Sullivan
 - 'The timeline from the late fourth millennium BC to the early first millennium AD appears to be too long to accommodate a reliable strand of oral tradition. And yet, there are enigmatic suggestions of broad continuity, presumably interrupted and transformed along the way, but nevertheless sufficiently consistent to be explored.'
 - Muiris O'Sullivan, 'Megalithic Tombs and Storied Landscapes in Neolithic Ireland', p.14.



Nativist

- ‘Some of the mythic themes encountered in early Irish tradition are of great antiquity and, I suggest, they provide us with indirect access to some older European beliefs.’
- ‘These features...are a part of a common Indo-European inheritance and are thousands of years old.’
 - John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth*, pp. 4-5.



Anti-Nativist

- Themes in Irish myths are underpinned by the Christian tradition
 - ‘The scholarly consensus is that the sagas’ authors were not mere passive transmitters of pagan myth and ancient tradition. Rather, they were creative authors who hybridized their native inheritance with a vast body of classical and Christian learning, thereby engaging with the issues and demands of their own times.’
 - Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*, p. 45.



Anti-Nativist

- Earlier, I set out the possibility that the very existence of a pantheon of sorts in medieval Irish literature might be due to influence from the neighbouring island ... then the core and kernel of Irish mythology begins to look rather less indigenous than has traditionally been thought. There is no problem proposing that elements of pre-Christian religious culture might have spread from Britain to Ireland, as Christianity was later to do. Rather, I merely point out the possibility that some gods long regarded as distinctively Irish might have coalesced rather late and under Romano-British influence.
 - Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* pp. 37-38



Nativist

- ‘On the literary side, the earliest of the tales may go back to eighth-century originals, but the high degree of variation between them suggests that the legend continued to have an oral basis throughout the medieval period.’
- ‘The survival of some version of these ancient doctrines in the medieval literature indicates that the world-view of the Irish remained, at least in certain respects, astonishingly stable through out the intervening centuries’
 - John Carey, ‘Time, Memory and the Boyne Neocropolis’, p. 29.



Transition from Oral to Written

- 7th Century - Earliest written myths are short stories
- 11th century onwards – longer texts
 - Latin and Christian influence
- Myths about myths
 - St. Columcille meets ancients and hears secret information about the Otherworld
 - The Fianna pass their stories to St. Patrick and his scribe, Brocán, writes it down
 - *Acallam na Senórach (The Interviewing of the Old Men)*



Place

- Myths not just about events but about the sites where the events take place
- Important events like deaths of gods, goddesses or animals, battles and combats are commemorated in the landscape
- Stories usually unfold in real places
- Story and place are inextricably linked – to the present day
 - The ford where Cú Chulainn kills Ferdia is Áth Fherdia or present day Ardee



