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Los Angeles

Birth Narratives in Indo-European Mythology

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Birth Narratives in Indo-European Mythology

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Doctor of Philosophy in Indo-European Studies

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This dissertation presents a study of the shared themes and parallel narrative structures of a set of stories about extraordinary birth. Stories about extraordinary birth form a universal story-type that displays widespread and striking similarities in narrative traditions throughout the world. Stories of this nature are typically told about various types of important persons, such as heroes, kings, gods, and saints, and have most frequently been treated within the context of the “heroic biography” pattern. Because of how well-attested this type of story is in all narrative traditions, a comparison of birth narratives from different Indo-European mythologies offers an ideal case study in the comparison and reconstruction of aspects of the Proto-Indo-European mythological system. While my primary focus is on stories from Indo-European sources, and particularly from Celtic, Greek, and Indic myth, several non-Indo-European examples of this type of narrative are also included in my discussion. The stories under consideration here can be defined as stories that describe a birth (often including conception and gestation) that in some way or another, and to a greater or lesser extent, deviates from what one would consider a “normal” or “ordinary” birth, from a social or biological standpoint. Stories about extraordinary births tend to emulate the progression of normal birth to some degree, though at every step the possibility for the distortion, inversion, and violation of the natural order is present. Because these stories mimic actual birth, a specific narrative structure is inherent to stories of this type and provides the starting point for

a comparative exploration of these stories in the cultures and contexts in which they appear.

The dissertation of Anna June Pagé is approved.

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FOR POP

In memory of my grandfather, who inspired me to do this in the first place.

Edouard Pagé

1909-2008

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SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

*	indicates a reconstructed form
AKS	<i>Abhiñskramaṇasūtra</i>
BhP	<i>Bhagavata Purāṇa</i>
CA	<i>Cóir Anmann</i>
DS	Diodorus Siculus <i>Library of History</i>
GRETIL	Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages
IE	Indo-European
Il.	<i>Iliad</i>
JB	<i>Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
JN	<i>Jātaka-nidāna</i>
KS	<i>Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā</i>
LL	<i>Book of Leinster</i>
LU	<i>Lebor na hUidre</i>
LV	<i>Lalitavistara</i>
MA	Buddhagoṣa <i>Majjhimanikāya Commentary</i>
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
Mtu	<i>Mahāvastu</i>
PB	<i>Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
PIE	Proto-Indo-European
RV	<i>Rig Veda</i>
TBC	<i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i>
TS	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
ViP	<i>Vishnu Purāṇa</i>

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Birth Narratives

In an 1884 volume of *The Folk-Lore Journal*, James Sibree, Jr. provides a translation of a Malagasy story to which he assigns the title “Ibonia.”¹ The version translated by Sibree comes from the Vakinankàratra region of Madagascar and describes the birth and deeds of the titular hero Ibonia. The story tells of two barren sisters who seek aid for their condition. They are sent into the forest to retrieve a sacred child-charm, and upon their return home they each drink a part of the charm. The elder sister becomes pregnant immediately, and the younger sister six-months later. The elder sister bears a daughter. When the time for the younger sister to give birth comes, she positions herself to the south of the hearth. Her child speaks to her however, and objects to being born in that place. She moves to the the north side of the hearth, but he again objects, and so she repositions herself again, but yet again he objects. He demands that a fire be built, that his mother swallow a knife, and that she then position herself to the west of the hearth. When this is done, he uses the knife to cut his way out of his mother’s womb, and then leaps into the fire. His parents attempt to rescue him, but he emerges from the flames unharmed. He then heals his mother and demands that she give him a name. He rejects all of his mother’s suggestions, however, and finally names himself in a speech which describes his greatness and supremacy:

I am Iboniamàsy, Iboniamanòro: breaking in pieces (*manòro*) the earth and the kingdom; at the point of its horns, not gored; beneath its hoofs, not trampled on; on its molar teeth, not crushed. Rising up, I break the heavens; and when I bow down the earth yawns open. My robe, when folded up, is but a span long; but when spread out it covers the heavens, and when it is shaken it is like lightning. My loin-cloth, when

¹Sibree (1884). Ibonia is also the subject of an epic poem known throughout Madagascar, which recounts his birth in much more elaborate detail.

rolled together, is but the size of a fist, but when unfolded it surrounds the ocean; its tongue (when girded) causes the dew to descend, and its tail sweeps away the rocks. Ah! I am indeed Iboniamàsy, Iboniamanòro.²

In this brief episode we can observe many of the features that universally characterize narratives about extraordinary birth in mythological and folk traditions. There is an obstacle to the mother conceiving a child; in this case she is barren. The conception finally does occur through unusual or even supernatural means. The role of the “father,” or mother’s husband, is peripheral at best. The child is marked as unusual even before his birth, here especially through his pre-natal awareness, a feature sometimes referred to as “fetal consciousness,”³ and his ability to communicate with his mother from the womb. The circumstances of the birth itself are unusual and often determined by prophecy, ritual, or even by the choices of the child himself. The birth may also be difficult, endangering the life of the child, his mother, or both, and immediately after the birth the child may face further danger in the form of natural elements, such as the fire in the story of Ibonia’s birth, or threats from members of his own family. The child is the subject of prophecies about his greatness and future deeds. Finally, the act of his naming is a significant one.

Stories about extraordinary births, or the births of extraordinary persons, form a universal story-type that displays widespread and striking similarities in narrative traditions throughout the world. Stories of this nature are typically told about various types of important person, such as heroes, kings, gods, and saints. While there are certainly stories about the extraordinary births of girls that follow this pattern, and several will be considered in the course of the present study, stories of this type far more frequently center on the births of boys, and so I will generally refer to these children as “he.” The subjects of these stories are destined to have extraordinary careers, and their birth narratives offer the first indications of their future greatness, as well as presenting them with their first challenges and dangers. These stories will often display not only the child’s

²Sibree (1884): 50.

³See Sasson (2007) and Sasson and Law (2009) for discussion and several case studies.

extraordinary nature, but will focus on his full destiny, and will thus prefigure his full life-story.

The stories under consideration here can be defined as stories that describe a birth – often including conception and gestation – that in some way or another, and to a greater or lesser extent, deviates from what one would consider a “normal” or “ordinary” birth, from a biological or social standpoint. Stories about extraordinary births tend to emulate the progression of normal birth to some degree, though at every step the possibility for the distortion, inversion, and violation of the natural order is present. Because the typical birth story mimics actual birth, its inherent narrative framework consists of a number of stages during which various incidents and signs mark the birth itself, and so the child in question, as extraordinary. These stages consist of: i) pre-conception, ii) conception, iii) gestation, iv) birth, and v) early infancy.

Even before the conception of the child takes place, there are generally indications of the unusual nature of the event. The union of the parents is typically complicated or even opposed by external influences. In Greek mythology, the case of Oedipus provides a well-known example of opposition to a certain set of parents having a child, whether because of prophecy in the case of Oedipus’ own parents Laius and Jocasta, or because of social taboos against incest in the case of Oedipus himself and Jocasta. In some cases the mother is unable to bear children, and her quest to become pregnant by supernatural means may itself form an important part of the narrative, as illustrated by the two barren sisters in the Malagasy story about Ibonia. Similarly Finnchaím,⁴ mother of the Irish hero Conall Cernach, seeks help from a druid to conceive a child, after failing to do so by natural means, and is instructed to bathe in an enchanted well in order to conceive a son.⁵ Omens and prophecies about the birth of the child and his destiny may precede the conception, and may even act to trigger it. Prophecies about a great destiny for the child conceived at a specific time occur in a number of medieval Irish stories, and typically lead directly

⁴Alternate spellings of this name include Finnchóem and Finncháem. I discuss Finnchaím primarily in the context of the story of Conall Cernach’s birth as it is recorded in *Cóir Anmann* “The Fitness of Names” (ed. Arbuthnot 2005 and 2007) and so I have adopted the spelling used in that text.

⁵Arbuthnot (2007): §264.

to the conception taking place.

Conception itself can take place in a wide variety of ways and be subject to myriad forms of opposition from many sources. Imbalance in the relationship between the parents is common: gods or other supernatural beings mate with mortals, foreign princes procreate with local princesses, children are conceived across lines of social status, and adultery and incest are frequent. Conception may also take place through a number of asexual means such as annunciation, drinking, eating, or through other entirely unexplained means. The Welsh Aranrhod, for example, gives birth while believing herself to be a virgin, and no explanation regarding the source of her pregnancy is ever given.⁶ In the story of Ibonia, the two barren sisters become pregnant after drinking a child-charm, while the mother of the Irish hero Conall Cernach, also barren, becomes pregnant after drinking water from an enchanted well.⁷ In other cases, no proper conception occurs at all, and the children are found in or born from various types of container. In Japanese folklore, Momotarō emerges from a giant peach,⁸ while in North American myth Blood-Clot Boy's birth comes about as a result of a clot of blood being cooked in a pot, where it transforms into a boy.⁹ The Buddha, meanwhile, is "conceived" when he enters his mother's womb directly through her side in the form of a white elephant while she is sleeping.¹⁰ Given these types of conceptions, it is understandable that the specific parentage of the child is often ambiguous or unknown.

The gestation can involve a number of extraordinary features, including temporal abnormalities such as very short or very long periods of incubation. Indra is said to have been born after

⁶The story is found in *Math uab Mathonwy*, the "Fourth Branch" of the *Mabinogi*. Text Williams (1964): 67-92 (story at 77-8); trans. Ford (1977): 89-109 (story at 98-9).

⁷Arbuthnot (2007): §264.

⁸For a translation of the story and detailed discussion of its history, see Antoni (1991).

⁹Thompson (1929): 108-113.

¹⁰Olivelle (2009): 4-5 (text and translation).

his mother bore him for “a thousand months and many autumns,”¹¹ while one story about the Irish king Conchobar’s birth describes a gestation period lasting three months and three years.¹² Conversely, a number of biblical figures are born after gestation periods lasting only six or seven months.¹³ The gestation period is also the most frequent stage during which prophecies and omens of the child’s future greatness occur. One particular sign of an extraordinary child is fetal consciousness, as displayed by Ibonia; while still in the womb, the child is already active, conscious, and able to communicate with his mother or with other people. Like Ibonia, Indra negotiates the circumstances under which his birth will take place with his mother while he is still in the womb, and the Irish saint Finnbar saves his parents from being burned by an angry king when he speaks from his mother’s womb and orders the king to free his parents.¹⁴

The birth is generally the central event of the stories and is frequently marked as unusual in a number of ways, including birth occurring from unusual body parts, from males, from animals, multiple births, and births accompanied by the simultaneous births of animals or other significant persons. Indra is born from his mother’s side, Athena from Zeus’ head, and the Norse giant Ymir produced offspring from his armpits and his legs. Another physically unusual way for birth to occur is via caesarean section, which generally takes place either because the mother has died, or because her pregnancy has gone on for too long, as in the case of the birth of Rostam from Rudabeh in the medieval Persian epic *Shahnameh*.¹⁵ Volsung, hero of the Icelandic *Völsunga Saga*, is also born via caesarean at his mother’s request after a gestation period of six years, and

¹¹Rig Veda (RV) 4.18.4. Text van Nooten and Holland (1994): 180: *sahásram māsáḥ ... śarádaś ca pūrvīḥ*. Translation Jamison and Brereton (2014): 586.

¹²Hull (1934): 9.

¹³See van der Horst (1978) and Sasson (2007): 50-51.

¹⁴Plummer (1922): v. 1, p. 11-12 (text) and v. 2, p. 11 (translation).

¹⁵Davis (1997): 104.

emerges as a grown boy.¹⁶ Multiple births, often twins but sometimes in greater numbers, are very frequent. In the *Mahābhārata* the twins Matsya and Satyavati are born from the Apsarā Adrikā while she is in the form of a fish after she accidentally swallows the sperm of King Vasu and becomes pregnant.¹⁷ The Hittite story sometimes called “The Tale of Zalpa” describes how the Queen of Kanesh gave birth to thirty sons, who were deemed a danger and cast into the river in baskets.¹⁸ The queen later gave birth to thirty daughters. The text breaks off after the return of the thirty sons to Kanesh, but it does so at a point where the thirty sons are debating marrying their thirty sisters.¹⁹ Birth may also be accompanied by other external indications of the significance of the event, such as earthquakes or celestial events. For example, RV 1.61, addressed to Indra, tells us that “in fear of his birth both the firmly fixed mountains and heaven and earth thrust against each,”²⁰ and 4.17, addressing the god directly, states that “At your birth Heaven trembled and Earth flinched in fear of your turbulence and of the battle fury that is yours. The well-founded mountains throbbed, the wastelands shuddered, and the waters ran.”²¹

Immediately after birth occurs, or after the child enters the world from whatever vessel has contained him, further signs of his greatness often manifest themselves, once again including prophecies. It is also at this stage that external threats to the child most frequently appear. Precocious behaviour on the part of the child, such as speaking, walking, or signs of supernatural

¹⁶Finch (1965): 3.

¹⁷van Buitenen (1973): 132-3.

¹⁸Translation Hoffner (1998): 81-2. Text, translation, and commentary Holland and Zorman (2007).

¹⁹Calvert Watkins discusses this story in “The Third Donkey: Origin Legends and Some Hidden Indo-European Themes,” in which he identifies parallels for the story in Greek and Indic sources and argues that they reflect the pattern of an Indo-European foundation myth. (Watkins 2004).

²⁰Text van Nooten and Holland (1994): 38. RV 1.61.14a-b ... *bhiyā girāyaś ca dṛlḥā dyāva ca bhūma janūśas tujete*. Trans. Jamison and Brereton (2014): 181.

²¹Text van Nooten and Holland (1994): 179. RV 4.17.2 *tāva tviśo jāniman rejata dyaú réjad bhūmir bhiyāsā svāsya manyōḥ | rghāyānta subhūvaḥ pārvatāsa ārdan dhānvāni sarāyanta āpaḥ||*. Trans. Jamison and Brereton (2014): 582.

strength are frequent. Athena is born fully grown and armed, as is the Aztec god Huitzipochtli.²² The Buddha famously takes seven steps immediately after his birth,²³ and we have already seen how Ibonia names himself and provides his own prophecy about his greatness. Herakles is renowned for being strong enough as a baby to strangle the two serpents sent by Hera to kill him. Accelerated growth is also a common feature of such children; the Welsh Pryderi and Lleu,²⁴ along with the Irish Bres,²⁵ all grow at twice the normal rate, and the North America Blood-Clot Boy ages from infancy to adulthood in the space of a single day.²⁶

While there is clearly a great deal of variation with regards to the specific ways in which the birth of an extraordinary child may be marked as unusual and special, the narrative structure governing such stories is constrained by its connection to the processes of actual birth and as such demonstrates a remarkable degree of consistency across cultural, geographical, and temporal divides. We find that such stories almost always introduce important cultural figures, and we find that all treat the birth of such a figure as a dangerous, powerful, and even transgressive act. Because the figures typically associated with these stories are of such importance, and because this type of story is so common and widespread, narratives about extraordinary birth have attracted the interest of scholars working from a number of disciplinary perspectives for some time now.

1.2 Approaches To The Study Of Birth Narratives

Given the widespread nature of these stories, the striking similarities between them, and the cultural centrality of many, it is not surprising that they have attracted the attention and inter-

²²Read and Gonzalez (2002): 193. Coe and Koontz (2013): 224-5.

²³Olivelle (2009): 8-9.

²⁴Williams (1964): 23 (Pryderi) and 78 (Lleu). Ford (1977): 53 (Pryderi) and 99 (Lleu).

²⁵Gray (1982): 28-9 (text and translation).

²⁶Thompson (1929): 109.

est of many scholars working in various fields. Anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists, and scholars of comparative religion, among others, have all studied and formulated theories about the nature, uses, and origins of these stories. The literature on stories about extraordinary births is extensive and represents numerous scholarly disciplines and perspectives on myth, literature, biology, religion, and theories about the universals of human thought and experience. I propose here to survey only a few of the main approaches to these stories and discuss them in terms of their relevance for the current work.

One approach is to treat these stories as representing contemporary understandings of reproduction, and to mine them for information about how conception and birth were conceptualized and experienced. In his 1909-10 study *Primitive Paternity: The Myth of Supernatural Birth in Relation to the History of the Family*, Edwin Sidney Hartland offered a survey of what he described as the “world-wide story-incident of Supernatural Birth.”²⁷ He argued that such stories were primarily the result of an inadequate understanding of the mechanisms of reproduction.

For generations and aeons the truth that a child is only born in consequence of an act of sexual union, that the birth of a child is the natural consequence of such an act performed in favouring circumstances, and that every child must be the result of such an act and of no other cause, was not realised by mankind, that down to the present day it is imperfectly realised by some peoples, and that there are still others among whom it is unknown.²⁸

While it is impossible to know what circumstances or views of reproduction might have initially informed the development of this category of story, it is clear that it remains a very productive type even into the present day.²⁹ Stories about supernatural or miraculous conceptions and births

²⁷Hartland (1909-10): v. i, v.

²⁸Hartland (1909-10): v. ii, 250.

²⁹Stories of this type retain their fascination for modern audiences, but have migrated from the realms of myth, religion, and folktale, and now exist primarily in the areas of medical abnormalities and urban legends. For example,

co-exist very comfortably with a clear understanding of the father’s role in reproduction, and have done so for a very long time; the Vedic *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, for example, attests to an awareness of the female reproductive cycle, since it claims that “women get offspring after their period.”³⁰ The culture represented in Vedic literature is replete with stories of extraordinary, miraculous, and unnatural conceptions and births, yet lexically and legally recognizes and distinguishes between the different parts of a woman’s cycle of fertility. I have already referred to the story in the *Mahābhārata* in which a king attempts to impregnate his wife by having her swallow his sperm, which indicates a clear understanding of the father’s contribution to conception. It is also hard to imagine the members of any community that practices agriculture and keeps livestock being unaware of the relationship between sex and procreation. It is difficult to reconcile any of this with Hartland’s claim that stories about “supernatural” birth are the product of complete “physiological ignorance.”³¹ Hartland fails to consider the functional aspects of these stories within their narrative and cultural frameworks, focusing on the ways in which they fail to accurately describe the mechanics of human reproduction rather than investigating their symbolic significance.

Other avenues of investigation into these stories have focused more directly on their connection with the medical realities of birth. Iavazzo et al. (2008), for example, examine incidents of extraordinary birth in Greek myth and conclude that “we can find obstetrical problems that are

in February of 2014, the *Osun Defender*, a Nigerian newspaper, published a story about a woman who gave birth to a stone after a four-year pregnancy (Omitaomu (2014)). The product of such a birth is known as a *lithopedion*, and while uncommon they attract sufficient media attention to make it easy to turn up multiple reports of similar births in many countries, from Columbia to China. Similarly, the recent birth of “mono mono” twins in Ohio was ubiquitous in social media for several days in early May of 2014 and was widely reported by the mainstream media as well – CBS news, for example, reported the birth under the headline “Rare ‘mono mono’ twins hold hands at birth,” playing up the extraordinary aspects of the birth by emphasizing the apparent pre-natal emotional connection between the twins ((Unattributed) - CBS News). Meanwhile, both Snopes.com and the *Discover Magazine* blog (*Discoblog*) have tackled stories about conception taking place when semen is transferred from the male to the female by an object. Snopes examines the history of the urban legend about a woman who becomes pregnant when a bullet passes through a man’s testicles and then hits her and enters her uterus, which can be traced back at least to the late 19th century (Mikkelson and Mikkelson (2008)). The *Discoblog* examines variant of this story in which a man and then a woman is stabbed with the same knife ((Unattributed) - *Discoblog*).

³⁰Jamison (1991): 215.

³¹Hartland (1909-10): v. ii, 249.

similar to the ones of today described thousands of years ago in the Greek myths.”³² Among the accounts of the births of Greek gods and heroes, Iavazzo et al. identify what they label as incidents of “assisted reproduction,”³³ “superfecundation,” “ectopic pregnancy,”³⁴ “preterm labour,” “prolonged pregnancy,” and “caesarean section.”³⁵ While here we may indeed find reflections of actual medical difficulties known to the early Greeks, these stories are certainly not intended to address problems of human reproduction, and without the corroboration of non-mythological sources, it is difficult to pursue the question of what resonance these myths might have had with actual experiences of birth in the world of the ancient Greeks.

Scholars within the field of mythological and religious studies have taken a different approach to this material. Stories about extraordinary birth have been treated as connected to or even reflecting various ritual practices. Lord Raglan, in *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, took the stance that “what a myth really is is a narrative linked with a rite.”³⁶ In studying the narrative patterns underlying hero-tales (which I will discuss more fully below), Raglan argued that the consistency of the features of the pattern “strongly suggest a ritual pattern.”³⁷ Since the major categories of narrative episodes identified by Raglan are primarily centered on the hero’s birth, his gaining the throne, and his death, Raglan concludes that they “correspond to the three principal *rites de passage* – that is to say, the rites at birth, at initiation, and at death.”³⁸

In their extensive study of birth stories from the Celtic cultures in *Celtic Heritage*, Alwyn and

³²Iavazzo et al. (2008): 13.

³³Iavazzo et al. (2008): 11.

³⁴Iavazzo et al. (2008): 12.

³⁵Iavazzo et al. (2008): 13.

³⁶Raglan (1936): 89. The citations for Lord Raglan refer to the page numbers of the Segal (1990) reprint.

³⁷Raglan (1936): 148.

³⁸Raglan (1936): 148.

Brinley Rees echo Raglan's view of these stories. They state that "in human societies generally, the times when a person becomes the central figure in a ritual are those of his birth and baptism, initiation and marriage, death and burial. The myth has a bearing upon the meaning of these rites."³⁹ In medieval Irish literature, we find evidence for a specific genre of stories centered on extraordinary births, the *comperta* (singular *compert*),⁴⁰ and Rees and Rees speculate that "it was appropriate to recount them at the birth of human children" and that "they had a validity as exemplars in the light of which the meaning of an ordinary birth could be apprehended."⁴¹ In certain cases, the link between ritual practices and stories about extraordinary birth is quite clear. In *The Orphic Hymns*, M.L. West's study of birth of the Greek god Dionysus as it is preserved in the Orphic "Eudemian Theogony" demonstrates that it reflects the practices of initiation rituals (both for boys entering the adult community and shamanic initiations) and rituals of animal sacrifice.⁴² This story will receive further consideration in chapter three. The connection between myth and ritual is not an intrinsic one, however, and many stories about extraordinary birth must be understood within their wider narrative and theological contexts.

One recent study of particular relevance is that of Vanessa R. Sasson in *The Birth of Moses and the Buddha: A Paradigm for the Comparative Study of Religions*. Sasson approaches the stories about the births of Moses and the Buddha not just with a view to understanding their narrative similarities, but is interested also in understanding the function of these miraculous births within their respective religious frameworks. She emphasizes that recognizing and studying the differences between the stories is more significant for properly understanding them on a functional level than merely identifying similarities between the narratives. Sasson states that:

The similarities are surely archetypal as they appear in religious narratives that

³⁹Rees and Rees (1961): 213.

⁴⁰From the verb *con-beir* "to conceive, beget, bring forth."

⁴¹Rees and Rees (1961): 226.

⁴²West (1983): 140-175.

were not likely to be connected historically. But as with all archetypes, they are merely forms. At times, both the forms and their interpretations are similar, while in other instances, the interpretations and function of these forms reveal very different priorities for each religion. It is indeed by way of these differences that the individuality of each religion emerges with great clarity.⁴³

Sasson here calls attention to the absolute necessity of considering these stories in terms of both their forms and their functions, and taking into account both their similarities and differences. Indeed, simply asking what the function of such stories is is far too restrictive an approach. Rather, we must ask what *range* of functions these stories can fulfill. As will become clear, stories that are quite similar with regards to their formal properties may be put to widely different uses, and conversely stories that diverge formally may serve the same functional purpose. Sasson here also emphasizes the value of comparative study for its own sake, as opposed to a means to the end of reconstruction.

In terms of understanding both the form and function of narratives about extraordinary birth, several studies have sought to identify a narrative structure underlying these types of stories. The most well-known and comprehensive approach is represented in studies of the so-called “heroic biography” pattern. Studies of this pattern typically focus primarily on the identification and interpretation of a single underlying structure shared among the stories and on seeking to account for the widespread attestation of this pattern. While I will take the heroic biography as a starting point for understanding the narrative framework of stories about extraordinary birth, a closer examination of their structural patterns reveals a much greater degree of articulation in the underlying narrative pattern than is captured by any of the formulations of the heroic biography, and variations of the pattern are frequently keyed to the functionality of the narrative in various contexts. Formulations of the heroic biography typically involve the entire life-cycle of the hero, from conception through death; however, I will focus primarily on those features of

⁴³Sasson (2007): 153.

the pattern which relate specifically to birth, in terms of the five stages previously outlined as: i) pre-conception, ii) conception, iii) gestation, iv) birth, and v) early infancy. My discussion will include consideration not only of narrative similarities, but also differences in terms of both form and function.⁴⁴

The heroic biography is an internationally known narrative pattern characteristic especially of accounts of the lives of heroic or sacred figures. Archer Taylor's "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative" offers a detailed history of the development of scholarship on the pattern.⁴⁵ The first description of the pattern is that of J.G. von Hahn in 1867. Von Hahn referred to the pattern as the "*Arische Aussetzungs-und-Rückkehr-Formel*" ("Aryan Expulsion and Return formula") and offered an initial formulation consisting of sixteen points, distributed across the three main stages of "birth," "youth," and "return," and a fourth category of "subordinate figures."⁴⁶ Von Hahn's work was largely neglected because it was framed within the theory of solar mythology, which fell out of favour soon after. An exception to this initial lack of interest in von Hahn's work was Alfred Nutt's 1881 study "The Aryan Expulsion and Return Formula in the Folk and Hero Tales of the Celts."⁴⁷ Nutt examined materials from the medieval literary traditions of Ireland and Wales, as well as stories from the later folklore of Ireland and Scotland, and demonstrated the widespread occurrence of the pattern in the narratives of the Celtic cultures. Based on his observations, Nutt made several modifications to von Hahn's original sixteen points, and added a further two. The "von Hahn/Nutt" formulation of the heroic biography pattern is as follows,

⁴⁴In terms of formulations of the birth episode in particular, Rees and Rees, in their discussion of stories about extraordinary births in Celtic traditions provide a list of the features that they argue form the structure of these narratives. (Rees and Rees (1961): 223-4.) I have provided this in the Appendix. In a 2012 paper presented to the International Celtic Studies Postgraduate Seminar at the Phillips Universität in Marburg, I argued for a 15-point structure underlying many of the Irish *comperta* and other birth narratives. (Pagé (2012): 18-30.) This has also been included in the Appendix.

⁴⁵Taylor (1964).

⁴⁶von Hahn (1867).

⁴⁷Nutt (1881).

with Nutt's additions to the pattern represented in italics, following his own practice:⁴⁸

1. Hero born out of wedlock, *or posthumously, or supernaturally.*
2. Mother, princess residing in her own country.
3. Father, god or hero from afar.
4. Tokens and warnings of hero's future greatness.
5. He is in consequence driven from home.
6. He is suckled by wild beasts.
7. Is brought up by a childless (shepherd) couple, *or by a widow.*
8. Is of a passionate and violent disposition.
9. Seeks service in foreign lands.
 - 9a. *He attacks and slays monsters.*
 - 9b. *He acquires supernatural knowledge through eating a magic fish.*
10. He returns to his own country, retreats, *and again returns.*
11. Overcomes his enemies, frees his mother, and seats himself on the throne.
12. He founds cities.
13. The manner of his death is extraordinary.
14. He is accused of incest; he dies young.
15. He injures an inferior, who takes revenge upon him or upon his children.
16. He slays his younger brother.

Both von Hahn and Nutt were operating under the assumption that the pattern was a particularly Indo-European (“*Arische*”/“Aryan”) one. In terms of the birth of the hero, the core elements here are the identities of his parents and the nature of the relationship between them, the use of prophecy and other signs as a warning about the hero's nature, exile, and, finally, rescue.

In the early twentieth century two additional studies offering further formulations of the pattern appeared: that of Otto Rank in *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, published in 1909 (translated into English as *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* in 1914), which takes a Freudian approach to the stories, and that of Lord Raglan in 1936, which, as we have seen, takes a myth-ritualist view.⁴⁹ The works of Rank and Raglan are certainly among the best known and most influential formulations of the pattern, and Raglan in particular is to be credited with including

⁴⁸Nutt (1881): 1-2. This list is also reproduced in the Appendix.

⁴⁹Rank (1914) and Raglan (1936). References to Rank's work are cited after the Segal (1990) reprint. Their formulations of the pattern are both reproduced in full in the Appendix.

heroes from beyond the Indo-European and adjacent Near Eastern world in his study, thus disproving the assertion that the pattern was “Aryan.” Rank’s formulation of the early stage of the hero’s life - that pertaining to his conception, birth, and early infancy, is as follows:

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or an oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman.⁵⁰

As in the von Hahn/Nutt formulation of the pattern, the identities of and relationship between the parents is crucial, particularly in terms of what obstacles might prevent their conceiving a child. Prophecy again makes the hero a threat to someone, particularly a father or father-figure, and again this leads to the hero’s exile and subsequent rescue.

Lord Raglan’s formulation does not differ substantially from those of von Hahn, Nutt, or Rank. Raglan’s description of the conception, birth, and early infancy of the hero shows the same concern with who the parents are and what obstacles they face. Raglan suggests the possibilities of incest, supernatural conception, and confused or divine paternity. There is no mention here of prophecy, but the typical consequences of prophecy are present in the attempt of a male relative to kill the child, leading to his rescue and exile in a foreign or distant land.

Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) further expanded the types of stories treated in examining the uses of the pattern. As Taylor describes it, Campbell “throws his net wider than anyone had done before him, catching in it stories of the gods, heroic tradition, and

⁵⁰Segal (1990): 57.

fairy tales.”⁵¹ Campbell’s resulting “monomyth” has of course been highly popular, and his study offers a theory of the evolution of the pattern from an earlier “semi-animal man-hero” to a “later, fully human type.”⁵² Campbell is largely uninterested in the birth of the hero, however. Robert Segal, in contrasting Rank’s work with Campbell’s, states that

Just as Rank confined heroism to the first half of life, so Campbell restricts it to the second half. ... Where Rank’s scheme ends, Campbell’s begins: with the adult hero ensconced at home. ... Campbell does acknowledge heroism in the first half of life and even cites Rank’s monograph, but he demotes this youthful heroism to mere preparation for adult heroism: he calls it the ‘childhood of the human hero’. **Birth itself he dismisses as unheroic because it is not done consciously.**⁵³

I have already discussed the ways in which birth poses a real threat to the child being born, and I have given examples of heroes who are aware before their births and make conscious efforts to control the circumstances and dangers of their births, and who actively confront threats in early infancy. In their ability to interact with the world and affect the circumstances of their entry into it, these children demonstrate that the full agency of the hero in confronting and overcoming obstacles and dangers is no way restricted to the adult stage of their careers, but rather can be present even during the gestational phase. In my discussion of some of these birth stories in chapter three, I will argue that in the case of certain heroes, their successful birth is in fact their first heroic deed.

The heroic biography pattern also continued to be explored in the works of Celticists and is well-represented in works such as T. F. O’Rahilly’s *Early Irish History and Mythology* (1946) and Rees and Rees’ *Celtic Heritage* (1961), which devotes an entire chapter to the narrative category of “births.” The most important and extensive work on the subject of the heroic biography pattern

⁵¹Taylor (1964): 119.

⁵²Campbell (1949): 338.

⁵³Segal (1990): xvii. Emphasis mine.

in Celtic tradition is Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (1977). Ó Cathasaigh provides a history of work on the heroic biography, particularly with respect to its Celtic manifestations, and identifies a number of concerns specific to the study of the Irish materials. One question raised by Ó Cathasaigh is that of the nature of the "hero" at the center of the pattern. He points out that "the general practice has been to take the martial hero as the norm,"⁵⁴ and goes on to argue that in fact standard heroic biographies can also be centered on other types of figures as well: "in Irish tradition, as elsewhere, the heroic biography is not limited to martial figures, and ... it does not always relate to a setting dominated by military aristocracy and celebrating martial virtues."⁵⁵ Indeed, in Ireland and elsewhere, many of the subjects of heroic biographies, and of the birth tales to be examined here, are far from "martial figures," including as they do gods, saints, poets, messianic figures, and women. I will return to the question of the hero and other types of figures as the subject of the heroic biography pattern in greater detail in my second chapter. Ó Cathasaigh's analysis of Cormac mac Airt's heroic biography operates on multiple levels, and demonstrates the many ways in which the underlying archetypal narrative pattern was adapted to concerns central to the Irish narrative and mythological tradition as well as to other cultural considerations, such as the shifting role and understanding of kingship, genealogical interests, and the contemporary political climate.

We have seen that there are many formulations of the heroic biography pattern, but in looking at the conception and birth episode we can observe that in its most basic form it consists of a description of the conception and birth of a child, accompanied by various signs and omens of that child's future greatness. These signs are centered on the child's parents, the manner of his conception, the nature of his gestation and his own nature during this period, and the circumstances of his birth. These signs will very often result in the child being viewed as a threat, and so after his birth the child is exposed, set adrift in water, or otherwise abandoned. For many

⁵⁴Ó Cathasaigh (1977): 9.

⁵⁵Ó Cathasaigh (1977): 11.

narrative traditions, the “abandoned or exposed child” motif is at the core of the pattern.⁵⁶ The child is rescued and raised in exile by wild animals and/or foster-parents. The birth episode typically has serious repercussions for the development of the rest of the biography of a particular hero, and as such the multiple possible variants of this general framework deserve particular attention.

It is because this type of story possesses an inherent well-defined narrative structure rooted in the realities of natural birth, and because of the universality of this type of story, that a comparative study of narratives about birth from different Indo-European cultures offers an ideal case study in the comparison and potential reconstruction of aspects of the Proto-Indo-European mythological system.

1.3 Indo-European Mythology

The opening sentence of M. L. West’s *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* declares that “‘Indo-European’ is primarily a term of historical linguistics.”⁵⁷ The reason for this is that while the linguistic affiliation of a particular language is empirically demonstrable, aspects of culture are much less well-defined and are not fundamentally bound to linguistic identity. Using the comparative method, we are able to compare aspects of languages and then to reconstruct a substantial lexicon for Proto-Indo-European (PIE), as well as a significant amount of information about its phonemic system, phonology, and morphology. We can make claims about the Indo-European (IE) languages, about the relationships between them, and about PIE, and these claims can be proven or disproven. Crucially, objective diagnostic criteria exist to determine whether a language or linguistic feature is or is not Indo-European and inherited from Proto-Indo-European. Outside of the field of linguistics, however, it is much harder to clearly define what it means for something

⁵⁶Note, for example, Brian Lewis’ work in *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed At Birth*, and that of Marc Huys in *The Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed At Birth in Euripidean Tragedy: A Study of the Motifs*.

⁵⁷West (2007): 1.

to be “Indo-European,” and the application of the comparative method to non-linguistic data is complicated by any number of external factors. Further, we must at all times keep in mind that shared language does not require, or even imply, shared culture, nor does shared culture require or imply shared language.

In spite of these challenges, however, the interests of Indo-European studies have always extended well beyond the confines of describing languages and linguistic relationships. Certainly, some form of PIE culture must be assumed based on the existence of the PIE language. As Calvert Watkins describes the situation in *How To Kill A Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*: “A language necessarily implies a society, a speech community, and a culture, and a proto-language equally necessarily implies a ‘proto-culture’, that is, the culture of the users of the proto-language.”⁵⁸ Aspects of the PIE lexicon certainly give us some insights into the world of the speakers of the proto-language. The fact that we can reconstruct words for *god* *d̥ǵʰéh₂-, *cow* *gʷóu-, *dog* *k̥(u)uón-, and *yoke* *ǵeug-⁵⁹ would certainly suggest that the Proto-Indo-Europeans had gods, some domestic animals, and agriculture, but there is nothing in this that gives us any real insight into their putative proto-culture. Simply collecting lexical items and treating them as a window into the past is an inadequate basis for making any claims about the culture. Enrico Campanile has pointed out that: “*il prodotto ultimo della ricostruzione linguistica é semplicemente una parola, mentre ciò che noi vorremmo consocere, è la complessa realtà storica e sociale che si cela dietro di essa.*”⁶⁰ Gaining knowledge of this “complex historical and social reality” through the lens of the inherited lexicon, however, is no simple task, and in considering any aspect of culture beyond strictly linguistic data we must consider what kinds of claims we can reasonably and legitimately make about the speakers of PIE and their culture or cultures.

⁵⁸Watkins (1995): 7.

⁵⁹Reconstructions given as they appear in *Nomina im Indogermanischen Lexicon*, ed. Wodkto, Irslinger, and Schneider (2008).

⁶⁰Campanile (1990): 12. “The final product of linguistic reconstruction is simply a word, while what we would like to know is the complex historical and social reality that is hidden behind it.”

West makes the following argument regarding the speakers of PIE and their likely cultural cohesion and geographical distribution:

If there was an Indo-European language, it follows that there was a people who spoke it: not a people in the sense of a nation, for they may never have formed a political unity, and not a people in any racial sense, for they may have been as genetically mixed as any modern population defined by language. ... The Indo-Europeans were a people in the sense of a linguistic community. We should probably think of them as a loose network of clans and tribes, inhabiting a coherent territory of limited size.⁶¹

J.P. Mallory, in *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth*, has argued that the territory inhabited by the speakers of Proto-Indo-European would have occupied a space of about 250,000 to 1,000,000 square kilometers.⁶² This territory would likely also have been occupied by speakers of non-Indo-European languages, and would certainly have bordered on territories occupied by speakers of languages belonging to other linguistic families. It is beyond question that interaction between these Indo-European and non-Indo-European speaking groups occurred, and there is no reason not to think that cultural exchanges would have been frequent and operated at the level of myth, religion, and story-telling more generally. These interactions and mutual influences must be recognized both in the historical period and for the period during which the PIE speech community existed as such.

In the areas of poetics, mythology, social structure, comparative law, and archaeology, Indo-Europeanists have continued to explore the limits of our knowledge of the PIE speakers and their world. It must be acknowledged, however, that comparing aspects of culture is, in many ways, fundamentally different from comparing linguistic features. Anything that we know about the speakers of PIE is rooted in the study of language, both through linguistic comparison and treating language as a vehicle for culture. Émile Benveniste wrote that “La notion d’indo-européen vaut

⁶¹West (2007): 2.

⁶²Mallory (1989a): 146.

d'abord comme notion linguistique et si nous pouvons l'élargir à d'autres aspects de la culture, ce sera encore à partir de la langue."⁶³ This reliance on linguistic form operates most strongly in the area of comparative poetics, which proceeds along more or less the same lines as linguistic comparison.

Calvert Watkins, in his landmark study *How To Kill A Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, demonstrated the range and depth of cultural information that the study of comparative poetics has to offer. Watkins described the process of comparison and reconstruction as follows: "The technique by which reconstruction works consists of *equations* of linguistic forms between languages, from which we may deduce rules of correspondence. These operate on all levels of grammar, the meaningless as well as the meaningful, sound as well as form. The key word is *systematicity* or regularity."⁶⁴ Stephanie Jamison also discussed the parallel approaches of comparative linguistics and comparative poetics in her 1999 article "Penelope and the Pigs: Indic Perspectives on the *Odyssey*," and again called attention to the importance of comparing and reconstructing *systems* as opposed to individual items, stating that: "Genetic linguistic comparison seeks to eliminate from its purview similarities due to (a) universal tendencies and (b) chance. Genetic poetic comparison does the same. ... In order to eliminate chance, we look for structured, systematic sets of similarities rather than isolated facts."⁶⁵ Jamison's comparisons of the literary texts of ancient Greece and India demonstrate compellingly that in these narrative contexts we find reflections of Indo-European legal and ritual structures and systems.⁶⁶

In turning to the comparison of narrative itself, including myth, however, we have a lesser degree of linguistic fixity to aid us in our attempts at reconstruction. With very few exceptions –

⁶³Benveniste (1969): 8. "The idea of Indo-European is primarily a linguistic one, and if we can broaden it to include other aspects of culture, it will still be based on language."

⁶⁴Watkins (1995): 5.

⁶⁵Jamison (1999): 228.

⁶⁶Jamison (1994) and Jamison (1999).

the *Rig Veda* most notable among them – stories, or narrative “texts” undergo extensive rewording as part of their process of transmission. Ruth Finnegan has stated that “As soon as one looks hard at the notion of exact verbal reproduction over long periods of time, it becomes clear that there is little evidence for it.”⁶⁷ Whereas the systems that underlie language and law and ritual are by nature and necessity resistant to rapid or unsystematic change, the systems in which stories participate, such as mythology, are subject to greater variation and reinvention in order to suit the needs of a particular moment in a culture’s history. Finnegan calls attention to the importance of taking into account “the active part people take in transmitting – but at the same time creating and re-enacting – forms of verbal art and oral tradition.” She goes on to assert that we must “envisage tradition not as a piece of dead baggage from the past, but as something constantly in change and continually needing to be actively renewed.”⁶⁸ Jamison echoes this argument, stating that:

Moreover, even if we can identify an element in a Greek text, an element with a counterpoint in ancient India, as an Indo-European inheritance this does not mean that it sits in the Greek text inert and undigested. Suggesting that poets use traditional materials does not mean that they do not skillfully shape these materials towards their own end.⁶⁹

In literary and other types of textual sources, we find extensive evidence for contemporary cultural systems, but projecting those cultural systems back to an earlier, pre-literate, period is a complex and difficult undertaking, and secure reconstructions are necessarily limited. Mythology and other types of narrative are far more susceptible to extensive borrowing and rapid *systematic* change due to various types of cultural exchanges such as invasion, conversion, and conscious convergence.

⁶⁷Finnegan (1977): 140.

⁶⁸Finnegan (1992): 115.

⁶⁹Jamison (1999): 228-9.

West has called attention to the degree to which these cultural exchanges are ignored, stating that

Many who have written on Indo-European poetics, mythology, and religion have tended to proceed in a rather naive way, ignoring historical and geographical coordinates. As soon as they find a parallel between two individual traditions, say Greek and Indian myth, they at once claim it as a reflex of ‘Indo-European’, without regard either to the groupings of the Indo-European dialects or to the possibilities of horizontal transmission.⁷⁰

In contrast, the reverse problem is also common. When a story element is known from a neighbouring non-Indo-European culture, borrowing or influence may be assumed and the possibility of inheritance ignored or rejected. In *The East Face of Helicon*, West himself connects Athena’s birth from Zeus’ head with birth of the deity ^dKA.ZAL from Kumarbi’s head in the Hurro-Hittite *Song of [Kumarbi]*, and given the parallels between that text and Hesiod’s *Theogony* there is good reason to do so.⁷¹ However, the motif of birth through the father’s head is found elsewhere in the Indo-European world; in Indic mythology we find that Agni is described as born from Prajāpati’s head in several sources.⁷² There is no reason to doubt a connection between the Greek and Near Eastern material, but this is not incompatible with the motif of birth through the head as an inherited Indo-European motif. As West points out elsewhere, in studying the comparative culture and myth of the Indo-European speaking groups, the aim should be “to identify whatever is Indo-European, not just what is distinctively or exclusively Indo-European.”⁷³ Inheritance and borrowing, or other forms of contact-based influence, are not mutually exclusive, nor do they

⁷⁰West (2007): 19.