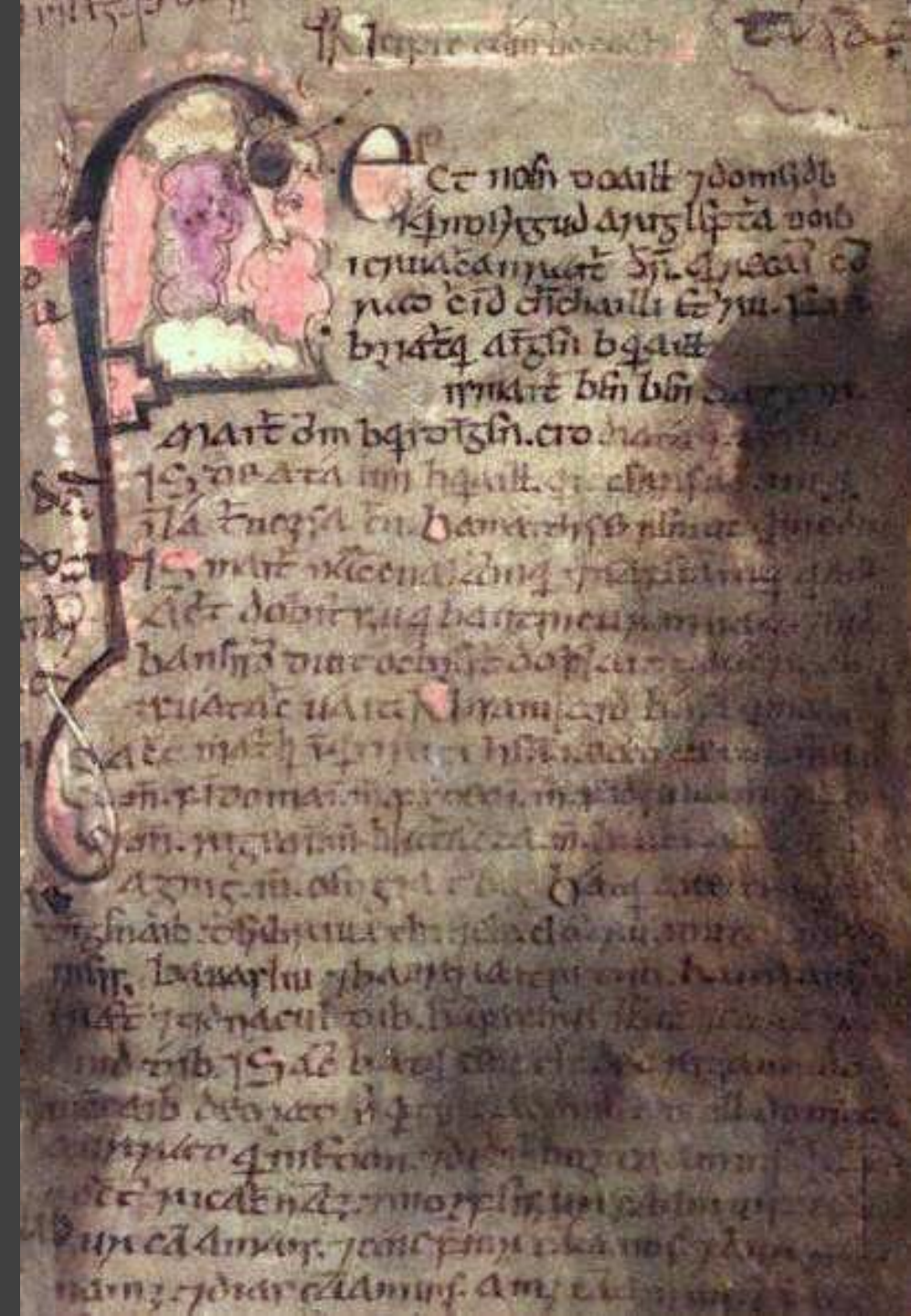
Place

- Sligo
- Wild Atlantic
- Surrounded by Mountains
- Mythology
- Ben Bulbin – the door to the fairy world
- Knocknarea – Queen Medb's tomb
- Brú na Bóinne, Carrowkeel, Sliabh Gullion



The Myths

- Four Cycles
 - Arranged by Myles Dillon according to the characters in them
 - Mythological Cycle
 - Ulster Cycle
 - Fenian Cycle
 - Historical Cycle



Gods and Goddesses

- Deities often associate with the natural world
 - Water – rivers, lakes, the sea
 - Cows and bulls
 - Horses
 - Some of the personal names of the characters in the myths are associated with deer
 - Oisín – little deer
 - Oscar – deer loving
- Local deities
- Move among humans who are never surprised to encounter them
- Tara, Newgrange, Emain Macha



Mythological Cycle

- Tuatha Dé Danann
 - Immortal gods
 - Arrived in a dark cloud from four cities in the north
 - Falias, Gorias, Findias and Murias
 - Four treasures
 - [Lia Fail](#), Lugh's Spear, Nuada's Sword, the Dagda's Cauldron
- Defeated the native Fir Bolg
 - First battle of Magh Tuireach
 - Led by Nuada who lost his arm
 - Airgeadlámh



Mythological Cycle

- Second battle of Magh Tuireach
 - Defeated the Formorians
 - A monster-like race
 - Lived on an island
 - Nuada is killed and Lugh becomes king of Tuatha
- Balor of the Evil Eye
 - King of the Formorians
 - Prophecy that he will be killed by his grandson
 - Daughter Eithlinn dreamed of a face – Cian of the Tuatha
 - Lugh of the Long Arm



Lugh of the Long Arm

Half Tuatha and half Formorian

Spear of Lugh from Gorias – invincible in battle

Samildanach – master of all the arts

Kills Balor in the Second Battle of Magh Tuireach, fulfilling the prophecy



Mythological Cycle

- The Sons of Mil
 - Skilled in magic
 - Battle of Tailtinn
 - Defeated the Tuatha and gained control of Ireland
 - Divided Ireland into provinces with Tara at the centre
- Tuatha succeeded in having Ireland named after them
 - Éiru was one of the Tuatha queens
- Now live in the Síd
 - Sometimes hinder the descendants of the Milesians the Gaels
 - Sometimes walk among people
 - Sometimes fall in love with humans



The Síd

- ‘A hill, a megalithic tumulus or pre-Celtic grave-hill. Its inhabitants look like human beings but they are different. In general, they are superior to humanity: they live longer or are even immortal; they are more beautiful and possess supernatural powers.’
 - Jacqueline Borsje, ‘Monotheistic to a Certain Extent’, p. 58.
- Synonymous with the Otherworld
- Bigger on the inside than the outside
- Roman offerings found outside them



Ulster Cycle

- Believed to have been written early in 7th Century
- More true to oral tradition
- Heroic Men
 - Conchobar Mac Nessa
 - CúChulainn
- Supernatural Women
 - Medb
 - Aoife
 - Scathach
- Táin Bó Cúailnge
 - The Cattle Raid of Cooley



Ulster Cycle

- Macha – daughter of the Ocean
 - A horse goddess
 - Emain Macha
 - Curse of Macha
- Medb
 - The Intoxicating One
 - Serially marries the king
 - Court at Crúachain
 - Access to the Otherworld



CúChulainn

- Son of Lugh and Dectire – sister of the King Conchobar Mac Nessa
- Short and heroic life
- Born in the Brugh of Oengus
- Called Setanta – renamed CúChulainn
- The Hound of Ulster
- Superhuman
- Battle frenzy
- Unconquerable
- Women cannot look at his face