⁷¹West (1997): 280.

⁷²KS VII, JB 1.73, and PB VI.5.1, all cited and translated Jamison (1991): 210.

⁷³West (2007): 20.

exist separately, but rather interact and even affect one another. The presence of a particular story pattern within a culture would make borrowing stories possessing that same pattern, or a similar one, far more likely, because the borrowed stories would fit comfortably into the pre-existing network of narratives. Conversely, where borrowing has a significant impact on the culture, as in cases of religious conversion, this would encourage the retention and even increase the importance of pre-existing narrative elements that fit into the new narrative context.

In *La ricostruzione della cultura indoeuropea*, Campanile takes the position that

... poiché l'obiettivo del presente lavoro sta unicamente nella ricostruzione di una cultura e non nella sua valutazione a confronto con altre culture, resta totalmente fuori dal nostro interesse la questione se singoli tratti della cultura indoeuropea possano o no ritrovarsi anche presso popolazioni non indoeuropee ...⁷⁴

The nature of the birth stories under consideration here is such that they do form a universal and universally consistent category of narrative. For this reason, making any claims about these stories, or aspects of these stories, representing genuine inheritances from Proto-Indo-European antecedents is exceedingly difficult. West's statement to the effect that "if a motif is indeed universal, all the more likely that it was also Indo-European"⁷⁵ rings particularly true here. While it may not be possible to demonstrate any direct shared inheritance in the stories under consideration, this in no way suggests that PIE culture did not possess stories of this type. Comparison based on narrative systems or structures, particularly as built around certain motifs or thematic schema, will offer the maximum potential for recognizing inherited features of these stories.

More specific claims must, however, be made with all due caution. I will not approach a comparison of this material with the goal of arguing for direct inheritance or reconstructing PIE stories or even narrative structures. My primary focus will be on providing a comparison of the

⁷⁴Campanile (1990): 11. "Because the goal of this work is solely the reconstruction of a culture and not to evaluate it in comparison with other cultures, the question of whether particular aspects of the Indo-European culture may or may not also be found among non-Indo-Europeans is entirely outside of our interests."

⁷⁵West (2007): 20.

stories as we have them in order to better understand them in their synchronic contexts with regards to both form and function. Any claims about inheritance and any arguments about what can be reconstructed will be secondary, and a by-product of the comparative analysis. Although I am not invested in an enterprise of reconstructing PIE myths about extraordinary birth, the bulk of the corpus of stories under consideration here will nonetheless be taken from Indo-European speaking cultures. Working primarily with Indo-European sources offers the greatest possible degree of attested materials in terms of chronological depth and geographical breadth, as well as multiplicity of types of sources. Birth narratives in Indo-European languages can be found in religious texts, epic narratives, pseudo-histories, saga literature, and multiple other types of sources. I will also deal with non-Indo-European sources, such as the Malagasy story of Ibonia with which I began my discussion; however the focus on IE sources makes it possible to keep open the possibility that inheritance plays a role in the transmission of these stories and explains at least some of the relationships between them. While my main concern is with the narrative structure of these stories and their range of uses and meanings, I will also treat them as potential sources of information about Indo-European mythology.

1.4 Overview of Dissertation

Chapter 2: Conceiving the Hero

This chapter focuses on the nature of the hero and the ways in which that nature can be determined by the circumstances of his conception. I build on the discussion of the heroic biography pattern in chapter one by considering the individual who is the subject of stories that display this pattern. I also examine other approaches to understanding the nature of the hero, in particular, the hero as a borderline figure, described as liminal or unseasonal, and I explore the ways in which this liminality is produced by the specific abnormalities associated with the hero's conception. I present a typology of the types of conceptions found in these stories, identifying the types which produce anomaly or ambiguity in the hero, and distinguishing between biological and social abnormalities. I draw in particular on the work of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Dan-*

ger while considering the ambiguities and violations of taboos that lie at the heart of these birth narratives and create heroes with liminal or indeterminate natures. I then examine some of the consequences of the ambiguities produced by these conceptions for the heroes themselves, as well as their families and societies. The hero's ambiguity frequently represents a threat to social order, as he is the product of incest or autochthonous reproduction, for example, and it is necessary for his anomaly to be controlled in some way. Attempts to control the hero's ambiguity are frequently the source of a number of the obstacles that confront him throughout his heroic "biography" or career.

Chapter 3: The Obstacle of Birth

This chapter considers birth as the first danger to the hero and the first obstacle that he must overcome. I again consider the place of the birth narrative within the larger heroic biography, particularly in establishing the hero's nature and specific challenges. The birth of the hero is not only anomalous, but frequently also dangerous to the hero himself and to his mother. In considering the birth as a danger and a challenge, I will focus in particular on stories about some form of failed birth, such as miscarriage or abortion, followed by rebirth. This type of story, centered on the theme of "failed birth and rebirth," has already been described by Stephanie Jamison in *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun* and has further been examined as a myth of possible Indo-European origin by Angelique Gulermovich Epstein in her article "Miscarriages and Miraculous Births in Indo-European Tradition."⁷⁶ This type of story typically begins with a miscarriage, the rescue of the fetus, its subsequent containment in some type of vessel, and its eventual emergence as a child. In presenting birth as dangerous to both mother and child and specifically as an obstacle with the potential to prevent the hero's entry into the world, these types of stories present birth as the first challenge for a hero to overcome.

⁷⁶Gulermovich Epstein (1994).

Chapter 4: Comparing the Births of Conchobar, Indra, and Herakles

The fourth chapter is the focal point of the dissertation and presents a comparison of the birth narratives of the Irish king Conchobar mac Nessa, the Vedic god Indra, and the Greek hero Herakles. The specific focus of my discussion is on the strikingly similar ways in which their conceptions and births are manipulated, particularly with respect to time, in order to produce a specific outcome. Themes of prophecy and temporal distortion play a particularly important role here, as does the prolongation of gestation as a form of containment and control. I pay particular attention to the motif of birth through the mother's side, and consider further comparanda from Ireland and India, as well as from Armenian, Egyptian, and Algonquin narratives. These comparanda suggest a particular framework of meaning in which to situate the motif and provide a starting point for reflecting on the place of the motif in both Indo-European and non-Indo-European narrative traditions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The concluding chapter discusses the relevance of this dissertation for our understanding of the texts under consideration and their themes and narrative structures, both in their own right and within their respective mythological systems. I consider the place of the birth narrative within the larger heroic biography and the ways in which the birth of the hero prefigures and interacts with stories about the rest of his career. Finally, I evaluate the significance of the similarities between these stories for our knowledge of Indo-European myth in general.

2 CONCEIVING THE HERO

2.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter I argued that birth tales are typically structured in such a way as to mimic the progress of natural pregnancy and birth, beginning with conception and the events that lead to it. The various formulations of the heroic biography pattern also proceed in this way, beginning with the identification of the hero's parents, the establishment of the nature of their relationship, and a description of the circumstances surrounding his conception, birth, and early infancy. Birth tales following the general pattern that I have outlined are certainly a common starting point for the heroic biography pattern, but can also be found describing the births of various figures who do not obviously fall into the category of "hero," and whose lives do not easily fit into the pattern as it is described by Rank, Raglan, and others.

In this chapter I consider various approaches to understanding the nature and function of the hero, in particular as a figure who occupies and transcends the fringes and borders of human society and the natural and supernatural worlds. I argue that the hero's conception, an event that frequently transgresses against these same borders, conditions and even determines his nature and the course of his biography. I examine the various types of conceptions that are found in birth tales and consider the differences between biologically abnormal conceptions (including both asexual and sexual conceptions) and socially problematic conceptions. I analyze these conceptions in terms of the conflicts that they create in the hero's nature, and the problems that arise from these conflicts in his later life.

2.2 Defining The "Hero" And His Nature

I have thus far used the term "hero" simply to refer to the subjects of the birth tales that I have been describing and of the heroic biography pattern. However, the problem of how to define "hero" is

a complex one. In “The Epic Hero,” Gregory Nagy writes that “The words ‘epic’ and ‘hero’ both defy generalization, let alone universalizing definitions.”¹ In Ancient Greece, the hero was not just a literary construct but also a cult figure who was worshiped. Nagy describes various types of heroes referred to in Greek literature and observes that the Greek word *hērōs* (ἥρωας) “integrates the concept of the cult hero with the concept of the epic hero - as well as the tragic hero.”² These heroes may also be *hēmitheoi* (ἡμιθεοί) – demi-gods or mortals who, through the experience of death, are able to become immortal.³ As such, the hero functions as an intermediary between the mortal and the immortal, the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural.

In describing the Irish hero, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt contrasts two “camps” – that of men and that of the supernatural – and writes: “In the camp of men is the Hero, the incarnation of the talents necessary to a race which lives in a world saturated with magic, warlike but also magical talents.”⁴ Sjoestedt also argues for two principal types of hero, distinguished by their place with respect to society, and identifies them as being either “inside the tribe” or “outside the tribe.”

Irish mythology presents two realizations of the heroic type, and they are two complementary aspects of the same force, the social and the asocial, the normal and the irregular. On the one hand we have the hero in the service of the tribe, and on the other the heroes outside the tribe. And this dualism reproduces, to some degree, in the camp of men, the dualism we have observed in the camp of the gods, opposing heroism as a social function to heroism as a natural force.⁵

The Irish heroes Cú Chulainn and Finn mac Cumail provide the proto-typical examples of

¹Nagy (2006): §1.

²Nagy (2006): §105.

³Nagy (2006): §72.

⁴Sjoestedt (1949): 94.

⁵Sjoestedt (1949): 94.

Sjoestedt's two types of hero. Cú Chulainn's primary role within the body of narrative texts known as the "Ulster Cycle" is to act as defender of the territory of Ulster, the Ulstermen, and their king Conchobar mac Nessa. Conchobar is either Cú Chulainn's grandfather or his uncle,⁶ and in "The sister's son in early Irish literature," Tomás Ó Cathasaigh argues that in spite of Cú Chulainn's at-times dangerous nature he is "integrated into Ulster society. The role he assumes is that of the wolf as defender and protector of the master's domain, which in his case is the realm of his maternal uncle."⁷ Finn mac Cumail, in contrast, is the hero "outside the tribe." He is a *fénnid*, a member of a *fian*, a warrior-band that lives apart from the tribal society Cú Chulainn represents and defends. The *fiana* (pl.) live as "semi-nomads under the authority of their own leaders."⁸ They are hunters and outlaws, individuals initiated into the *fian* through rituals and ordeals that set them apart from their previous membership in tribal society, but they nonetheless continue to interact with it, and, as Sjoestedt argues, they "were regarded as in some measure necessary to the well-being of Celtic society."⁹

The distinctions that Sjoestedt makes with regards to insider or outsider status relate primarily to the hero's function, both within society and in relation to society. In terms of their respective natures, however, Cú Chulainn and Finn are not so different. Finn's birth and early childhood closely correspond to the standard formulations of the heroic biography that we have seen.¹⁰ Finn's father is killed in battle before he is born, and his mother sends him away after his birth in order to protect him from his father's enemies. He is raised in the wilderness by two women

⁶Various texts refer to Conchobar either as Deichtine's father or as her brother.

⁷Ó Cathasaigh (1986): 159. See also Tatyana A. Mikhailova's recent article on the subject: "Cú Chulainn: A Watch-dog of Ulster (Hero Within the Tribe?)." (Mikhailova (2013).)

⁸Sjoestedt (1949): 82.

⁹Sjoestedt (1949): 90. See further McCone (1986) and the collection of essays in Arbuthnot and Parsons (2012).

¹⁰For an account of Finn's birth and childhood, see *Macgnimartha Find* "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn." Text Meyer (1882) and translation Nagy (1985): 209-221. The primary study of Finn's boyhood deeds is that of J.F. Nagy in *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Tradition*. For a comparison of the narratives about the boyhood deeds of Finn and Cú Chulainn, see also Nagy (1984).

fénnidi, the druidess Bodbmall and the female warrior known as the Líath Lúachra, “the Gray One of Lúachair.” Finn, called Demne as a boy, gains his supernatural traits when he encounters the poet Finn, who is waiting to eat the salmon of Linn Feicc in order to gain supernatural knowledge. The boy Demne burns his thumb on the cooking salmon and then puts his thumb in his mouth. He is then renamed Finn and permitted to eat the salmon, and so it is he, rather than the poet Finn, who gains magical knowledge. Finn then becomes a poet himself, and whenever he puts his thumb in his mouth he gains whatever knowledge he is seeking. Cú Chulainn’s own supernatural traits are the direct result of his conception, which will be examined in chapter three, but, as with Finn, a transformative encounter with an animal – in this case his killing of the hound of Culann – brings about his renaming (he had previously been called Sétanta) and re-categorization, since it is at this point that he becomes the hound of Ulster and takes on the responsibility of protecting the territory and her people.

Nagy’s statement that “since the otherworld and this world are essentially alike, a hero such as Finn who exists between them and has special powers and talents is needed and has a role to play in both of them”¹¹ applies also to Cú Chulainn. While they may serve different social functions, their shared higher function is to mediate between the human world and the supernatural world, and to do so they must exist and operate in both. Their central characteristic is their liminality or ambiguity with respect to their participation in the various categories of the human and the supernatural worlds. In describing the liminal nature of the poet and of poetic knowledge in Irish tradition, Nagy gives the following explanation of liminality:

By the term “liminal” I refer to the state of being in between separate categories of space, time, or identity. A boy who is on the verge of manhood is a liminal figure, as is someone who crosses from one world into another. Such figures belong only marginally to one or several categories; they are unclassifiable persons, or, they are

¹¹Nagy (1985): 39.

classifiable in more ways than one.¹²

Much has been written about the hero as an ambiguous or liminal figure in Irish tradition,¹³ and this property of the hero is recognized elsewhere as well. Gregory Nagy has described the hero of Greek epic as “unseasonal,” and noted that he is typically found in conflict with the very forces that made him unseasonal. He gives the example of Herakles, who is made unseasonal when Hera delays his birth and then persecutes him throughout his life. In so doing, however, she raises him above the ordinary, or at least less extraordinary, life that he might have led otherwise, and his original destiny of kingship is replaced by his eventual apotheosis.¹⁴

Ambiguity (or liminality, or unseasonality) is the central characteristic of the heroes born in the types of birth tales that I described in the previous chapter. This aspect of their nature is often a consequence of the circumstances of their conceptions, and the subsequent episodes of the heroic biography often provide resolution to the conflicts created by the hero’s birth. When we consider how different types of conceptions set up ambiguous “heroes” and examine the figures produced by such conceptions, we find that the individuals in question do not all fit comfortably into the category of “hero” as it is commonly understood.

2.2.1 The Hero of the Heroic Biography Pattern

In the preceding chapter, I introduced the narrative pattern known as the “heroic biography” and, in referring to Tomás Ó Cathasaigh’s discussion of the nature of the “hero” at the center of the pattern in Irish sources, I raised the question of what types of persons may appear as the subjects of heroic biographies. Whatever definition of “hero” one chooses to adopt, it is clear that the term does not encompass the full range of persons whose biographies show the pattern that

¹²Nagy (1981-2): 135.

¹³See, for example, Nagy (1986-7), McCone (1990), and Dooley (2006).

¹⁴The story is found in multiple sources. These include *Iliad* 19.95-133, Diodorus Siculus’ *Library of History* (DS) IV.8.39, and The *Library* of Apollodorus Book 2, §2.4.6-2.8.1. The story of Herakles’ birth will be considered in chapter four.

has customarily been characterized as “heroic,” unless one defines “hero” simply as one whose life follows the course of the heroic biography pattern. Ó Cathasaigh writes that “in Irish tradition, as elsewhere, the heroic biography is not limited to martial figures, and ... it does not always relate to a setting dominated by military aristocracy and celebrating martial virtues.”¹⁵ The question of the subject of the biographical pattern generally referred to as “heroic” is at the heart of our understanding of what the essential elements of this pattern actually are, and what range of functions this type of story can serve.

Most descriptions of the pattern focus on its presence in stories about a very particular sort of person – a male who is both of royal blood and a warrior. The formulations of the pattern that I surveyed in the preceding chapter all include features such as a mother who is a princess (von Hahn/Nutt) – preferably a virgin (Raglan); a father who is a god or hero (von Hahn/Nutt) or a king (Rank and Raglan); and the hero himself becoming a king (Rank and Raglan). None of these formulations raise the possibility that the subject of the pattern might not be male. While Ó Cathasaigh argues for a non-martial hero, his focus remains on the sphere of the royal and the masculine. Similarly, Alan Dundes has analyzed the biblical accounts of the life of Jesus, another royal, male, but decidedly non-martial figure, as reflecting aspects of the heroic biography in his monograph *The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus*.¹⁶ In truth, however, the pattern can accommodate many other types of figures if we move away from the features of the pattern that the earlier bias of royal/masculine/martial highlighted, such as founding cities and prescribing laws, marrying a princess, and achieving victory over giants or dragons.

The conception-and-birth episode is least infused with this bias, and so birth narratives generally provide the best starting point for examining the narratives lives of non-“heroes” within the context of the heroic biography pattern. In a number of birth episodes attached to non-traditional “heroes,” we can recognize the essential features of the start of a heroic biography, and we can

¹⁵Ó Cathasaigh (1977): 11.

¹⁶Dundes (1976), reprinted in Segal (1990).

then consider the rest of the biography of these individuals alongside the biographies of figures more readily labeled as heroes. I will present here only one case to illustrate the extent to which the biography pattern can apply to figures who do not conform to the typical expectations of a “hero”: that of Deirdre, the central character of the Middle Irish text *Longes mac nUislenn* “The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu.”¹⁷ I begin with Deirdre’s birth, which most overtly corresponds to the formulations of the heroic biography that we have seen, but I examine also the rest of her life in the light of this narrative complex.

2.2.1.1 The Biography of Deirdre

The story of Deirdre is perhaps one of the best known from medieval Irish literature. It is generally read as a story of the doomed love of a tragic heroine,¹⁸ yet in Deirdre’s life we find many of the familiar features of the heroic biography. No details about her conception are given, but we know that her parents are married and of high social status. Her father is Feidlimid mac Dall, storyteller to Conchobar mac Nessa, king of the Ulstermen; her mother is known in this text simply as *ben ind Fédlimthe* “Feidlimid’s wife.” The first sign of Deirdre’s dangerous nature comes before her birth when she screams from her mother’s womb in the presence of the Ulstermen.

(2.1) *Oc dul dī dar lár in taige, ro·gré·ch in lenab inna broinn co·closs fon less uile.*¹⁹

As she [Deirdre’s mother] was going across the floor of the house, the child in her womb screamed, so that the scream was heard throughout the entire dwelling.

In order to understand the cause and meaning of this scream, Feidlimid’s wife turns to Cathbad, the druid of the Ulstermen, and asks him to explain the scream. Cathbad responds by prophesying

¹⁷Hull (1949). The oldest surviving version of the text is in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster. Hull discusses the various manuscript witnesses of the text and theorizes that the date of composition is earlier than the 10th century (Hull (1949): 31). For more on the dating of *Longes mac nUislenn*, see Buttimer (1995).

¹⁸John Millington Synge’s 1910 play based on the story is titled *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, for example. On contemporary understandings of this text, see further Stelmach (2007) “Dead Deirdre? Myth and Morality in the Irish Literary Revival.”

¹⁹Hull (1949): ll. 6-8. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

about the woman to whom she will give birth.

In two poems, the first addressed to Feidlimid's wife and the second to Deirdre herself, Cathbad describes Deirdre's physical beauty and the wars that will be fought on her behalf, and he names many of the Ulster heroes who will be killed because of her. Placing his hand on Feidlimid's wife's belly, Cathbad says that:

(2.2) *Ingen fil and ocus bid Derdriu a hainm ocus biaid olc impe.*²⁰

There is a girl here, and her name will be Deirdre, and evil will surround her.

Upon hearing this prophecy about the destruction that Deirdre will bring to them, the Ulstermen demand that she be killed. Conchobar refuses to allow her death, however, and instead decides that Deirdre will be raised in exile until she is old enough to become his wife. Deirdre is taken away from her parents and raised in a separate court, where she is kept in complete isolation from everyone except her foster-parents and the female satirist Leborcham.

In this episode we find many of the elements of the beginning of a heroic biography. The unborn child of distinguished parents shows signs of an unusual nature, and a prophecy identifies the child as a threat. In response to this threat an intent to kill the child is expressed, but she is instead taken into exile and raised by foster-parents. In a standard heroic-biography-type story, the hero would grow up in ignorance of his identity, though showing what the von Hahn/Nutt formulation of the pattern calls "a passionate and violent disposition." In Deirdre's case, her "passionate and violent" nature reveals itself when she sees and falls in love with Noísiu mac Uislenn and coerces him into eloping with her.

(2.3) *La sodain fo-ceird-si bedg cuci corro·gab a dá n-ó fora chinn. "Dá n-ó mēle ocus cuitbiuda in-so," ol si, "manim·bera-su latt."*²¹

Then she leapt on him and seized the two ears on his head. "Two ears of shame and mockery, these," she said, "if you do not take me with you."

²⁰Hull (1949): ll. 52-3.

²¹Hull (1949): ll. 119-120. On the interpretation of this passage, see Arbuthnot (2013).

There is no question of reading this as the abduction of a passive woman. Deirdre's agency is clear in her reacting to her seeming fate as Conchobar's wife by "stealing herself," as Elizabeth Gray has recently argued.²²

Upon reaching adulthood, the hero of our pattern either seeks service in foreign lands (von Hahn/Nutt) or returns to his point of origin in order to claim his throne, and thus reclaim his original position in society (Rank and Raglan). The return of the hero generally brings about the fulfillment of the initial prophecies about the threat that he would pose, and so his homecoming is accompanied by death and destruction. After their elopement, Deirdre, Noísiu, and his brothers spend several years in exile, taking shelter in various places in Ireland, and eventually entering the service of the king of Scotland. Gray has argued that during this period Deirdre is acting as a *fénnid*, living the life of an outlaw and hidden on the fringes of society.²³ In time a truce is negotiated with Conchobar, and Deirdre and the sons of Uisliu return to Ulster. They are betrayed, however, and Noísiu and his brothers are killed. A war is subsequently started among the Ulstermen that results in the deaths of many. Here, as we would expect in a traditional heroic biography, the homecoming of the hero, in this case Deirdre, is accompanied by death and destruction in fulfillment of the prophecy that accompanied her birth. Deirdre then takes the place in society that was intended for her before her exile and becomes Conchobar's consort. Whereas the traditional hero returns home in triumph, marries a princess, and seizes his throne, Deirdre is tricked into returning and forced to marry the king.

According to Lord Raglan's heroic pattern, after becoming king the hero rules uneventfully for a time before eventually losing the favour of his people or the gods, a loss that forces him into a second exile and leads to his death. This outcome corresponds closely to the remainder of Deirdre's biography. She remains with Conchobar for one year, but is unhappy the entire time, which causes him to become angry with her. Conchobar asks Deirdre whom she hates the

²²Gray (2014).

²³Gray (2014).

most, and she replies that she most hates Conchobar himself and Eogan mac Durthacht, who killed Noísiu. Conchobar determines then that she will spend the following year with Eogan, and when Eogan begins to take Deirdre away from Emain Macha in his chariot, she commits suicide by leaping from the chariot and striking her head against a boulder – the extraordinary death to which the von Hahn/Nutt pattern refers.

While Deirdre is in many ways dissimilar from the male, royal warrior-heroes scholars usually associate with the heroic biography pattern, the pattern of her life nonetheless follows a similar path, and, more significantly, serves the same function, in that the events of her life operate to create in her an ambiguous figure. In Deirdre's story we find the familiar elements of the heroic biography pattern: signs of the extraordinary nature of the child, including prophecy identifying her as dangerous, an attempt on her life followed by exile, an eventual homecoming that precipitates the fulfillment of the prophecy, installment in her intended place in society, a subsequent loss of that place, and finally an extraordinary death. Crucially, in Deirdre's person and actions we find the same central ambiguity that occurs in the cases of the male heroes. She is both insider and outsider as the intended bride of the king but also as an exile and a threat to his sovereignty. Though female, she demonstrates a male agency with regards to her life. It is she who abducts Noísiu and not the other way around, and, as Gray has argued, during their period of exile Deirdre becomes a *fénnid* through her participation in the hidden life that she and the sons of Uisliu live as outlaws. Women in the category of *fénnid* are not unknown. We have already encountered two in the persons of Finn's foster-mothers Bodbmall and the Líath Lúachra, but it remains a predominantly male category, and one already imbued with liminal connotations. Gray, following Máire Herbert's argument in "The Universe of male and female: a reading of the Deirdre story,"²⁴ has also argued that in Deirdre we find a reflection of the Sovereignty Goddess, but one who refuses to act as such and denies sovereignty to the king, Conchobar,²⁵ and so again

²⁴Herbert (1992).

²⁵Gray (2014).

refuses to play her “assigned” role.²⁶

2.2.2 Conception and Ambiguity

The hero, viewed as an ambiguous or liminal figure, is the product of a conception that introduces problems of categorization into his nature at the very outset of his existence. Ambiguity occurs when there is confusion between different categories. It is the result of the blurring or even crossing of the boundaries that maintain social order and stability. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that ambiguity can be understood as a threat to the separation of the distinct categories fundamental to a culture’s understanding of the world. She states that “rational behaviour involves classification, and that the activity of classifying is a human universal.”²⁷ It is by separating the different aspects of life, including behaviour, into discrete categories and then acting to maintain these distinctions that we are able to understand and rationalize the world. According to Douglas:

Ideas about separating, purifying demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.²⁸

There are a number of categories that may come into “impure” contact when a conception takes place, and the contrasts listed by Douglas – male-female, above-below, and within-without – are among the most commonly employed in the birth tales under discussion.

The interaction between certain categories is required for conception to occur. Two participants are generally needed for conception to take place, and ideally these two people will share

²⁶For further discussion of the relationship between Conchobar and Deirdre and the impact of their relationship on his kingship, see Mathis (2013).

²⁷Douglas (2002): xvii.

²⁸Douglas (2002): 5.

certain categories (e.g. humanity) but be separate with regard to others (e.g. sex). Every individual's identity includes in a number of categories, such as sex, humanity, kin-group, and social status. A child inherits his own traits with regards to many of these categories from his parents. A conception usually requires a combination of the separate categories of sex, for example, in that one parent should be male and one should be female, and a conception should also involve parents from sufficiently separate kin-groups. However, in the conceptions of heroes we often find that the categories combined in the conception are categories that should normally be kept separate. In terms of categories, the two main areas here are social categories and biological categories. Social categories include:

- Status in marriage – married, unmarried, married to someone other than the person with whom the child is conceived.
- Status as an insider or outsider with respect to a particular social or cultural group.
- Social status – high or low status.
- Kinship status as defined in legal or social terms, such as marriage or fosterage.

Natural categories include:

- Sex.
- Species, in particular human or non-human – where the non-human may be an animal, a divine being, or some other form of supernatural force.
- Mortal or immortal.
- Fertile or non-fertile.
- Kinship as determined by blood relations.

Because a child inherits his identity with respect to many of these categories from his parents, conceptions involving misaligned or clashing categories produces a child who is ambiguous in that he can be categorized in several, sometimes conflicting, ways.

One of the most extensive discussions of birth tales in medieval Irish literature is found in Rees and Rees' *Celtic Heritage*, and in their discussion of the hero's conception they remark that the hero is prominently characterized by his "wrongness." They explain that:

From the point of view of the established order of things in this world, the way in which the hero is conceived and born is “all wrong.” Ordinary children are born of married parents who are not blood-relations. The hero is more often than not conceived ‘illegitimately’ by an unmarried girl and born out of wedlock. If the mother is married, he is begotten through what would normally be called adultery, and the irregularity of the union is often accentuated by violence or trickery. To make matters worse, even the integrity of the family is violated: a father begets a hero upon his daughter, a son upon his mother, a brother upon his sister. A mockery is made even of the laws of biological nature, for a barren woman may conceive a hero by drinking water, by swallowing worms, or by eating a fish or a grain of wheat.²⁹

Rees and Rees highlight here only a few of the many ways in which the conceptions of heroes violate social, natural, or supernatural order. The “wrongness” to which Rees and Rees refer is the characteristic ambiguity of the hero. This ambiguity is associated with what Rees and Rees term the “third factor” involved in these types of conceptions: “In every conception there is a third factor. The child may derive its biological inheritance from its earthly parents, but it is also the incarnation of a supernatural essence.”³⁰ It is this third factor that gives the hero his superhuman qualities, but it also contributes to his ambiguity by setting him apart from the human society into which he is born.

There are many ways for conception to instill ambiguity, arising either from the nature of the act itself or the natures of or relationship between the participants. Different complications arising from categories clashing during the conception create different forms of ambiguity, which in turn pose different types of problems for the child conceived.

²⁹Rees and Rees (1961): 225-6.

³⁰Rees and Rees (1961): 226.

2.3 A Typology of Conception

The means and methods by which conception can occur in these narratives may seem entirely fantastic and outlandish. The strangeness of these conceptions can operate on several levels, and the conceptions – and children so conceived – can be marked as extraordinary in terms of both biological and social abnormality. If, as Rees and Rees suggest, these stories are meant to be understood in part as “exemplars in the light of which the meaning of an ordinary birth could be apprehended,”³¹ then the births they describe must also be viewed in contrast, or even in opposition, to a “normal” or entirely unmarked birth. In terms of biology, an unmarked birth involves a sexual union between a human man and a human woman. In terms of social norms, an unmarked birth involves a couple in a socially sanctioned union. This type of conception does not involve any form of imbalance or transgression. There are no violations against natural order or social convention, and the child produced falls into the same basic categories as his parents. As a result, he has an obvious and well-defined place in society and in the world more generally. The lack of an extraordinary “origin-story” does not entail that such a child cannot be a hero or have a heroic biography, merely that his conception will not condition his nature or establish his conflicts.

In the conceptions that are marked as unusual, multiple conflicts occur. We find both sexual and asexual conceptions, and with sexual conceptions we find both biologically and socially problematic conceptions. In order to understand the consequences of conception for the child conceived, a distinction must also be made between conceptions that leave him with a deficiency of categories by which he is to be identified, and those that leave him with an excess of categories.

2.3.1 Sexual vs. Asexual Conceptions

Sexual conceptions are in principle unmarked, since there is nothing inherently unnatural or transgressive about them. Any stigma attached to sexual conception, or ambiguities resulting

³¹Rees and Rees (1961): 226

from it, have to do with the participants involved in the conception rather than with the act itself. These conceptions may involve biological abnormalities such as unions between humans and non-humans, including gods or animals, or social abnormalities, such as incestuous or adulterous unions. I will discuss these in greater detail in section 2.3.2

When an asexual conception occurs, a supernatural component is inherently present. In this case, it is often difficult to speak of “parents” in a normal sense, and so I will refer instead to the “father” as the *source* of the conception, that is, whatever entity takes the “male” role and acts as inseminator, and I will refer to the “mother” as the *recipient* of the conception, that is, whatever entity receives the conception and incubates the fetus, thus taking the “female” role. In most cases of asexual conception either the source or the recipient is non-human. In discussing asexual conceptions, I will use “human” as a cover term for both humans and human-like beings, such as gods and other anthropomorphic creatures. These stand in contrast to the non-human elements that may be involved in these conceptions, such as apples or insects.

In cases where the recipient of the conception is human, the source of the conception is generally a non-human entity, and the conception will often take place through the ingestion of the source by the recipient. The Irish hero Conall Cernach, for example, is conceived when his mother drinks water from an enchanted well and swallows a worm.³² In Indian myth, king Yuvanāśva conceives after drinking consecrated water intended to impregnate one of his wives, and he later gives birth to Māndhātara.³³ In this story, we find the unusual feature of a male taking the “female” role as the recipient of insemination. In other cases, what the recipient actually ingests is a form of the child about to be reincarnated through her. In the Middle Irish text *Tochmarc Étaíne* “The Wooing of Étaín,” the titular character Étaín is transformed into a fly, swallowed, and then reborn

³²Arbuthnot (2007): §264.

³³The story occurs in both the *Bhagavata Purāna* (GRETIL (2003)) and the *Viṣṇu Purāna* (GRETIL (2014)), and will be considered in greater detail in chapter four.

in human form.³⁴ Similarly, in Elis Gruffydd's 16th c. *Ystoria Taliesin* "The Story of Taliesin," the Welsh Gwion Bach is swallowed in the form of a grain of wheat by the witch Ceridwen and is then reborn as the poet Taliesin.³⁵ In these cases, the child conceived also serves as the source of his or her own conception.

Other forms of asexual conception involving a human woman impregnated by some non-human entity include cases of annunciation, such as the Virgin Mary whose pregnancy comes about after the announcement that she is carrying a child.³⁶ An Irish poem calls this form of conception "conception through the ear," understanding the announcement itself as the conception, and names this one of the four best forms of conception, and one exclusive to Mary herself.

(2.4) *Coimpert cluaise, nocha chél,*

is uaisle 'ná cech aenscél;

ní tharla do neoch fo neim

acht do Moire óigingin.

Conception by the ear – I shall not conceal it – which is nobler than any other announcement, happened to no one under heaven except Mary, virgin maiden.³⁷

In other cases, a woman finds herself pregnant and no explanation for her condition is readily available. In the Welsh text *Math uab Mathonwy*, Aranrhod declares herself to be a virgin but then gives birth to twin boys, Dylan and Lleu.³⁸ The source of conception in these cases is not any

³⁴Bergin and Best (1938): §21.

³⁵Ford (1992): 67-8.

³⁶Luke 1:26-38.

³⁷Ó Cuív (1973): 94. Ó Cuív describes the poem as being a very late Middle Irish text. Its main subject is the conception and characteristics of the Antichrist, but it begins by naming four kinds of conception, including conception by the ear. The other three forms of conception are: through carnal intercourse, from mouth to mouth, and "conception of the fair little bee" (93). The birth tale of Cú Chulainn also features an annunciation, but it is paired with another form of conception, that of conceiving by swallowing a small insect. (van Hamel (1978): §5.)

³⁸See Williams (1964): 77-8 (text) and Ford (1977): 98 (translation).

particular physical entity, but rather must be understood as a supernatural essence that changes the condition of the woman and produces in her a child with supernatural characteristics.

Alternatively, there are cases in which the source of the conception is human and the recipient is non-human. In Greek myth the goddess Aphrodite is conceived after Kronos castrates Ouranos and his severed genitals fall into the ocean, from which Aphrodite is then born. Likewise Erichthonios, a legendary king of Athens, is conceived when Hephaistos attempts to rape Athena and his semen falls onto the earth, which, as the recipient of the conception, then gives birth to Erichthonios.

While most episodes of asexual conception involve only one participant possessing human characteristics, there are also cases where both are human but no direct sexual contact occurs. Instead, something like artificial insemination takes place, which, as with the other types of asexual conception, often involves eating or drinking. The *Mahābhārata* (MBh)³⁹ tells the story of Vasu, a king who wishes to conceive a child with his wife Girikā. Because he is away from his wife when she is ovulating, Vasu ejaculates onto a leaf and entrusts it to a kite to carry back to her. When the kite is attacked by another kite, it drops the leaf into a river where it is eaten by the Apsarā Adrikā, who is in the form of a fish. Nine months later, the fish is caught by fishermen who pull human twins from her belly – a boy, Matsya, and a girl, Satyavatī. A striking analog to this episode is found in a Middle Irish text titled “Cred’s Pregnancy” by its editor Whitley Stokes.⁴⁰ The text describes the conception of Saint Bóethíne and relates how one day his mother was washing her hands at a well where she was secretly observed by the outlaw Findach, who became aroused and ejaculated onto a sprig of watercress. Later, Cred ate the watercress along with Findach’s semen and became pregnant.

Another episode of asexual conception brought about by ingestion is found in Hurrian mythology, as preserved in Hittite, featuring two males rather than a male and a female. When the gods

³⁹van Buitenen (1973): 132-3.

⁴⁰Stokes (1873-5): 199-200.

Anu and Kumarbi are battling for supremacy in heaven, Kumarbi bites off and swallows Anu's "manhood."

(2.5) (Kumarbi) bit his (Anu's) loins, and his "manhood" united with Kumarbi's insides like bronze (results from the union of copper and tin).⁴¹

Anu then informs Kumarbi that he has been impregnated and is bearing the Storm God, the Aranzah River, and several other gods and topographical entities. Kumarbi later gives birth to all of these from various parts of his body, including his head.⁴²

In some cases, the nature of the physical act that produces children is entirely unclear, as neither parent is human. Girikā, mentioned above as the wife of king Vasu, father of Matsya and Satyavatī, has a remarkable birth of her own. The *Mahābhārata* recounts that the river Śuktimatī "was once waylaid by an intelligent mountain, Mount Kolāhala, which had fallen in love with her."⁴³ Vasu kicked the mountain however, and in doing so created an opening that the river could flow through. The river had been impregnated by the mountain, and in gratitude she gave her twin children to Vasu. The son was made the leader of Vasu's army, while the daughter, Girikā, became his wife. Similarly, the origin legend of the Spartoi features conception between two non-human entities. The Spartoi were born from the earth where Kadmos sowed the teeth of a dragon that he had slain.

(2.6) ἀγανακτήσας δὲ Κάδμος κτείνει τὸν δράκοντα, καὶ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ὑποθεμένης τοὺς ὀδόντας αὐτοῦ σπείρει. τούτων δὲ σπαρέντων ἀνέτειλαν ἐκ γῆς ἄνδρες ἔνοπλοι, οὓς ἐκάλεσαν Σπαρτούς. οὗτοι δὲ ἀπέκτειναν ἀλλήλους, οἱ μὲν εἰς ἔριν ἀκούσιον ἐλθόντες, οἱ δὲ ἀγνοοῦντες.⁴⁴

⁴¹Trans. Hoffner (1998): 42 §5.

⁴²Hoffner (1998): 42. On this text see also Beckman (2011).

⁴³van Buitenen (1973): 132.

⁴⁴*Library of Apollodorus* 3.4.1. Ed. Wagner (1965).

Angered, Kadmos slew the dragon, and, enjoined by Athena, he sowed its teeth. From the sown teeth, armed men rose up out of the earth, and they were called the Spartoi. They killed each other, some going into strife deliberately and others in ignorance.

In these two myths we see that the consequences of a strange conception affect more than the individual conceived, and that such conceptions and births tend to recur within family groups. In the stories of the conceptions and births of Vasu's wife and children, we find multi-generational episodes of abnormal conceptions. The story of the origin of the Spartoi displays how the products of such conceptions have difficulties in recognizing, and so honouring, kinship ties, and thus commit violence within the family.

2.3.2 Biologically vs. Socially Problematic Conceptions

Asexual conceptions entail both biological and social abnormalities. Any ambiguities resulting from such conception stem not only from the conditions of the act of conception itself, but also from the participants involved in it, from their identities and their relationship to one another. Biologically problematic conceptions can result from the two parents sharing categories that they should not, such as being of the same sex, or not sharing categories that they should, such as one being human and one non-human, for example a god or an animal. Similarly, socially problematic conceptions can be the result of the parents sharing categories that they should not, such as their belonging to the same kin-group, or not sharing categories that they should, such as being unmarried or belonging to distinct social groups or hierarchical levels.

There are a number of different ways in which biologically abnormal conceptions can occur. The asexual conceptions discussed in the preceding section fall into this category, but as I have already surveyed them my concern here is with sexual conceptions involving two parents who should not be able to reproduce for biological reasons, or whose union creates biological or physical ambiguity in their child. The most common example is the union between a human and a god or other supernatural being. Such conceptions are well known from Greek myth, where the *hēmithēoi* “demi-god” heroes are the offspring of gods who mate with mortals. The

majority of these are born from a human mother and a divine father. Theseus, Perseus, Herakles, Bellerophon, Jason, and many other well-known figures from Greek myth are the offspring of such unions. Less frequently, a goddess will produce a child with a human male, as in the case of Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, and Achilles, son of Thetis. Such children inherit mortality from their human parent, but also a superhuman element from their divine parent – the “third factor” to which Rees and Rees refer. In other cases the non-human parent is an animal rather than an anthropomorphic supernatural being. In Greek myth we have the example of Pasiphaë conceiving a child by a bull and giving birth to the minotaur. Sarah Larratt Keefer has argued that Aranhod’s pregnancy is actually the result of an encounter with a selkie⁴⁵ on the basis of her firstborn son Dylan being some form a sea-creature.⁴⁶

Conceptions that are biologically abnormal may also involve persons who should not be able to conceive doing exactly that, as in cases of male pregnancy or conception by non-fertile women. In some cases, the two parents may be of the same sex. The Middle Welsh text *Math uab Mathonwy*, for example, features a series of three conceptions that are heavily transgressive, involving incest between two brothers. As a punishment for their betrayal, the sorcerer-king Math transforms his two nephews, the brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, into pairs of mating animals for three years. They first become deer, and then wild pigs, and finally wolves, and each year they produce a son. At the end of each year, the newest son is returned to Math, who transforms him into a human and has him baptized.⁴⁷ Another well-known example of male-male reproduction occurs in the Scandinavian myth of the birth of Odin’s horse Sleipnir, who is conceived when Loki takes the form of a mare and mates with the stallion Svaðilfari.⁴⁸ In both of these cases, a

⁴⁵Selkies are creatures known from Irish and Scottish and Faroese folklore. They live as seals but are able to shed their skins and take on human form.

⁴⁶Keefer (1989-90).

⁴⁷Text Williams (1964): 75-6. Translation Ford (1977): 96-8.

⁴⁸Larrington (2009).

sex change is required in order for one of the males to conceive, and so such conceptions involve significant confusion with respect to the category of sex. Most cases of male pregnancy, however, are generated asexually.

In other cases, women who are viewed and thus categorized as non-fertile – either because of virginity, age, or a history of barrenness in themselves or in their husbands – are able to conceive, frequently through the intervention of some supernatural intermediary. These are sexual conceptions, in contrast to the cases of conception by non-fertile women described in the preceding section. The story of Ibonia, which I discussed in chapter one, begins with two barren women who are able to have children thanks to a magical child-charm. In the Old Norse *Völsunga Saga*, Rerir and his wife are unable to have children, and so they pray to the gods for help. Frigg hears them and appeals to Odin, who gives an apple to a valkyrie, who takes the form of a raven and brings the apple to Rerir. Rerir, understanding the significance of the apple, eats it and is then able to impregnate his wife, who later gives birth to Volsung.⁴⁹

In contrast to biologically ambiguous conceptions are those that are socially problematic. These are cases in which the two parents are forbidden to reproduce because of social constraints, and so certain violations of social order must occur in order for them to conceive a child. This type of conception is one of the most frequently referred to in the formulations of the heroic biography pattern surveyed in chapter one. For example, a conception of this type may occur outside of marriage and by stealth, involving an unmarried woman, adultery, or rape. Conceptions between a member of the “in”-group and a foreigner or other type of outsider also belong to this type. The conceptions of Lug and Brés in *Cath Maige Tuired* “The Battle of Mag Tuired,”⁵⁰ for example, each involve one parent from the Túatha Dé Danann, the “insider” group, and one parent from the Fomoiré, the “outsider” group. The result is that the children have complex ties to both groups and become central players in the war between the two. Conceptions of this type may also

⁴⁹Text and translation Finch (1965): 2-3.