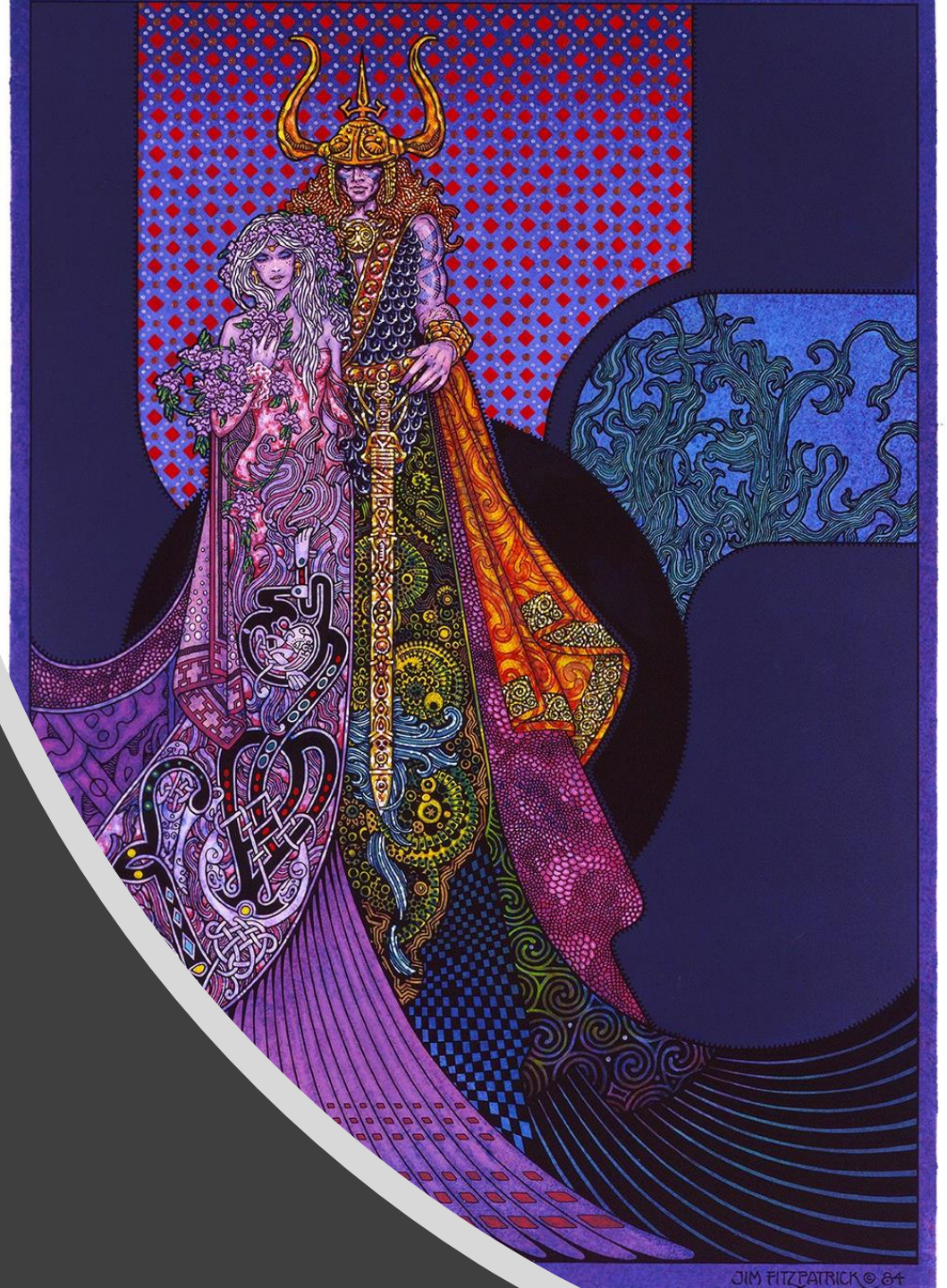
CúChulainn

- Joined the Red Branch at six years old and took up arms at seven
- Taught the secrets of war and weaponry by Scathach
- Gave him the Gae Bolga
- Ferdia
- Aoife
 - Connla
- The Táin
- Death of CúChulainn



Fenian Cycle

- The Fianna
 - Fionn MacCumhal
 - Huntsman, hurler, wanderer, poet
 - Ate the Salmon of Knowledge from the Boyne
 - The Music of What Happened
 - Diarmuid and Grainne
 - Standing Stones
 - Bran and Sceolan
 - Oisín and Tir na nÓg



CúChulainn and Fionn

- The hero of the tribe and the hero outside the tribe
- Both associated with hounds
- Both from the family of Lugh



Historical Cycle

- The Cycle of the Kings
 - Approximately one hundred stories of legendary and historical kings of Ireland
 - Continues into the Christian era up to the Middle Ages
 - High king at Tara
 - All four provinces
 - Mound of the Hostages
 - Sunrise on 1st November and 1st February



Historical Cycle

- Irish society and legend centred around the king and the idea of kingship
- The king was a sacral figure
- The centre of the cosmos
- Equilibrium depends:
 - The king's unity with the right sovereignty goddess
 - Validation by the Otherworld
 - Princes' Truth
 - Princes' Untruth avoided by obeying geis
 - Physical perfection



Historical Cycle

- Diarmait Mac Cerbail
- Copyright Judgement against St. Columille
 - 'To every cow its calf and to every book its copy'
 - Battle and exile
- Curse of Tara
 - Violated the sanctuary of St. Ruadán
 - Twelve saints assembled to curse Tara
 - Desolate forever
- Interviewing of the Old Men
- Fianna



The Otherworld

- Adventures (*Eachtraí*)
 - Heroic adventures with no Christian references
- Voyages (*Immrama*)
 - Predominantly Christian but have a non-Christian Otherworld
- Visions (*Físi*)
 - Describe the Christian Heaven and Hell
 - Exit from the body
 - Journey with obstacles on the way
 - A bridge
 - Encounter with deeds
 - Re-entry to the world



The Otherworld

- Very little barriers between the Otherworld and real world
- One can slip easily from one world to the other
- A place without disease, death, old age, sadness , decay, war
- Frequently entered by travelling over water
- May surround human beings but they fail to see it



The Otherworld

- Different Names
 - Tír na mBeó (Land of the Living)
 - Tir na mBan (Land of Women)
 - Mag Mell (The Plain of Delight)
 - Mag Mór (The Great Plain)
 - In Tír Tairngire (The Promised Land)
 - Tír na nÓg (The Land of Youth)
- Time passes differently