⁵⁰Text and trans. Gray (1982).

involve parents who belong to different social strata, for example, a king and a slave, whose children are difficult to categorize with respect to their social status. The children of these unions participate in multiple, often conflicting categories, and this creates for them an ambiguous place in society, just as biologically problematic conceptions result in children whose place cannot easily be categorized with respect to the natural or supernatural world.

Cases of incest are particularly complex because they produce different outcomes depending on the identities of the participants. In the world of the gods, incest is commonplace and unproblematic, but it is generally restricted to the sibling-sibling, uncle-niece, or aunt-nephew relationship. Parent-child unions for the most part remain taboo.⁵¹ In the human world however, incest is far more heavily tabooed, especially where the two participants are related by blood, as opposed to by social ties. Lord Raglan's formulation of the heroic biography pattern makes reference to the father of the hero being a "near relative of his mother," but in his discussion of the various heroes on whose life he bases his pattern, incest occurs primarily among the gods or in cases where the human parents are related, but the child is believed or known to have another father, generally a god. In many cases, even where the parents are close relatives, the degree of closeness is not sufficient to make their relationship taboo to the societies in question.

Herakles' mother Alkmēnē is married to her first cousin Amphitryōn, but there is no social impropriety in this relationship, and in any case Herakles' true father is Zeus. Even where the relationship between the mother and her human relative is transgressive, there is frequently an alternative divine father implicated. Perseus, for example, is generally known as the son of Zeus and Danaë, but it is also said that his father was Proitos, Danaë's uncle.⁵² A case of outright incestuous conception with no divine intervention is that of Sinfjotli in the *Völsunga Saga*. Sinfjotli's mother Signy seduces her brother Sigmund in order to produce a child strong

⁵¹A notable exception to this is the Orphic tradition that Dionysus is the son of Zeus and his daughter Persephone, which will be considered in chapter three.

⁵²This alternative account of Perseus' paternity is found in the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus, and the D-scholion on this work attributes the information to Pindar. On this point, see Cameron (2004): 99.

enough to avenge their murdered father.⁵³ Here, incest is more than an element of strangeness in the conception. Rather, Sinfjotli is deliberately created to be sprung from a single familial line in order to act as its avenger. Generally speaking, incest in the heroic biography is more closely tied to the hero's later life and to his own actions than to his birth.

2.3.3 Hybrid Conceptions

What I refer to as “hybrid” conceptions are cases in which more than one of the other types co-occur in the same conception. For example, there are cases where more than one conception takes place before the hero is successfully born. The conception and birth of the Irish hero Cú Chulainn⁵⁴ stands out among these, featuring three separate conceptions and two births. He is first conceived by the god Lug and an unidentified woman, who is also supernatural. She gives birth to him, but he dies. He is then conceived a second time by a human mother, Deichtine, when she swallows an insect, but also by the influence of Lug, who visits her in a dream and informs her that she is carrying his child. When the unmarried Deichtine's pregnancy is discovered, it becomes a source of shame, particularly since her father Conchobar is suspected of having fathered her child, and so she aborts the child before her marriage to Súaltaim. Cú Chulainn is conceived a third time, this time in a relatively unmarked conception involving Deichtine and Súaltaim. There is nothing supernatural at play in this third conception, but Deichtine and Súaltaim do conform to the standard heroic-biography formula of the hero's parents as a local princess and a hero “from afar,” since Súaltaim is an outsider among the Ulstermen.⁵⁵ In Cú Chulainn's conception we find two mothers and two fathers (one of each human and one of each supernatural), three episodes of conception, two births, episodes of both sexual and asexual conception, and a

⁵³Finch (1965). I discuss this story more full in section 2.4.1.2.

⁵⁴van Hamel (1978).

⁵⁵The Lebor na hUidre (LU) recension of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* TBC calls attention to Súaltaim's status as an outsider, noting that like Cú Chulainn he is immune to the curse that affects all the other Ulstermen (O'Rahilly (1976): 7 (text) and 131 (translation)) and referring to Cú Chulainn as the son of *Soaltaim a sídaib* “Súaltaim from the fairy mounds” (116 (text) and 229 (translation)).

hint of incest. I will discuss this story in greater detail in chapter three, alongside an account of the birth of Dionysus that provides a striking parallel in that it also involves birth from two separate mothers (one divine and the other human), both sexual and asexual conceptions, incest, and multiple instances of conception and birth.

2.4 Consequences of Ambiguity

All the conceptions surveyed in the preceding section establish heroes who are either marked by deficient categorization - that is, belonging to too few categories - or by excessive categorization - that is, belonging to too many categories. In some cases, it is certainly true that these extraordinary conceptions have no discernible impact on, or consequences for, the children produced. As we have seen, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's three sons apparently escape their strange origins entirely unscathed. In general, however, the product of one of these unusual conceptions is an individual who is difficult or even impossible to classify, and so he does not fit cleanly into any of the "normal" categories operating in the world of the story.

2.4.1 Deficient Categories: Autochthony and Incest

The word *autochthony* is derived from the Greek *αὐτόχθων*, meaning "sprung from the land itself," "indigenous, native,"⁵⁶ or "born from the earth [*khthôn*] itself [*autos*] of one's homeland."⁵⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss examined the repercussions of autochthonous origins in "The Structural Study of Myth,"⁵⁸ and scholars of Greek mythology in particular have pursued this line of inquiry, especially in connection with Theban and Athenian origin stories.⁵⁹ The relevance of this concept in the context of an examination of conception is the idea of life created from a single source, a

⁵⁶LSJ (Liddell-Scott-Jones *A Greek-English Lexicon*).

⁵⁷Loraux (2000): 1.

⁵⁸Lévi-Strauss (1955).

⁵⁹See for example Dee (1979), Walters (1984), Rosivach (1987), and Loraux (2000).

single point of origin. But, in terms of the way that I have treated conception in the preceding section, even autochthonous conceptions typically do have two sources. The story of the origin of the Spartoi, for example, is an example of an autochthonous conception, and indeed they do spring from the land. This is only after the earth has been seeded with the teeth of the dragon by Kadmos, however. Whereas an unmarked conception leaves a child with two distinct lines of filiation, this type of conception provides only one and the offspring are understood as, in some sense, spontaneously generated and identified with a single point of origin. The Spartoi are understood not as the children of both the earth and the dragon, but only as having sprung from their own native soil.⁶⁰ A child with only one point of origin fails to form the network of social and kinship relationships that build on dual parentage. Similarly, incest produces children from a single point of origin, since these children are generated within a single family. Autochthony and incest thus represent the same underlying imbalance, creating problems particularly for the hero's relationship to his family.

2.4.1.1 Autochthony: The Case of Conall Cernach

Nicole Loraux, in her study of Athenian myths of autochthony, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*, argues that there are two distinct types of autochthony in Greek mythological thought. In the first, “man – mankind, a man, or men – rises up from the earth as a plant emerges from the ground or a child from the womb.”⁶¹ In the second, “the human creature ... made of earth and modeled by a god in the role of craftsman, is the product of a fabrication.”⁶² Reflections of both kinds of autochthony are discernible in the birth narrative about the Irish hero Conall Cernach.

Compert Conaill Cernaig, “The Birth of Conall Cernach,” is one of the five *comperta* “birth tales” named in the B recension of the medieval Irish Tale-Lists.⁶³ Unfortunately, if there was

⁶⁰Loraux (2000): 57.

⁶¹Loraux (2000): 1.

⁶²Loraux (2000): 1.

⁶³MacCana (1980): 53-4. On the question of whether these tale-lists provide an accurate representation of the

ever a text by this name it has not survived. We do, however, have an account of Conall's birth in *Cóir Anmann* (CA), "The Fitness of Names," a text dealing with the origins of the personal names and epithets of various figures from Irish narrative tradition. There is variation in the story of Conall's birth among the different recensions of the text, with the fullest account appearing in what Sharon Arbuthnot, the latest editor of this text, labels the "Long Version" of *Cóir Anmann*.⁶⁴

Conall Cernach's birth is unusual in several ways. Unlike the majority of the other Irish birth tales, which have at least two participants in the conception, Conall's birth is the result of an asexual conception. The story begins with the identification of Conall's mother as Finnchaím, a woman of the Connachta, who is the daughter of the druid Cathbad, and the wife of Amairgein Iarngiunnach, both of whom are prominent figures among the Ulaid (Ulstermen). Finnchaím is barren and so seeks help from a druid. The druid instructs her to meet him at a particular well on the following day. When she arrives, the druid chants spells over the well and instructs her to bathe in it in order to conceive. The druid prophesies to Finnchaím, telling her that:

(2.7) *Dofuisemha mac 7 ní ba hingaire nech aile día matharmacne oldás .i. do Connachtaibh.*⁶⁵

You will conceive a son and no one will be less dutiful towards his mother's people, i.e. the Connachta, than he.

Rather than bathing in the well, Finnchaím instead takes a drink of water from it and swallows a worm along with the water. This worm is the trigger for Conall's conception, though this is not explicitly stated,⁶⁶ and it remains with him in the womb until his birth. Before Conall is born, two other prophecies are made about how destructive he will be towards the Connachta (Connaughtmen). Cet mac Mágach, Finnchaím's brother and a leading warrior among the Connachta, learns

corpus of stories in circulation at the time, see Toner (2000).

⁶⁴The story occurs at §264 of Arbuthnot's edition of the text.

⁶⁵Arbuthnot (2007): §264.

⁶⁶For a more thorough discussion of this motif in Irish literature, see chapter four, section 4.3.1.3.

of these prophecies. He guards his sister until she gives birth and then attempts to kill the baby by crushing his neck. Finnchaím appeals to Cet and he relents, but Conall is left with a crooked neck, a mark of this early threat to his life. By the time that Conall is born, the worm that brought about his conception has burrowed into his hand and damaged it, and this injury is treated as the explanation for his name in CA, which derives *cernach* from *cern* “swelling.” The clear implication here is that Amairgein is not Conall Cernach’s father, hence Conall has no paternal kin.

Returning to the argument that both of Loraux’s two types of autochthony are present in the account of Conall Cernach’s birth, let us first consider the autochthony of a man who rises up from the earth. Functionally, the earth is a substitute for the womb, and some external source of insemination is necessary for conception to occur and birth to eventually take place. The proto-typical example of this type of autochthony is the story of Erichthonios, as recounted in Apollodorus’ *Library*.

(2.8) Ἀθηνᾶ παρεγένετο πρὸς Ἥφαιστον, ὄπλα κατασκευάσαι θέλουσα. ὁ δὲ ἐγκαταλελειμμένος ὑπὸ Ἀφροδίτης εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ὤλισθε τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς, καὶ διώκειν αὐτὴν ἤρξατο· ἡ δὲ ἔφευγεν. ὡς δὲ ἐγγὺς αὐτῆς ἐγένετο πολλῇ ἀνάγκῃ (ἦν γὰρ χωλός), ἐπειρᾶτο συνελθεῖν. ἡ δὲ ὡς σώφρων καὶ παρθένος οὕσα οὐκ ἠνέσχετο· ὁ δὲ ἀπεσπέρμηθεν εἰς τὸ σκέλος τῆς θεᾶς. ἐκείνη δὲ μυσσασθεῖσα ἐρίῳ ἀπομάξασα τὸν γόνον εἰς γῆν ἔρριψε. φευγούσης δὲ αὐτῆς καὶ τῆς γονῆς εἰς γῆν πεσούσης Ἐριχθόνιος γίνετα.⁶⁷

Athena came to Hephaistos, wishing for him to equip her with arms. He, having been left by Aphrodite, fell into yearning for Athena, and he began to run after her; but she fled. When he got near her – with much difficulty because he was lame – he tried to couple with her. She, being chaste and a virgin, would not allow it. He ejaculated onto the goddess’ leg. Feeling disgust, she wiped the seed off with a pice of wool and threw it onto the earth. After she fled and the seed fell onto the earth, Erichthonios was born.

The core factors behind the conception are:

⁶⁷*Library* of Apollodorus 3.14.6.

1. Both the sperm and the earth are required for the conception to take place.
2. The sperm is the inseminator and the earth is the recipient of the insemination.
3. The source of the sperm is a human or human-like agent – in this case a god – representing the male side of the conception, while the recipient is not human at all, but rather an aspect of nature representing the female side.

A similar pattern holds in Conall Cernach’s conception as well, with the important distinction being that in his case the natural world provides the source of the conception – the worm – taking the “male” role, while the recipient of the conception is a human woman.

ERICHTHONIOS		CONALL CERNACH	
Inseminator	Recipient	Inseminator	Recipient
↓	↓	↓	↓
Sperm (Hephaistos)	Earth	Worm	Finnchaím
↓	↓	↓	↓
Male	Female	Male	Female
↓	↓	↓	↓
<i>Human(-like)</i>	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Human</i>

The second type of autochthony described by Loraux involves one “parent” who is more of a creator or fabricator. Conall’s conception is a deliberate act on Finnchaím’s part. Deliberate conceptions are not uncommon – in fact they are quite typical in stories about the births of heroes – but they generally involve two participants. While the druid here takes a role in the conception by providing instructions and by preparing the well through his spells, his role is undermined and its impact lessened by Finnchaím’s alteration of the method of conception: she drinks water from the well rather than bathing in it.

Loraux notes the pervasiveness of myths of autochthony in Greece: “It is not that each city wishes to tell in its own way the story of the birth of the first man. Every foundation myth is less concerned with providing a version of the beginnings of humankind than with postulating the

original nobility of a founder.”⁶⁸ Conall Cernach’s birth is of course not a story about the origins of mankind, but rather is attached to the origins of certain tribal groups in Ireland. J. P. Mallory, in “The Career of Conall Cernach,” remarks on Conall’s connection to tribal founders as both a descendant of the ancestor of the Ulaid (through his mother’s father Cathbad), and himself the ancestor of later tribal groups:

His [Conall Cernach’s] importance is readily seen in the fact that he was sixth in line of descent from Rudraige, the legendary ancestor of the Ulster heroes (hence the Ulster Cycle is also known as the Rudraigecht). His son Irél was the founder figure of the Dál nAraidi and other Cruthin tribes of Ulster (CAn 249; O’Rahilly 1946, 349-350), and his grandson Iboth was regarded as founder of the Tuath or Fir Iboth of Scotland.⁶⁹

Autochthony is reflected not only in the ancestry of Conall Cernach, but also in the line of his descendants who become tribal ancestors themselves. The story of the birth of Conall Cernach, a founder figure, shows the same use of autochthony in creating foundation myths that Loraux describes in the Greek context.

Autochthony may assert itself at the level of genealogy, but also in the physical characteristics of those with autochthonous origins. In “The Structural Study of Myth,” Lévi-Strauss claims that “difficulties to walk and behave straight” are symptomatic of autochthony.⁷⁰ He cites examples of this from Greek (Oedipus and his kin) and various North American mythologies in which autochthonous origins result in limping due to physical injury or deformation, particularly involving the feet or legs, or other forms of “crooked” behaviour. Conall himself is associated with physical crookedness in several ways. As Dobbs notes, “he is frequently called ‘cloén’ – crooked

⁶⁸Loraux (2000): 9.

⁶⁹Mallory (1989b): 22. CAn = Stokes (1897).

⁷⁰Lévi-Strauss (1955): 434.

or squinting. ... Only it is not clear whether it referred to his eye or his shoulder.”⁷¹ I have already referred to the crookedness of Conall’s neck as a result of his uncle Cet mac Mágach’s attack on him immediately after his birth. Conall is also said to be cross-eyed, but this condition is corrected when he beheads the Leinster king Mesgegra and then puts Mesgegra’s head over his own, as described in the medieval Irish saga *Talland Etair* “The Siege of Howth.”

(2.9) *Dobert immorro Conall achend-som forachend, conid tarla (d)araais combodiriuch
onduairsin ammach.*⁷²

Then Conall Cernach put his [Mesgegra’s] head over his own, so that it went over his shoulders and so that [his eyes] were straightened because of that.

The crookedness of autochthony also manifests itself in Conall’s behaviour.

In his controversial analysis of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss posits an opposition between autochthonous reproduction and reproduction involving the two sexes, and writes that “the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which, to phrase it coarsely, replaces the original problem: born from one or born from two? born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type: the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it.”⁷³ I schematize this correlation below in order to clarify the link between the impossibility of successful autochthonous reproduction and the undervaluing of blood relations, which is realized in Oedipus’ story by his “crooked” behaviour towards his father, whereas the attempt to escape autochthony and the overrating of blood relations is realized in Oedipus’ relationship with his mother.

⁷¹Dobbs (1929): 127.

⁷²Stokes (1887a): 60. Although this passage makes no specific reference to Conall’s crossed-eyes, the preceding passage describes his affliction and thus provides context for reading the act of straightening here as applying to his eyes.

⁷³Lévi-Strauss (1955): 434.

incest	:	patricide
overrating blood relations	:	underrating blood relations
escape autochthony	:	impossibility of autochthony

Conall Cernach’s birth tale contains a number of these problems as well – the problem of autochthony vs. bisexual reproduction, the problem of “same” vs. “different” in his ties with the Ulaid and the Connachta, and the “undervaluing of blood relations” in particular, which will be a consistent pattern in his life, at least when it comes to the Connacht side of his family. His autochthonous birth underlies and shapes his genealogical network and defines his relationships with the various members of his family.

The genealogical network introduced in Conall Cernach’s birth tale in CA is a strictly maternal one and can be better understood if we examine other sources of information about his kinship ties. These sources include a variety of medieval Irish narrative and genealogical texts, surveyed fully in Dobbs’ article “The Traditions of Conall Cernach”⁷⁴ and Mallory’s article “The Career of Conall Cernach,” cited above. I examine here only the core members of Conall Cernach’s kin-group, which yields a limited but representative picture of the relationships.

The Ulster side of Conall’s genealogy represents a fairly straightforward grouping, and the relationships among its members are generally positive. Conall is Cú Chulainn’s foster-brother, as well as his cousin, and he will eventually avenge Cú Chulainn’s death. Along with Cú Chulainn, Conall is counted among the best of the Ulster warriors during Conchobar’s reign and he is foster-father to Conchobar’s son Cuscraid Mend Macha. Conchobar himself is Conall’s uncle, since both Conall’s mother Finnchaím and Conchobar are identified as the children of Cathbad.

Finnchaím is identified as a woman of the Connachta, in spite of her father being an Ulsterman, and the Connacht side of Conall’s genealogy is far more extensive than the Ulster side. Conall’s uncles include the seven sons of Mága, listed in the LU TBC as: Ailill, Ánlúan, Moccorb,

⁷⁴Dobbs (1929).

Cet, Én, Bascall, and Dóche.⁷⁵ Elsewhere the list varies, and it is not consistent in either its members or the order in which those members are named. Conall’s aunt is Máta Muireasc, Finnchaím’s half-sister, whose three sons are Ailill, king of Connacht, Cairbre, king of Tara, and Finn, king of Leinster. This set of relationships is referenced by Ailill himself in the Book of Leinster (LL) TBC,⁷⁶ and is mentioned elsewhere as well. In contrast to Conall’s generally positive relationship with the members of his Ulster kin-group, his relationship with his Connacht family is exceedingly negative and destructive, as the prophecies issued before his birth predicted it would be. Conall engages in multiple acts of violence against them, and his killing of his Connacht kin occurs across a number of different texts. Conall’s uncle Anlúan’s death, for example, is recounted in *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*, and Cet is the subject of the death-tale *Aided Cet maic Mágach*.⁷⁷ Ailill mac Mágach, along with Dóche, Moccorb, Scandal (one of the seven sons of Mága listed in the LL TBC but not in LU), and Cet again are all listed as being killed by Conall in *Cath Airtig* “The Battle of Airtech.”⁷⁸ Meanwhile, Ailill mac Mága shares his death-tale with Conall; *Goire Conaill Chernaig i Crúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig* describes how Conall Cernach is taken in and given hospitality in Crúachan by Ailill and Medb, but eventually kills Ailill through Medb’s agency, and later dies himself. The text summarizes Conall’s acts of kin-slaying:

(2.10) *Ocus romarb-som tri maic Oilella 7 Medba 7 ... is e romarb secht maccu Mágach do Connachtaib .i. Anlúan mac Magach 7 Docha mac Magach 7 Magcurp mac Mágach 7 Find mac Mágach 7 Scannlán mac Mágach 7 Cet 7 Ailill mac Mágach. Ocus is e romarb Ailill mac Mata Muirsci do Connachtaib ...*⁷⁹

He killed the three sons of Ailill and Medb, ... and it is he who killed the seven sons of

⁷⁵O’Rahilly (1976): ll. 4-5.

⁷⁶Ed. and trans. O’Rahilly (1970).

⁷⁷Text and trans. Meyer (1906).

⁷⁸Ed. and trans. Best (1916).

⁷⁹Meyer (1897): 103.

Mága of Connacht, that is, Anlúan son of Mága, and Docha son of Mága, and Mac Corb son of Mága, and Find son of Mága, and Scandlán son of Mága, and Cet, and Ailill son of Mága. And it is he who killed Ailill son of Máta Muireasc of Connacht.”

These acts of kin-slaying underlie most of the stories about Conall Cernach, and demonstrate what Lévi-Strauss describes as the “underrating of blood relations” associated with autochthony.

Cairpre Nia Fer, Conall’s cousin and the brother of Ailill, son of Máta Muireasc, escapes death at Conall’s hands, but Conall does elope with Cairpre’s wife, Feidelm Noicrothach.⁸⁰ In this story we find both the under-rating and over-rating of blood relations, since Feidelm is the daughter of Conall’s uncle Conchobar. Given that Feidelm and Cairpre are both Conall’s first cousins, one through his mother’s maternal line in Connacht and one through his mother’s paternal line in Ulster, in this act of elopement we find both a denial of the Connacht blood relations and an assertion of the Ulster line. By overrating the paternal line and underrating the maternal line at one generation removed, Conall compensates for his own deficient paternal line.⁸¹

2.4.1.2 Incest: The Cases of Sinfjotli and Lugaid Ríab nDerg

Episodes of incest occur frequently in mythology, from the intermarriage of sibling deities to creation myths involving a primordial couple. In most cases, however, the emphasis is on the individual or individuals committing incest rather than the offspring of such unions. Thus, while incest does feature in heroic-biography-type stories, it often comes later in the biography rather than during the initial episode describing the birth of the hero. Moreover, it is often the hero himself who commits incest, as noted in the von Hahn/Nutt formulation of the heroic biography pattern. While incest is certainly a heavily tabooed act in human society, it is not always the case that the children of an incestuous union are tainted in any way by their origins. In *Math uab*

⁸⁰Dobbs (1929): 128.

⁸¹In other texts, Conall is described as the son of Amairgein Iarngiunnach. However, this relationship has little impact on Conall’s genealogical connections, and Amairgein at times participates in Conall’s vendetta against his Connacht kin. Amairgein may here represent what Kim McCone (1990: 199) describes as the “human being generally acknowledged as the father but in reality a mere step-father,” a figure that frequently appears in heroic biographies.

Mathonwy, as we have seen, an incestuous union between the brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy is imposed as a punishment. Once the punishment is complete, however, there is no evidence for any negative stigma attached to them or to their children. Here, incest is used as a means of negating the damage to the family that came about as a result of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's dishonouring their uncle Math. In many cases, in fact, incest is not the cause of damage to the family, but rather the outcome of previous disruptions within a family group. Two cases show how the creation of a child through incest can be deliberately orchestrated by characters seeking to control preexisting damage in a family wracked by internecine conflict.

The Icelandic *Völsunga Saga* / *Saga of the Völsungs*⁸² narrates the events leading to the fall of the dynastic Völsung family. The birth of Völsung himself has already been referred to, but here I am concerned with the birth of Völsung's grandson Sinfjötli. Völsung has ten sons and one daughter. His daughter Signy marries king Siggeir, who plots against Völsung and his sons. Siggeir attacks Völsung, kills him, and takes his sons prisoner with the intent of killing them. Signy, however, asks that instead of being executed her brothers be put in stocks. Siggeir accedes to her request, and the ten sons of Völsung are taken into the woods and so confined. That night, a wolf comes and kills one of the sons.⁸³ She comes again for eight successive nights until only Sigmund remains alive. Signy arranges for a man to go to Sigmund in secret to smear honey on his face. That night instead of biting Sigmund, the wolf licks his face. Sigmund is able to bite her tongue and tear it out of her head, thus killing her. He is then able to escape this confinement. Signy provides a hiding place for him, while Siggeir believes him to be dead.

Siggeir and Signy have two sons, and when the eldest is ten years old she sends him to Sigmund in order to help him seek vengeance against Siggeir for the death of Völsung. The boy proves himself too weak, however, and Signy instructs Sigmund to kill him. The same fate be-

⁸²Finch (1965). Finch describes the saga as "compiled not later than c. 1260-70, probably in Iceland, though possibly in Norway," (ix) and remarks that the oldest manuscript is from c. 1400.

⁸³The text notes that some people believe this wolf to have been Siggeir's mother, "who had assumed that shape on account of witchcraft and magic" (Finch (1965): 8).

falls Signy's younger son the following year. In order to produce a child strong enough to assist Sigmund in carrying out their revenge against Siggeir, Signy resorts to more drastic measures. She exchanges appearances with a witch, and while the witch goes to Siggeir's bed, Signy visits Sigmund's hiding place. She sleeps with him for three nights, and conceives a son – Sinfjotli. Unlike Signy's previous children, Sinfjotli is strictly a descendant of Volsung, a fact that becomes apparent as he grows older:

(2.11) *Ok er hann vex upp, er hann bæði mikill ok sterkr ok vænn at álitu ok mjök í aett Völsunga.*

As he grows up, he becomes big, strong, and handsome, the very image of the Völsungs.⁸⁴

When Sinfjotli is ten years old, Signy puts him through the same ordeal to which she had subjected her other two sons before sending them to Sigmund: she sews Sinfjotli's shirt to his skin, and then rips it off, taking the skin with it. While the two older sons had not been able to withstand this torture, Sinfjotli responds by saying:

(2.12) *Lítit mundi slíkt sárt þykkja Völsungi.*

No Völsung would think much of pain like that.⁸⁵

Able to withstand physical ordeals thanks to his doubled Völsung heritage, Sinfjotli clearly displays a much stronger nature than that of his half-brothers. He distinguishes himself again when he is sent to Sigmund. Whereas the two older brothers had refused to comply with Sigmund's request that they make dough out of flour when they realized that there was something alive hiding in the flour, Sinfjotli obeys and succeeds. Sigmund then reveals that the flour had contained a venomous snake, which Sinfjotli has kneaded into their bread without coming to any harm. The text tells us that

(2.13) *Sigmundur var svá mikill fyrir sér at hann mátti eta eitr, svá at hann skaðaði ekki, en Sinfjötla hlúddi þat at eitr kæmi útan á hann, en eigi hlýddi honum at eta né drekka.*

⁸⁴Text and trans. Finch (1965):10.

⁸⁵Text and trans. Finch (1965): 10.

Sigmund was so hardy that he could take poison and yet come to no harm. But though Sinfjotli was able to stand outward contact with poison, he could neither eat nor drink it.⁸⁶

Sinfjotli's incestuous origins have imbued him with strength beyond that of his half-brothers, who were the issue of far less unusual conceptions. Incest here serves the necessary function of creating a child who is so strongly a descendant of Volsung, and so uniquely a member of that family, that he is able to avenge Volsung's death. As Signy herself states when she finally reveals to Sigmund that Sinfjotli is their son:

(2.14) *Hefir hann af því mikit kapp at hann er bæði sonarsonr ok dóttursonr Völsungs konungs.*

His immense vigour comes from being King Volsung's grandson on his father's as well as his mother's side.⁸⁷

Sigmund and Sinfjotli burn down Siggeir's hall with their enemy inside. After Siggeir's death, Signy declares that she has done what she had to in order to avenge her father, but, after all that she has done, she can no longer go on living. She then walks into the burning hall and dies. Signy alone bears a negative consequence for the incest that created Sinfjotli. Sinfjotli is marked by his incestuous origins, but the mark is his extraordinary strength and toughness rather than any negative stigma.

Another hero marked by his incestuous origin, this time physically, is Lugaid Ríab nDerg "Lugaid of the Red Stripes," whose birth is recounted in several medieval Irish sources, including the late Middle Irish *Cath Boinde* "The Battle of the Boyne."⁸⁸ Lugaid is the product of an incestuous union between Clothra and her three brothers, Bres, Nár, and Lothar, a set of triplets known as the three *Findeamna*.

⁸⁶Text and trans. Finch (1965): 10.

⁸⁷Text and trans. Finch (1965): 13-4.

⁸⁸Ed. and trans. O'Neill (1905). For a detailed study of the figure of Lugaid Ríab nDerg, see Burgess (2004).

(2.15) *Na tri findeamna .i. Eamain raed nach dealaighther, 7 d'aentairbirt rucad .i. Breas 7 Nár 7 Lothar a n-anmand, 7 is iad dorigni Lugaid tri riab n-derg rena siair bodein.*⁸⁹

The three Findeamna, that is “set,”⁹⁰ a thing that cannot be separated, and they were born of one birth, and Bres and Nár and Lothar were there names. It is they who generated Lugaid of the three red stripes with their own sister.

The explanation for Lugaid’s epithet *Ríab nDerg* “of the Red Stripes” is that he was born with two stripes dividing his body into three sections, each section the product of one of his three fathers. *Cóir Anmann* explains that:

(2.16) *Dá sreibh dhearga bátar tairis .i. crís fó braigib 7 crís dara mhedhon. A cheann fri Nár ro dhíall. A bhruinne fri Bres. Ó chris síis fri Lothar ro dell.*⁹¹

Two red stripes were across him, that is a band on his neck and a band across his middle. His head resembled Nár. His chest Bres. From the belt down he resembled Lothar.

In contrast to Sinfjotli’s conception, which is motivated by the desire to avenge the murder of his mother’s father, Lugaid’s conception comes about in order to avoid a similar event. According to *Aided Meidbe* “The Death of Medb,”⁹² the conception comes about after Clothra learns that her three brothers are planning to make war on their father Eochaid Feidlech in order to force him to give up his kingship. She questions them about this, and when they confirm that this is indeed their intent she invites them to conceive a child with her in order to ensure that they will have descendants. Afterwards, she confronts them with the crime of their incest and dissuades them from further transgressing against their family by attacking their father, and attack that would

⁸⁹O’Neill (1905): 174.

⁹⁰The Irish *eamain* or *emon* is defined by the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* as “a pair (or triplet) born at one birth; a twin, one of two or three born together; a pair,” but because these are triplets I render the term as “set” in this context.

⁹¹Arbuthnot (2007): §106.

⁹²Ed. and trans. Hull (1938).

now be doomed to fail.

In both cases of incest that I have dealt with, the incest is not the cause of disruption to the family unit, but rather the result of it and designed to resolve the problem. Sinfjotli is conceived in order to create a champion for the family, and specifically to avenge his grandfather, while Lugaid is conceived in order to prevent his uncles from committing patricide, and to protect his grandfather. Both cases involve protecting the family rather than harming it. In contrast, autochthonous births fail to continue or maintain the family unit, and, as we have seen in the case of Conall Cernach, autochthonous births often lead to alienation from and destruction within the family.

2.4.2 Excessive Categories: Demi-Gods and Monsters

Whereas some conceptions create children who lack some of the categories that the children of unmarked conceptions inherit from their parents, other types create an excess of ways in which the child may be categorized. In the simplest cases, a demi-god is produced from the union of a god and a human. Other cases, however, are more complex. The story of the birth of Matsya and Satyavatī in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, features children who are produced through an asexual conception between a human father and a mother who is an Apsarā but also a fish, and their conception would have been abnormal even if Vasu's semen had reached Girikā. At birth the twins are separated. Matsya is immediately recognized as the son of the king and restored to his parents, but Satyavatī remains behind with the fishermen. She retains the smell of fish until a sexual encounter with a sage removes the smell, and afterwards the sage also restores her virginity. While Matsya is apparently recognizably human and Vasu's son from birth, Satyavatī moves back and forth among different identities, even into adulthood.

I have thus far described the children born of these remarkable conceptions as "heroes," but in many cases the product of these unions are instead monstrous creatures. The Greek minotaur, for example, is the product of the union between Pasiphaë, a human woman, and a bull. In some cases, a single pregnancy will produce different types of beings. According to Hesiod's

Theogony, at the same time that Aphrodite was born from the contact of Ouranos' genitals with the ocean, the Erinyes or Furies were born from the drops of blood that spilled onto the earth when the genitals were flung into the water. In Norse myth, the offspring of Loki's union with the giant Angrboða are Hel, who presides over the land of the dead, the monstrous wolf Fenrir, and Jörmungandr, the world-serpent.

The hero produced by such a union may himself embody the human, divine, and monstrous aspects of his conception. Cú Chulainn is known for his *ríastrad*, sometimes translated as "distortion"⁹³ or "warp-spasm."⁹⁴ When Cú Chulainn undergoes the *ríastrad*, he is transformed into a monstrous and deformed figure. He is described as:

(2.17) *Úathbásach n-ílrechtach n-ingantach n-anaichnid...*⁹⁵

Horrible, many-shaped, strange, and unrecognizable...

Cú Chulainn's body distorts itself completely. His skeleton and organs twist around inside his skin, his legs turn backwards, one of his eyes retreats into his skull while the other hangs out of its socket onto his cheek, his mouth opens so wide that his innards can be seen, and the beating of his heart becomes as loud as a howling dog, or a lion attacking bears. He is surrounded by supernatural phenomena – strange lights and sounds – and becomes an unstoppable force of violence and destruction and death.⁹⁶ In this condition, he loses all rationality and has the capacity to turn against his own people, and to attack those that he has sworn to protect.

This monstrous aspect is in sharp contrast to his beautiful yet still supernatural appearance. On the morning following a particularly dramatic and destructive episode of *ríastrad* in the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn comes to display his other aspect to the assembled host, ashamed that they had seen

⁹³O'Rahilly (1976).

⁹⁴Kinsella (1970).

⁹⁵O'Rahilly (1976): ll. 2245-6.

⁹⁶The most detailed description of the *ríastrad* is given in the LU TBC at pages 68ff. (text) and 187ff. (translation) of O'Rahilly's edition.

his monstrous side.

(2.18) *Dotháet Cú Chulaind arna bárach do t[h]aidbriud in tslóig 7 do thaisbénad a chrotha álgín álaind do mnáib 7 bantrochtaib 7 andrib 7 ingenaib 7 filedaib 7 áes dána, úair nír míad ná mass leiss in dúaburdelb druídechta tárfás dóib fair in adaig sin reme. Is aire sin tánic do thaselbad a chrotha álgín álaind in lá sin.*⁹⁷

Cú Chulainn came the following day to show himself to the host and to display his pleasant, beautiful form to the women, to the female retinue and the married women and the girls, and to the poets and the men of art, because he did not think that the terrible magical shape that had appeared on him the previous night was honourable or dignified. It is for that reason that he came to display his pleasant, beautiful appearance on that day.

Cú Chulainn's beautiful form is as strange as his monstrous one. He is described as having hair that is dark at the roots but then changes to blood-red and then gold at the tips. He has spots of four colours on his cheeks: yellow, green, blue, and purple. His eyes each have seven pupils, his feet each have seven toes, and his fingers each have seven hands. The scene demonstrates that Cú Chulainn is just as capable of being supernaturally beautiful as he is of being supernaturally monstrous.

In Cú Chulainn's different shapes we find the traces of his complex conception. He displays a duality in being both human and supernatural, and his supernatural side displays a duality in being both monstrous and beautiful. His inability to control his monstrous side showcases the extent to which the ambiguous qualities of the hero are present not only in his person but in his actions. Although Cú Chulainn's supernatural side is precisely what allows him to be the defender of Ulster, it also makes him a dangerous presence for the people he protects.

⁹⁷O'Rahilly (1976): ll. 2336-2340.

2.4.3 Controlling Ambiguity

One of the consequences of the hero's ambiguity is the opportunity it affords him to transcend ordinary categories, and by embodying multiple categories he is able to mediate between them and maintain a balance among them. The ambiguity of the hero also poses dangers for both to the hero himself and for his society. The ability to maintain balance includes the potential to destroy it. As Douglas points out: "ambiguous things can seem very threatening."⁹⁸ In being impossible to categorize, heroes threaten the integrity of the categories themselves. Cú Chulainn and Herakles, for example, share the feature of participating in multiple categories, and also possess an excess of heroic "essence" Both can lose control of their strength and become a danger to all those around them, losing their ability to distinguish between friend and foe. Herakles, in a fit of rage induced by Hera, kills his own children.⁹⁹ Even as a child his overwhelming strength is a danger to those around him. Herakles kills his music teacher Linus, and though he is acquitted of this murder, Amphytrýōn fears that he will commit similar acts of violence in the future and so sends him into exile.¹⁰⁰ Cú Chulainn also is not always able to contain his strength as a child. When playing with the other boys at Emain Macha he loses control and kills fifty of them with his fists. He then hides under Conchobar's bed, and Conchobar must intervene to protect him from the Ulstermen and make peace between him and the other boys.¹⁰¹ When Cú Chulainn takes up arms for the first time, he goes on an excursion in his chariot to the border of Ulster where he fights and defeats the three sons of Nechta Scéne. When he returns to Emain Macha he is still in the grips of his *ríastrad* and he challenges his own people, declaring that unless someone is sent out to fight him he will slaughter every man in the fort. Instead, the women of Emain Macha are sent out naked,

⁹⁸Douglas (2002): xi.

⁹⁹*Library* of Apollodorus 2.4.12 and DS 4.11.1.

¹⁰⁰*Library* of Apollodorus 2.4.9.

¹⁰¹O'Rahilly (1976): 15 (text) and 138 (translation).

which causes Cú Chulainn to avert his eyes and gives the warriors of Ulster the chance to seize him and plunge him into tubs of cold water in order to cool his frenzy.¹⁰²

Ambiguous things are indeed threatening and must be controlled in some way. Douglas argues that control over ambiguity can be exerted through the imposition of taboo, and describes taboo as:

... A spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe. Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organized. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder. ... Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred.¹⁰³

We may compare Margaret Mead's far narrower definition of taboo as "a prohibition whose infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or superhuman mediation."¹⁰⁴ What she describes more closely resembles the type of taboo most familiar in Irish literature – the *geis*. Philip O'Leary, in "Honour-Bound: The Social Context of Early Irish Heroic *Geis*,"¹⁰⁵ has written that "*Geis*, like all taboo, is a means of defining and thereby restricting and to some extent controlling danger."¹⁰⁶

The literature on *geis* is extensive, and demonstrates that the functions of *geis* are numerous and far from uniform.¹⁰⁷ There are many sources for *geis*, but some do relate specifically to the circumstances of the hero's conception, and so can be understood as designed to control the ambiguity that arose from his conception. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, for example, the king

¹⁰²O'Rahilly (1976): 25 (text) and 147-8 (translation).

¹⁰³Douglas (2002): xi.

¹⁰⁴Mead (1937): 502.

¹⁰⁵O'Leary (1988).

¹⁰⁶O'Leary (1988): 86.

¹⁰⁷The most extensive study on *geis* is Tom Sjöblom's *Early Irish Taboos* (2000). In addition to the O'Leary article previously cited, see also Greene (1979), Sjöblom (1998), and Charles-Edwards (1999).

Conaire is burdened with an elaborate set of taboos.¹⁰⁸ The first of these is that he must not kill birds. This is directly related to the circumstances of his conception, since his father is a bird-man, and birds are thus in some sense his kin. Conaire's own nature is therefore ambiguous in that he is both human and bird, and the prohibition against killing his bird-kin is perfectly understandable in this light. Considered in the context of the reduction of ambiguity, we can read this *geis* not as an attempt to deny or eliminate Conaire's dual nature, but rather to rationalize it. By assigning a personal *geis* that mirrors the general social taboo against kin-slaying, Conaire's relationship with the birds is transformed into a kinship tie that can be more readily categorized and understood in terms of normal human society. If the function of taboo is to confront ambiguity and resolve it, as Douglas suggests, then we can understand this *geis* as a response to confusion between human and bird created at Conaire's conception.

2.5 Conclusion

The birth tales under consideration here feature a wide range of unnatural ways for conception to occur, but all of these strange conceptions produce very specific outcomes, the most consistent of which is ambiguity in the identity of the child conceived. The hero produced by these conceptions is an ambiguous and therefore troubling figure. His nature is characterized by great strength that helps him to maintain balance, but also by a lack or excess of identity that can create imbalance. His life is a struggle to resolve his ambiguous nature and maintain equilibrium. From the moment of his conception, the hero's nature is a mystery that will persist until his birth and beyond, as he grows, develops, and navigates between the different categories that he embodies. Although prophecies may hint at his future actions, before his birth there is little indication of what his nature might be, as Deirdre's mother says when she asks Cathbad to explain her child's scream:

Ar nád·fitir ban-scál

¹⁰⁸Ralph O'Connor's *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel. Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga* (2013) is the most comprehensive study of this text.

*Cīa fo brú ·bī*¹⁰⁹

For a woman does not know

What is in her womb.

¹⁰⁹Hull (1949): ll. 27-8.

3 THE OBSTACLE OF BIRTH

3.1 Introduction

In the story of the birth of Ibonia described in chapter one, Ibonia himself takes a commanding interest in the exact circumstances of his birth even before it occurs. His pre-natal activity makes it clear that, in his view at least, there is a right way and a wrong way for his birth to take place, and that he is thoroughly invested in ensuring that he is born correctly. In Ibonia's case, the correct way for him to be born involves him freeing himself from his mother's womb without assistance from her or intervention from anyone else. Ibonia's actions are those of an individual confronting an obstacle and overcoming it. Ibonia himself recognizes this obstacle and takes action, and by doing so he demonstrates his greatness. In many cases, however, the obstacle of birth is not so easily overcome, and it relates not only to arranging the circumstances of the birth, but also to the dangers that birth presents to the hero.

Rees and Rees refer to the difficulties and complications that characterize the birth of the hero, and they note that his conception and birth are, by normal standards, "all wrong."¹ A "wrong" conception and birth is the "right" way for a hero to be born, but with this "wrongness" comes danger. In addition to the physical danger inherent in any birth, the hero is confronted with further threats from persons seeking to do him harm, or even prevent his birth entirely, as well as dangers arising from the extraordinary circumstances of his conception. Even after the hero has successfully been born, these dangers remain with him into his later life. Indeed, in Otto Rank's view, the entire biography of the hero, including all of his heroic deeds, is merely an attempt to resolve the problems created by the hero's birth.

The myth of the hero's birth begins, as is well known, with the situation of the child in the protecting womb (small box), where it is already persecuted by the father, who

¹Rees and Rees (1961): 225.

– in the meaning of the primal wish fulfilment – does not want the child to come into the world at all. The rest of the hero's fate is nothing but the working out of this situation, namely, the reaction to a specially severe birth trauma, which has to be mastered by over-compensatory achievements, among which the most prominent is the regaining of the mother.²

As I noted in chapter one, whereas in Joseph Campbell's view the true journey of the hero begins with the hero's transition into adulthood, Rank recognizes that this later transformation echoes and is conditioned by the first major transition of the individual – birth.