The Otherworld

- The Abode of
 - The Tuatha
 - The Fianna
 - The Sovereignty Goddess
 - King receives validation of his kingship from there
- CúChulainn visits it three times
- Manannán MacLir invites Cormac (Ulster) to visit



Sovereignty

- Sacred marriage to ensure well-being of the land
- Always a woman
- Serially marries kings
- Gives the king a drink
- Medb – The Intoxicating One
 - Had six husbands



Sovereignty

- Ireland
 - Cathleen Ní Hoolihan
 - Dark Rosaleen
 - Roisín Dubh
 - Sean-Bhean Bhocht



Sovereignty

- Baile in Scáil (The Phantom's Frenzy)
 - Conn of the Hundred Battles
 - A mist descends over Tara and a horseman brings Conn to a wonderful hall where a beautiful woman sits beside a vat of ale. She is the Sovereignty of Ireland. Beside her is Lug who presents Conn with a list of the future kings of Ireland





Newgrange
Neolithic monuments
& visitor centre



Newgrange Farm
and Coffee Shop

River Boyne

Stalen Rd

River Boyne

River Boyne

Google



ANTHONY MURPHY
WWW.MYTHICALIRELAND.COM



ANTHONY MURPHY
WWW.MYTHICALIRELAND.COM

Bibliography

John Carey, 'Time, Memory and the Boyne Neocropolis', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 10 (1990), pp. 24-36

Ciaran Carson, *The Tain* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007)

Rosalind Clarke, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses From the Morrigan to Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (Gerrads Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1991)

Gabriel Cooney, 'The *Passage Tomb Phenomenon in Ireland*', *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Supplement: Bru na Boinne (Autumn, 1997), pp. 7-8.

Gabriel Cooney, 'Newgrange – a view from the platform', *Antiquity* 80 (2006): 697-710

Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (London: Faber & Faber:1994)

Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009)

Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*. Thames and Hudson, 1982

Muiris O'Sullivan, "Megalithic Tombs and Storied Landscapes in Neolithic Ireland." *Journal of Neolithic Archaeology* (2010-08-23 2010).

John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014)

Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016)

John M. Wooding, 'Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past— Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 6 (2009), 51– 74.

Ella Young, *Flowering Dusk: Things Remembered Accurately and Inaccurately*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1945)

Images

Cuchulainn Carries Ferdiad Across the River, Charles Squire, "Celtic Myths and Legends", 1905, Public Domain

Finn McCool Comes to Aid the Fianna, Stephen Reid, 1932, Public Domain

Facsimile of folio 53 of the *Book of Leinster*, now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, Áed Ua Crimthainn *et al* (12th century), Public Domain

Statue of CuChulainn, GPO Dublin, Photo: Poul Madsen, Permission of Owner

CuChulainn's Stone, Photo: Poul Madsen, Permission of Owner

Saint Patrick and the Birth of Christianity in Ireland, Nheyob, Historic Church of Saint Patrick (Toledo, OH) - transept, Saint Patrick and the Birth of Christianity in Ireland, Creative Commons 3.0 Unported

Boánn, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/boann-free-download/>

Boánn, Cow Goddess, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/boann-cow-goddess-free-download/>

Beneath the Sky of Stars, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/sky-of-stars-free-download/>

Conaan of the Fianna, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/conann-of-the-fianna-free-digital-print-download/>

Brian Boru, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/brian-boru-free-digital-download-print/>

Diarmud and Grainne, Jim Fitzpatrick, <https://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product/diarmuid-and-grainne-free-digital-print-download/>

St. Columcille, By J. R. Skelton (Joseph Ratcliffe Skelton; 1865–1927) (illustrator), erroneously credited as John R. Skelton - Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall, Scotland's Story, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2546243>

Anti-Nativist

- ‘In the case of the former, it seems likely that at least a few Romano-British visitors paid their respects to the local spirits of an imposing site in their usual way, perhaps bringing to Ireland a ‘retro-pagan’ fondness for making offerings at ancient monuments. But if the Boyne complex had been so important, it remains difficult to explain why there are relatively few signs of earlier ritual use in a purely Irish context.’
 - Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*, p. 37.