In chapter two, I examined a number of the ways in which the hero's conception can contribute to his general "wrongness." Here, I examine one particular way in which the hero's birth can be "wrong" and thus create an obstacle or challenge that he must overcome in order to begin his heroic career. In this chapter I consider stories in which birth fails to occur properly and the hero is not born correctly – or at all – because of, for example, miscarriage, abortion, still-birth, or death in early infancy. This requires a second attempt at birth, or a "rebirth," that repairs the failure of the first birth so that the hero can survive the process and be born successfully.

The narrative pattern described as "failed birth and rebirth" is identified in Indic mythology by Stephanie Jamison in *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India*.³ Building on Jamison's work, Angelique Gulermovich Epstein, in her article "Miscarriages and Miraculous Births in Indo-European Tradition,"⁴ has also identified this pattern in Greek and Welsh stories. Independently of the work of Jamison and Gulermovich Epstein, Leslie Ellen Jones has identified a similar and likely related narrative pattern or "bundle of motifs," to use her phrase, which she constructs based solely on Welsh sources, and which she discusses in "Boys in Boxes:

²Rank (1952): 106. (Original version *Das Trauma der Geburt*, published 1924.)

³Jamison (1991).

⁴Gulermovich Epstein (1994).

The Recipe for a Welsh Hero.”⁵ At its core, the pattern consists of:

1. A failed birth, such as a miscarriage or an abortion.
2. Containment of the issue of the failed birth in some type of vessel as a means of secondary gestation or continued incubation. This is used to correct the failed birth.
3. The eventual re-emergence of a child following his containment as a second, and this time successful, birth or rebirth.

The Middle Welsh text *Math uab Mathonwy*, the “Fourth Branch” of the *Mabinogi*, presents a typical example of this pattern in the story of the remarkable birth of Llew Llaw Gyffes. His mother, Aranrhod, steps across a magic wand held by her uncle, Math, as a test of her virginity. As she steps across the wand, a child is born.

(3.1) *Yna y camawd hitheu dros yr hutlath, ac ar y cam hwnnw, adaw mab brasuelyn mawr a oruc.*⁶

Then she stepped over the magic wand, and with that step, she left behind a big blond boy.

Aranrhod promptly flees, dropping something else from her as she goes. Her brother Gwydion immediately picks up that something, wraps it in a silk cloth, and hides it. Later he conceals it inside a chest.

(3.2) *... kyrchu y drws a oruc hi, ac ar hynny adaw y ryw bethan ohonei; a chyn cael o neb gaelet yr eil olwc arnaw, Gwydion a’y kymmerth, ac a droes llen o bali yn y gylch, ac a’e cudyawd. Sef y cudyawd, y mywn llaw gist is traed y wely.*⁷

She went towards the door, and she left behind her a kind of little thing. Before anyone got a second look at it, Gwydion took it and wrapped it up in a mantle of silk brocade, and he concealed it. This is where he hid it: inside a small chest at the foot of his bed.

⁵Jones (2005).

⁶Williams (1964): 77.

⁷Williams (1964): 77.

We are told that some time later Gwydion hears a cry from the chest at the foot of his bed, and when he opens the chest to investigate he finds there the boy who will later be known as Lleu.

(3.3) *Val yd oed Wydyon diwarnawt yn y wely, ac yn deffroi, ef a glywei diaspat yn y gist is y draet. Kyny bei uchel hi, kyuuch oed ac y kigleu ef. Sef a oruc ynteu, kyuodi yn gyflym, ac agori y gist. Ac ual a hegyr, ef a welei uab bychan yn rwyuaw y ureicheu o blyc y llen, ac yn y guascaru.*⁸

One day, as Gwydion was in his bed and waking up, he heard a cry in the chest at his feet. Although it was not high, it was high enough and he heard it. This is what he did: he rose swiftly and he opened the chest. And as he opened it, he saw a small boy flailing his arms out of the folds of the mantle and throwing it off.

We have here the core elements of our pattern: Lleu's initial emergence from his mother is as *ryw bethan* "some little thing," rather than as a fully formed child, and so this is a failed birth. He is immediately put back into containment, however, and there he continues to gestate until he eventually emerges as a boy, and is thus successfully born.

In many of these stories of failed birth and rebirth, we also recognize core elements of the birth episode of the heroic biography pattern. The children are often rejected, abandoned, or sent away by their mothers. Some, like the Welsh Taliesin, are set adrift in water. These children are eventually rescued and raised by foster-parents in exile, or at least removed from their original identities. In Ireland, the connection between a "wrong" birth and setting the child adrift is known not only in literary sources, but is also present in legal texts, which refer to the practice of placing "a child born of incest in a leather shrine, which is put out to sea 'as far as a white shield is visible'. If the child is washed ashore, his life is spared, but he is reared to be a servant to his kin."⁹ In heroic literature, however, the hero is able to overcome his origins and reclaim his original status.

⁸Williams (1964): 78.

⁹Kelly (1988): 220-1.

The displacement caused by the wrongness of his birth is an obstacle that can be surmounted, though it may persist throughout his heroic career, as recognized by Rank. Stories about failed birth involve one specific type of wrongness, and add a physical obstacle to the more usual social obstacles that the hero must overcome.

I begin here with a brief survey of the three studies of this pattern to which I have already referred, and I then explore some other examples of this pattern. I argue that the birth of Pryderi in *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*, the “First Branch” of the *Mabinogi*, also conforms to this pattern, which neither Gulermovich Epstein nor Jones has proposed. I then examine the story of the birth of Cú Chulainn, which Gulermovich Epstein suggests is possibly connected to this type, but does not include in her study. Referring in particular to the accounts of the births of Cú Chulainn and Dionysus, I argue that this narrative pattern can become recursive, and occur with both double and triple cycles of failed birth and rebirth, a feature that may have particular resonance with stories of reincarnation and with the “rebirths” of ritual initiations. Finally, I evaluate Gulermovich Epstein’s assertion that this narrative pattern is Indo-European.

3.2 “Failed Birth and Rebirth”

The first study of the narrative pattern in question is that of Stephanie Jamison in *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun*. The second half of the book is devoted to an analysis of the Vedic myth of the wounding of the Sun by the Asura Svarbhānu, who pierces it with darkness. The Sun is then rescued, sometimes by the gods, but most commonly by Atri. Jamison argues that the rescue of the sun is in fact “conceived of as a type of childbirth,”¹⁰ and that Atri’s prominent role in the myth is connected to the circumstances of his own birth, which make him uniquely qualified to carry out the rescue.

There are various accounts of Atri’s birth, including one in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which relates a conflict between *Manas* “Mind” and *Vāc* “Speech.” They appeal to Prajāpati for judgment,

¹⁰Jamison (1991): 189.

and Prajāpati judges in favour of Manas. Vāc, who was pregnant, then suffers a miscarriage. The gods collect the fetus and put it into a container from which Atri is later born. Other texts offer further details about this incident. In the *Vādhūla Sūtra* account, for example, Vāc does not merely miscarry, but is in fact forcibly aborted by Manas.¹¹ The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* furnishes us with the additional detail that Manas was also the father of Vāc’s child.¹²

In this story, as in that of the birth of Lleu, we find the “birth” of a non-viable fetus rather than a well-formed child, the re-containment of that fetus, and its eventual emergence from containment in a successful second birth. As Jamison puts it: “Atri achieves ... the result of fertility, a successful birth – through only the second time around. This second birth effectively neutralizes the bad effects of the first one.”¹³ The story of Atri’s birth is only one example of what is a fairly well known type of miraculous birth in Indic mythology, both from the Vedic period and later. Jamison notes that “The theme of abortion/miscarriage and a second incubation in a vessel seems to be a widespread one in Indian literature, explicitly presented several times in the MBh.”¹⁴

A final point of interest relating to the story of Atri’s birth has to do with his emergence from the container that serves as a surrogate womb during his second gestation. The container is described in various ways, including as a pot, or some type of skin-bag, and, in the Rig Veda, a kettle or even just a cleft. Atri’s emergence from his containment is not a simple or straightforward event. Rather, he requires assistance to accomplish his second birth. This assistance comes in the form of the Aśvins, the twin horse-gods. Their rescue of Atri is mentioned in various hymns in the Rig Veda. RV 5.78.4, addressed to the Aśvins, describes Atri as calling on them for help during his rebirth.

¹¹Jamison (1991): 221.

¹²Jamison (1991): 244-5.

¹³Jamison (1991): 227.

¹⁴Jamison (1991): 239.

(3.4) *átrir yád vām avaróhann ṛbīsam, ájohavīn nādhamāneva yóṣā*¹⁵

As when Atri, sinking down into the earth cleft, called upon you again and again, like a young woman in need (at childbirth).¹⁶

This is in keeping with the role of the Indo-European Divine Twins as assisting in childbirth, as demonstrated in a number of Rig Vedic hymns that refer to women in childbirth calling on the Aśvins for help.¹⁷

Gulermovich Epstein, building on Jamison’s work, begins her study with an examination of the birth of Lleu in *Math uab Mathonwy*. She compares this story with various other stories from medieval Welsh literature, as well as material from Indic and Greek sources. In addition to the story of Atri, discussed above, Gulermovich Epstein also considers the story of Mārtāṇḍa, who later becomes Vivasvant, discussed also by Jamison (1991: 204-208). Several variants of the basic narrative exist, but the core of the story is that Mārtāṇḍa was born not as a fully formed child, but rather as a misshapen lump of flesh, sometimes described as a failed or dead “egg.”¹⁸ This lump or egg is then shaped and transformed into Vivasvant. Gulermovich Epstein also considers two further examples of this narrative type from Welsh sources alongside the story of Lleu, namely the story of the birth of Gwion Bach, who is reborn as Taliesin, and the story of the imprisonment and transformation of two fighting dragons in *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*.¹⁹

¹⁵van Nooten and Holland (1994).

¹⁶Trans. Jamison and Brereton (2014): 761.

¹⁷Ward (1968): 27. See Ward’s *The Divine Twins: An Indo-European Myth in Germanic Tradition* for a comprehensive study of the Indo-European “Divine Twins,” as well as discussion of the problems of recognizing universal and inherited features within the same narrative complex.

¹⁸For example, the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* VI.5.6.1 describes what is born as *vyṛddham āṇḍām* “a ‘failed’ egg.” (Jamison 1991: 206.)

¹⁹The text is one of the stories of the *Mabinogi* and is of roughly the same period as the “Four Branches.” It is first attested as an addition to the Welsh version of Gregory of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* in a thirteenth century manuscript. See further Roberts (1975): xi.

*Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*²⁰ (known simply as “Lludd and Llefelys” in English) recounts how Lludd, king of Britain, appealed to his brother Llefelys, king of France, for help in overcoming three “oppressions” (*gormes*) attacking his realm and people. The second oppression is described as follows:

(3.5) *Yr eil ormes oed, diaspat a dodit pob nos Kalan Mei vch bob aelwyt yn Ynys Prydein, a honno a aei trwy gallonneu y dynyon ac a’e hofnockaei yn gymeint ac y collei y gwyr eu lliw ac eu nerth, a’r gwaged eu beichogyeu, a’r meibon a’r merchet a gollynt eu synhwyreu, a’r holl aniueileit a’r gwyd a’r dayar a’r dyfred a edewit yn diffrwyth.*²¹

The second oppression was a cry that came on the eve of May-day each year over every hearth in the Isle of Britain, and that went through the hearts of men and it frightened them so much that men lost their colour and their strength, and women miscarried,²² and sons and daughters lost their senses, and all the animals and the trees and the earth and the waters were left barren.

The source of this cry is eventually revealed to be a dragon who is being attacked by a foreign dragon. Llefelys instructs Lludd to dig a hole in the exact center of the island of Britain and to place a vat of mead in the hole, which must then be covered with a *llen o bali* “sheet of silk brocade.” The dragons will eventually fall into the vat, drink all the mead, and fall asleep. Lludd must then wrap them in the silk brocade, lock them in a stone chest, and bury them in the ground. Gulermovich Epstein notes that it is the detail of the dragons being wrapped in the *llen o bali* and then enclosed in a stone chest that suggested a connection with the story of Lleu’s birth, who is similarly contained following his initial failed birth. Moreover, the dragons turn into small pigs when they fall into the vat of mead, a detail that reinforces the interpretation of containment in a *llen o bali* and a chest as associated with transformation. Though Gulermovich Epstein does

²⁰Text Roberts (1975) and translation Ford (1977): 111-117.

²¹Roberts (1975): ll. 35-41.

²²Literally “lost their *beichogyeu*”: conceptions, pregnancies, or embryos.

not call attention to the fact, the dragons are also strongly associated with miscarriage and with barrenness. The cry of the first dragon causes miscarriages when it is heard each year on the eve of May-day; among the effects of this cry as listed in the text is that *y collei ... [y]r gwraged eu beichogyeu* “women miscarried” and that animals, the woods, the fields, and the waters were left barren.

The Welsh text *Ystoria Taliesin*,²³ “The Story of Taliesin,” describes how the boy Gwion Bach gains magical knowledge by stealing a magical potion that the witch Ceridwen had been preparing for her son Morfran. Ceridwen chases after Gwion Bach, and both transform themselves several times during the pursuit. Finally, Ceridwen follows Gwion Bach into a barn and, in the form of a hen, swallows Gwion Bach, who is hiding as a grain in a pile of wheat.

(3.6) ... *yn y mann yr ymrithiodd ef ymhlith un o'r grawn. Sef a oruc Keridwen onid ymrithio yn rhith iar ddu gwta, megis ac y mae yr hanes yn dangos, yn y modd y llynkodd hi Wion yn ei chroth, yn y lle yr arweddodd hi ef gymain a naw mis ynghylch yr amser y kafas hi escor ohonaw ef.*²⁴

... in that place he transformed himself into one of the grains. This is what Ceridwen did: she transformed herself into a black tufted hen and, according to the story, in that form she swallowed Gwion into her womb, where she carried him for nine months, until the time she gave birth to him.

After carrying Gwion Bach for nine months, Ceridwen finds herself unable to harm him and so she places him in a small vessel described as *korwgyl ne vol kroen* – either a “coracle” (*korwgyl*) or a “skin bag” (*bol kroen*) – and sets it adrift.²⁵ *Bol*, here translated as “bag,” can also mean “womb,” an overt indicator of the function of this container as a surrogate or artificial womb. The

²³Text Ford (1992) and translation Ford (1977): 159-181. Ford notes that while the story of Taliesin must be very old, it is unattested in the manuscript tradition until the middle of the sixteenth century when it is included by Elis Gruffydd in his “Chronicle of the Ages of the World.” (Ford (1977): 159 and Ford (1992): vii.)

²⁴Ford (1992): ll. 78-83.

²⁵Ford (1992): l. 87.

coracle floats for forty years before it is eventually found by Elphin, a nobleman in service at the court of King Maelgwyn Gwynedd. Elphin cuts open the *bol kroen* and discovers the child inside. The child receives the name Taliesin when Elphin first sees him and remarks upon his “radiant forehead” – *tal iesin*.²⁶

Turning to Greek myth, Gulermovich Epstein analyzes two further stories as representing the same core pattern of failed birth, containment, transformation, and rebirth. The first of these is the story of the birth of Dionysus. Gulermovich Epstein’s discussion of this story focuses on the most commonly known account of the birth, which relates how Dionysus’ mother Semele was killed while pregnant with him. Apollodorus describes Dionysus’ form at this point as ἑξαμηνιαῖον τὸ βρέφος ἑξαμβλωθὲν, a “six-month miscarried fetus.”²⁷ Zeus rescues the fetus, however, and sews it up in his thigh, which, as Gulermovich Epstein notes, is a form of skin-bag, comparable with the *bol kroen* of *Ystoria Taliesin*. Dionysus continues to gestate in Zeus’ thigh, from which he is eventually born. I will return to this story and some of its variants in section 3.5. The second example of this narrative type that Gulermovich Epstein draws from Greek myth is the story of the birth of Erichthonios, which I have previously examined in chapter two. After Hephaistos attempts to rape Athena and ejaculates on her thigh, she wipes the semen off and it falls to the earth, from which Erichthonios is born. After Erichthonios is born from the earth, Athena places him inside a basket and gives him to Pandrosus, daughter of Cecrops, to raise in secret. Athena forbids Pandrosus to open the basket, but her sisters do so and find a serpent inside, guarding the child.

(3.7) τοῦτον Ἀθηνᾶ κρύφα τῶν ἄλλων θεῶν ἔτρεφεν, ἀθάνατον θέλουσα ποιῆσαι: καὶ καταθεῖσα αὐτὸν εἰς κίστην Πανδρόσῳ τῇ Κέκροπος παρακατέθετο, ἀπειποῦσα τὴν κίστην ἀνοίγειν. αἱ δὲ ἀδελφαὶ τῆς Πανδρόσου ἀνοίγουσιν ὑπὸ περιεργίας, καὶ θεῶνται τῷ βρέφει παρεσπειραμένον δράκοντα: καὶ ὡς μὲν ἔνιοι λέγουσιν, ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ

²⁶Ford (1992): l. 141.

²⁷Library of Apollodorus 3.4.3.

διεφθάρησαν τοῦ δράκοντος, ὡς δὲ ἔνιοι, δι' ὀργὴν Ἀθηνᾶς ἐμμανεῖς γενόμενοι κατὰ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως αὐτὰς ἔρριψαν.²⁸

Athena reared him without the knowledge of the other gods, wanting to make him immortal; and having placed him in a basket, she entrusted it to Pandrosus, daughter of Cecrops, forbidding her to open the basket. But the sisters of Pandrosus opened it out of curiosity, and they saw a serpent coiled about the baby.²⁹ Some say that they were destroyed by the serpent, but others say that they became mad because of the anger of Athena, and threw themselves down from the acropolis.

Gulermovich Epstein interprets the presence of the snake coiled around the baby as a possible indication that the basket may actually contain “a baby which is half baby, half snake,” and argues that “the fetus does not have human form, although in this case it is not miscarried.”³⁰

Based on these stories from Indic, Celtic, and Greek myth, Gulermovich Epstein argues for the identification of a coherent narrative pattern that she divides into four principal events, which she describes as follows:³¹

- A. A fetus is miscarried. It may simply fall out of its mother, who then rejects it, or it may be forcibly aborted by some other person. In short, a type of reproductive material without human form falls out of a woman.
- B. A man puts the “thing” into a container to incubate. The containers can be silk brocade, a skin, a pot, a kettle, or a chest, singly or in combination. The container may be a textile, a solid container, or both. Often, as in the case of Lleu, the container is a double one, consisting of a textile and a solid container.
- C. The “thing” spends some time in a surrogate womb, and then emerges.
- D. The “thing” goes through a transformation, either before or during the incubation.

²⁸*Library of Apollodorus* 3.14.6.

²⁹Note, however, that βρέφος, used here to refer to a newborn child, is also used to describe Dionysus in his form as a miscarried fetus (βρέφος).

³⁰Gulermovich Epstein (1994): 159.

³¹Gulermovich Epstein (1994): 156-7.

Gulermovich Epstein places a particular emphasis on the exact nature of the container that acts as a surrogate womb for the fetus. Part of her argument for including the story of the dragons in *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* rests on parallels between the details of their containment and that of Lleu, since both Lleu and the two dragons are contained first by being wrapped in a *llen o bali*, a “sheet of silk brocade,” and then by being placed into a chest. Gulermovich Epstein also notes that the container can also be the body of another person, as in the accounts of the birth of Dionysus in which his mother Semele dies while pregnant, and the fetus is taken from her body and sewn up in Zeus’ thigh, where it continues to gestate and from which Dionysus is later successfully born. Orphic accounts of Dionysus’ birth feature additional containers to facilitate his rebirth, such as a casket into which his heart is placed by Athena, and an effigy of Dionysus made out of gypsum into which his heart is placed and which becomes animated as his new body. These accounts will be treated in greater detail in section 3.5.

The third study of the narrative pattern of “failed birth and rebirth,” though it is not referred to as such, is that of Leslie Ellen Jones, who also takes the story of Lleu’s birth as her starting point, but whose formulation of the pattern differs somewhat from that of Jamison and Gulermovich Epstein because her interest in the story begins with Lleu’s period of incubation in the chest, and not with his first appearance as an unformed “little thing.” She compares his birth story with other tales of boys found in boxes, or otherwise contained or imprisoned, including Taliesin in *Ystoria Taliesin*, Goreu mab Custenin and Mabon ap Modron in *Culhwch ac Olwen*,³² and Owein, the hero of the romance of *Owein*, also known as *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*, “The Lady of the Well.”³³ Jones identifies the following bundle of motifs present in some form in each of these stories, but most strongly represented in the story of Lleu’s birth. In her words, these motifs are:³⁴

³²Text Bromwich and Evans (1992) and translation Ford (1977): 119-157.

³³Text Thomson (1975) and translation Davies (2007): 116-138.

³⁴Jones (2005): 224.

1. There is a period of incubation in a box or other container.
2. There is a problem attached to naming the child.
3. There is an announcement that this child is “done” in the form of an unusual sound.
4. The boy is associated with birds and with theriomorphism.
5. The boy is abandoned by his mother and adopted by an older man.
6. The boy in general has a non-martial character.

Of particular interest here are items (1) *incubation in a box or other container* and (5) *abandonment by the mother and adoption by an older man*, the later corresponding to the man who puts the “thing” into incubation in Gulermovich Epstein’s formulation of the pattern.

Aspects of the narrative pattern of “failed birth and rebirth” as described thus far are also present in two additional stories from medieval Celtic literature: the birth of Pryderi in Welsh, and the birth of Cú Chulainn in Irish. The birth of Pryderi is described in *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*.³⁵ The birth of Cú Chulainn is the subject of one of the *comperta* texts that I described in chapter one, *Compert Con Culainn*,³⁶ and I discussed his birth in the context of hybrid conceptions in chapter two.

3.3 The Birth of Pryderi

Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet is composed of three principal episodes. In the first Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, encounters Arawn, ruler of Annwfn, the Otherworld. The two exchange places for one year, at the end of which Pwyll fights and defeats Arawn’s rival Hafgan. Pwyll and Arawn then return to their own kingdoms. The second episode consists of Pwyll meeting Rhiannon, an otherworldly woman riding a white horse, who cannot be caught until Pwyll asks her to stop. She then declares her love for him, and, after Rhiannon assists Pwyll in overcoming the challenge of a rival suitor, they are married. The third episode focuses on the birth of their son Pryderi. After years of a childless marriage, Pwyll’s men encourage him to divorce Rhiannon and marry again. Pwyll decides to wait for one more year, and during that time Rhiannon gives birth to a son.

³⁵Text Williams (1964): 1-27 and translation Ford (1977): 35-56.

³⁶Text van Hamel (1978) and translation Gantz (1981): 130-133.

Although Pryderi's birth is one of the events central to the plot of *Pwyll Pendewic Dyuet*, few details are provided. His conception has all the markings of the beginning of a heroic biography: his father is Pwyll, a human king, and his mother is Rhiannon, an otherworldly woman. The conception, moreover, takes place following years of a childless marriage, when it is generally believed that Rhiannon is barren. When the birth occurs in the course of the narrative, we are told only that it happens during the night, and that the child somehow vanishes immediately after he is born. The women who were supposed to be watching over Rhiannon and her newborn son do not wish to be blamed for his disappearance, and so they fake his death and incriminate Rhiannon for the murder of her son:

(3.8) *Lladwn rei o'r canawon, ac irwn y hwyneb hitheu Riannon a'r gwaet, a'y dwylaw, a byrwn yr eskyrn gyr y bron, a thaerwn arnei e hun diuetha y mab.*³⁷

Let us kill some of the puppies, and smear Rhiannon's face with the blood, and her two hands, and let us cast the bones in front of her, and swear that it was she who killed her son.

In covering Rhiannon's face with the blood of the puppies, the women not only create the impression that Rhiannon has killed her son, but also that she has eaten him. Pryderi is made to appear dead to his parents and to everyone else. For a time within this story, the reality seems to be that he has been destroyed by his own mother at the moment of his birth, just as Atri was destroyed by his father Manas before his birth, when Manas aborted Vāc. Within the narrative, this has the same effect as a miscarriage or failed birth, in that Rhiannon's pregnancy has failed to produce a living child.

Pryderi's subsequent reappearance in the text is even more remarkable than his disappearance. He is discovered by Teyrnnon, lord of Gwent Is Coed, on his doorstep, following Teyrnnon's confrontation with a creature that has been stealing foals born on the eve of May-day every year. We must assume that the creature that had been stealing foals also stole Pryderi, and then dropped

³⁷Williams (1964): 20.

him when it fled after being attacked by Teyrnnon. We are also left to assume that the separate events of Pryderi's birth and disappearance, and his reappearance on Teyrnnon's doorstep take place on the same night, that is, the eve of May-day, and that Pryderi's birth thus co-occurs with that of the foal. Pryderi's reemergence into the world at this moment is as a child with no origin. When he is adopted by Teyrnnon he is provided with a new identity and thus a second birth or rebirth of sorts. As in the Vedic story of Atri, we find here that the rebirth requires some assistance. Whereas in Atri's case this assistance was provided by the *Aśvins*, the twin horse-gods, who rescued Atri from his containment, here we have Teyrnnon who, while attempting to rescue a horse, also rescues Pryderi.

Pryderi is both twinned with a foal and is a type of foal himself. His mother, Rhiannon, is generally understood to be associated with Epona, the Horse-Goddess known from Continental Celtic sources.³⁸ Rhiannon first appears in the story riding a supernatural horse, and her punishment for apparently killing her son is to wait by the mounting block at the gate of the court each day for seven years and to carry on her back any one who asks, essentially taking on the role of a horse. Ford remarks on this punishment, stating that:

Scholars have long seen in this a connection between Rhiannon and the goddess known as Epona worshiped by the Celts on the Continent. The name Epona means "Divine Horse," and although she is depicted as human, there is no doubt that she was originally one of the numerous deities in animal form worshiped by the Celtic peoples. ... It appears that the first branch preserves the memory of this Celtic goddess and the detritus of a myth that told about her mating and giving birth.³⁹

Pryderi is thus, in some sense, the son of a horse, and he is also stolen by a creature that up until this point had only been known to take foals.

³⁸On this point, see Davies (1997) and Sterckx (2009).

³⁹Ford (1977): 36.

With Pryderi's abduction and apparent death providing the "failed birth" stage of the pattern, and his rediscovery and adoption by Teyrnon serving as his rebirth, the intervening period functions as the period during which he is contained. Containment can be understood as a period of absence during which a child who has entered the world too soon is removed from it, only to enter it again at a later, more appropriate or auspicious moment in the narrative. This is certainly the case in the story of Pryderi's birth in that he is absent from the narrative (and apparently dead) between the time of his abduction and his reappearance on Teyrnon's doorstep. There is the further detail of his physical containment, however, which indicates a connection with the Welsh stories included in Gulermovich Epstein's study. Teyrnon's discovery of Pryderi is described as follows:

(3.9) *Ac wrth y drws, llyma uab bychan yn y gorn, guedy troi llenn o bali yn y gylch.*⁴⁰

And at the door, there was small boy wrapped up, enveloped in a mantle of silk brocade.

Here again we have the presence of the *llen o bali* that was used to wrap both Llew's first form as a "little thing" and the two dragons in *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*. We must remember also that the "oppression" caused by the dragons is a scream that is heard on the eve of May-day – precisely when the events surrounding Pryderi's birth take place – and that has numerous terrible effects, including causing women to miscarry.

A secondary containment motif is present in the "story within the story" that Pryderi has been eaten by his mother, and thus taken back into her body. The swallowing of a child by a parent, and its containment and later reemergence from that parent, is of course most familiar from the story of Kronos eating his children. Hesiod's *Theogony* describes how Kronos, fearing that one of his children would supplant him, swallowed Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon immediately after their births. Rhea, their mother, hid Zeus, the sixth child, and Zeus later brought about the rebirth of his siblings by forcing Kronos to vomit them up.⁴¹

⁴⁰Ford (1977): 22.

⁴¹Hesiod, *Theogony*: ll. 453-506. Text West (1966) and trans. Athanassakis (2004).

In addition to the features of failed birth, containment, rebirth, and adoption by a man that are present in the patterns set up by Gulermovich Epstein and Jones, there are several other points of correspondence here with Jones' more elaborate bundle of motifs. Pryderi is first named Gwri Wallt Euryn "Golden-Hair" by Teyrnnon, and is then renamed Pryderi when he is restored to his mother and to his true identity, a detail that reflects the problem regarding the boy's name to which Jones refers. We find also that the reemergence of the child is signaled by what Jones describes as "an unusual sound": the appearance of the creature that abandons Pryderi with Teyrnnon is accompanied by much noise, described both as *twrwf mawr* "a great commotion," and later *twrwf a diskyr* "a roar and wail together."⁴² Jones also refers to "the boy's association with birds and theriomorphism" – Pryderi is not associated with birds, but in the substitution of puppies for him at his birth and his equation with a foal, he does display a strong affinity with animals.

While Pryderi's birth story may not immediately appear to conform to the pattern of failed birth, containment, and rebirth, it nonetheless possesses a number of the features associated with that pattern, as well as included Jones' bundle of motifs. For this reason, it should be set alongside the birth of Lleu and the containment of the dragons in *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* as a Welsh attestation of this narrative pattern.

3.4 The Birth of Cú Chulainn

I summarized the story of Cú Chulainn's birth in chapter two, where I described it as featuring a hybrid conception because it involves multiple instances of conception and includes both sexual and asexual conceptions. In fact, in *Compert Con Culainn*, it takes three attempts for Cú Chulainn's birth to succeed, and Gulermovich Epstein concludes her argument with the suggestion that Cú Chulainn's birth may also be connected to the other stories that she discusses as examples of the "failed birth and rebirth" type. She does not, however, pursue this argument any further.

⁴²Williams (1964): 22.

In his own discussion of this story, Kim McCone gives the following analysis of Cú Chulainn's birth, schematizing it as occurring over three separate stages:

Cú Chulainn's fully supernatural origin in stage one is mediated by stage two, comprising an annunciation and the non-sexual impregnation of a virgin human mother by the supernatural father, into the fully human stage three.⁴³

In the context of the narrative pattern under consideration here, we can read this as two failed births preceding a final successful birth.

First, we have what McCone calls the "fully supernatural" first birth. Cú Chulainn is born to a set of divine parents. While his mother is never named, his father is later revealed to be Lug mac Ethnenn, one of the Túatha Dé Danann. The birth takes place in a mysterious house that the Ulstermen find while seeking shelter in the middle of the night, during a snowstorm. Simultaneous with Cú Chulainn's birth is the birth of a set of twin foals to a mare standing in the doorway of the house:

(3.10) *Asbert in fer fri Ultu iarom boí a ben fri idna inna cuili. Luid Deichtine a dochum, atdises, birt mac. Láir dano boí i ndorus in tige trogais dá lurchuire.*⁴⁴

Then the man said to the Ulstermen that his wife was in labour in the storehouse.

Deichtine went to her, and assisted her, and she bore a son. A mare, moreover, was in the door of the house and she brought forth two foals.

Like the story of Llew's birth, this story features the birth of twins, and as in the story of Pryderi's birth we have the birth of horses taking place simultaneously with the birth of the hero – horses with whom the hero will retain an association in his later life. In Cú Chulainn's case, this association persists so strongly that these horses play a pivotal role in his death tale.⁴⁵ Moreover, as with

⁴³McCone (1990): 199.

⁴⁴van Hamel (1978): 4.

⁴⁵Kimpton (2009).

the birth of Atri, we have the presence of twin horses at the birth, here being born themselves, but in the Vedic story symbolically through the presence of the Ásvins who, while not actual horses themselves, are always accompanied by horses and represent horses, and who assist with the birth. The Ulstermen take the child and give him to Deichtine to raise, but he dies, and so this first birth fails.

The second stage of Cú Chulainn's birth involves what McCone describes as "an annunciation and the non-sexual impregnation of a virgin human mother by the supernatural father," and again the father is Lug. The first part of this conception involves Deichtine drinking water with a little creature in it, a motif found elsewhere in Irish literature in conjunction with asexual conception.⁴⁶ That same night, however, Deichtine dreams of Lug, who informs her that she is bearing his child and that this is the same child who had previously been in her care and had died:

(3.11) *Asbert fria robad torrach úad, ⁊ ba hé noda bert a dochum don Bruig, ba leis fetir, ba aí in mac altae, ⁊ ba hé tothar lae inna broind, ⁊ bid Sétantae a ainm. ⁊ ba hésse Lug mac Ethnenn, ⁊ co n-alta ind lurchuiri don mac.*⁴⁷

He told her that she was pregnant by him, and it was he who had brought them [the Ulstermen] to the Brug, it was with him that they spent the night, the boy that she raised was his, and he had come into her belly, and his name would be Sétanta, and he himself was Lug mac Ethnenn, and the foals were to be raised for the boy.

When it becomes clear that Deichtine is pregnant and that there is no identified father (though, as one version of this text says, some suspect Conchobar), she is offered in marriage to Súaltaim mac Róich. Deichtine, not wishing to go to her new husband already pregnant, aborts this semi-divine fetus and thus brings about a second failed birth.

⁴⁶I have discussed this motif in chapter two, and will return to it with greater detail in chapter four. It should be noted that the motif is not exclusively Irish, or even Indo-European. A story about the creation of mankind recorded in the Caroline Islands in Micronesia describes how Ligoapup, daughter of the creator Luk, "drank some water which had collected in the hollow of a tree. Without knowing it, with the water she swallowed a tiny animal, and made fruitful by this, she bore a girl-child." (Dixon (1916): 251.)

⁴⁷van Hamel (1978): 5.

(3.12) *In am luide don chrunn síuil bruitis bí a croith innallaile, combu ógslán.*⁴⁸

When she went to bed she crushed together what was in her belly, so that she became whole again.

Deichtine then conceives normally, with Súaltaim as the father, and Cú Chulainn is finally born successfully.

There is no overt period of time during which Cú Chulainn is contained in this story, but we can read the second, aborted pregnancy as a form of containment. This story is not unique in presenting us with a fetus that has undergone a failed birth being contained not in a object, like a chest or a jar, but instead in the body of a parent. As we have seen, in some accounts of the birth of Dionysus, after his mother Semele dies while pregnant, her unborn child is transferred to Zeus' thigh where he continues to gestate.

Gulermovich Epstein insightfully refers to Cú Chulainn's birth as "overdetermined."⁴⁹ We find in this story two episodes of failed birth before successful birth occurs, creating a total of three cycles of conception and gestation. We also find two separate mothers in Lug's unnamed consort and Deichtine, and two separate fathers in Lug and Súaltaim. Remarkable as this may appear, it is not unique. Whereas most of the stories considered thus far, as well as those studied by Jamison, Gulermovich Epstein, and Jones, have involved only two cycles of conception and birth, with the first a failure and the second a success, both the birth of Cú Chulainn and the "Orphic" version of birth of Dionysus feature a triple cycle.

3.5 The Birth of Dionysus

Of all the figures whose birth stories reflect the narrative pattern of failed birth and rebirth, Dionysus is the one most thoroughly connected to the concept of rebirth due to his association with mystery cults and their rituals, including initiation, which is generally conceived of and even

⁴⁸van Hamel (1978): 6.

⁴⁹Gulermovich Epstein (1994): 161.

enacted as a form of death and rebirth. That he is called διμήτωρ or διμήτριος “twice-born” in various sources,⁵⁰ shows how integral his death and rebirth are to his function in Greek mythology as god of the vine, of madness, and of reincarnation. In the Orphic hymn to Dionysus (30) he is even referred to as τρίγονον “thrice-born.” The second line of the hymn describes Dionysus as:

(3.13) πρωτόγονον, διφυῆ, τρίγονον
primeval, two-natured, thrice-born⁵¹

The triplicity here is further emphasized by the “one, two, three” of the line: πρωτο-, δι-, τρί-. The hymn goes on to call him also δικέρωτα “two-horned” and δίμορφον “two-shaped.”

There are two distinct traditions about Dionysus’ birth. The first, to which I have already referred, is that most commonly known, and that referred to by Gulermovich Epstein in her discussion of the birth of Dionysus as reflecting the pattern of failed birth and rebirth. Most accounts of his birth make Dionysus the son of Semele and Zeus. He undergoes failed birth when Semele dies while carrying him, but is transferred to Zeus’ thigh and later born successfully. In contrast to this we find the “Orphic” version of the birth of Dionysus, in which he is the son of Zeus and Persephone. Sarah Iles Johnston provides the following synthesis of various sources for the “Orphic” myth of Dionysus.⁵²

Dionysus was the child of Zeus and Zeus’ daughter Persephone. Dionysus succeeded Zeus; Zeus himself placed the child on his throne and declared him the new king of the cosmos. The Titans, jealous of Dionysus’ new power and perhaps encouraged by Hera, used various toys, and a mirror, to lure Dionysus away from his guardians, the Curetes, and dismembered him. They cooked his flesh and ate it. Zeus, being

⁵⁰For example, DS 3.62.5.

⁵¹Text and trans. Athanassakis (1977): 42-3.

⁵²These sources include the 6th c. CE Neoplatonic philosopher Olympiodorus, Pindar, and Plato. See Johnston (2013): 67 and notes for a full discussion. The Orphic fragments are edited in Bernabé (2003-2004).

angry at this, killed the Titans, and from their remains, humanity arose. Because humanity arose from material that was predominantly Titanic in nature, each human is born with the stain of the Titans' crime, but a remnant of Dionysus leavens the mixture. Each human must expiate the Titans' crime by performing rituals in honor of Dionysus and Persephone, who still suffers from the "ancient grief" of losing her child; by doing so, humans can win better afterlives. Meanwhile, Dionysus was in some manner revived or reborn.⁵³

In describing the crucial episodes that he reconstructs for the Orphic Dionysus myth, Alberto Bernabé writes that because of their Titanic nature, men must perform rituals and observe certain taboos in order to free themselves from this original sin, but that once this expiation is accomplished the soul can join the company of the gods. Until that time, however, "elle devra poursuivre son pénible cycle de maux et de réincarnations."⁵⁴ The link between Dionysus and rebirth is inescapable, and the origins of this link are established and explored in both versions of the story of his birth.

In addition to the later fragments drawn on by Johnston and Bernabé, further details about the Orphic account of the birth of Dionysus are furnished by some of the earlier "Orphic Theogonies." My discussion of these texts relies primarily on M. L. West's *The Orphic Poems*.⁵⁵ There are many difficulties in working with these texts, but they are recognized as being quite old, dating as far back as the 5th c. BCE. These texts relate how, after his birth, Dionysus was so favoured by Zeus that the Titans, in jealousy, tore him apart. Athena, however, was able to preserve his still-beating heart, which she placed into a casket. Dionysus was later reborn from his heart, through there are different explanations for the exact mechanisms of this rebirth. One version of the story, and the

⁵³Johnston (2013): 67.

⁵⁴Bernabé (2002): 403. "It [the soul] will have to continue its painful cycle of misery and reincarnation." Bernabé's article includes editions of some of the texts used by Johnston in reconstructing the Orphic Dionysus myth.

⁵⁵West (1983).

one that West identifies as the true Orphic tradition, is that Zeus placed the heart in an image of Dionysus made of wood, which then came alive. Here we have not one, but two containers, and the child is reborn not *out of* the second container, but rather *as* the container, since it provides the physical material for his new body.

West argues that the story of Dionysus' birth, death, and rebirth are best understood "in terms of two models: initiation rituals and animal sacrifice."⁵⁶ In particular, he argues that Dionysus' dismemberment and rebirth reflect ritual initiation practices that involve the symbolic death and rebirth of the initiand, who is often "captured, taken away, and killed by a divine ancestral spirit or spirits, whose part is played by men disguised in unearthly fashion."⁵⁷ West likens these disguised men to the Titans who use gypsum to whiten their faces and then lure Dionysus away in order to destroy him. West also notes that the supernatural being (or beings) is given a terrible voice through the use of a bullroarer. In her discussion of the "boys in boxes" narrative pattern in Welsh literature, Jones notes that the rebirth or reemergence of the boys is accompanied by a sound of some sort.⁵⁸ These sounds are described as *diaspat* a "cry" or "shout" in the story of the birth of Lleu and *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, and as *twrwf mawr* "a great commotion" and *twrwf a diskyr* "a cry and a wail together" in the story of Pryderi's birth. In the case of the dragons, this cry causes terrible effects including widespread terror, miscarriages, and barrenness, while the the sound that accompanies the reappearance of Pryderi is associated with a monstrous being that steals foals from their mothers. These cries, like the sound of the bullroarer during initiation rituals, accompany the passage of the individual from one stage of life into another. In these rituals, the individual is destroyed before he is recreated as a member of the society into which he is being initiated. The stories of failed birth and rebirth show this same cycle of destruction followed by recreation as something new, something better and stronger.

⁵⁶West (1983): 140.

⁵⁷West (1983): 143.

⁵⁸Jones (2005): 224: "There is an announcement that this child is 'done' in the form of an unusual sound."

3.6 Dionysus and Cú Chulainn

The story of Dionysus' birth as told in the *Fabulae* of Hyginus⁵⁹ attests to the survival of the competing tradition of Persephone's maternity outside of the Orphic sources, and reconciles it with the better known story that Semele is Dionysus' mother. Hyginus' account also provides a very strong parallel for the story of Cú Chulainn's birth. Hyginus tells us that Dionysus was born first to Zeus and Persephone, and was thus fully divine. After the Titans destroyed him, Athena rescued his heart and it was ground up and given to Semele to drink, which caused Semele to become pregnant. Later, Semele was struck by lightning and died. According to Hyginus, Zeus took Dionysus from her womb and then gave him to Nysus to care for.

(3.14) *Liber Iouis et Proserpinae filius a Titanus est distractus, cuius cor contritum Iouis Semele dedit in potionem. ex eo praegnans cum esset facta, Iuno in Beroen nutricem Semeles se commutavit et ait, Alumna, pete a Ioue ut sic ad te ueniat quemadmodum ad Iunonem, ut scias quae uoluptas est cum deo concumbere. illa autem instigate petit ab Ioue, et fulmine est icta; ex cuius utero Liberum exiit et Nyso dedit nutriendum, unde Dionysus test appellatus et bimater est dictus.*⁶⁰

Dionysus, son of Zeus and Persephone, was dismembered by the Titans, and Zeus gave his heart to Semele in a drink. When she was made pregnant by this, Hera, changing herself to look like Semele's nurse Beroe, said to her: "Daughter, ask Zeus to come to you as he comes to Hera, so that you may know what pleasure it is to sleep with a god." At her suggestion, Semele made this request to Zeus, and was smitten by a thunderbolt. He took Dionysus from her womb, and gave him to Nysus to be cared for. For this reason he is called Dionysus, and also "the one with two mothers."

⁵⁹Ed. Rose (1933).

⁶⁰Rose (1933): *Fabula* No. 167. In my translation, I replace the Roman names for the gods with their Greek equivalents.

Still other sources, such as the *Library* of Apollodorus, tell us that the fetus was rescued from Semele's body and sewn up into Zeus' thigh, from which Dionysus was later reborn. Here, as in the birth of Cú Chulainn, we have two separate mothers (one divine and one human), a divine father, two failed births before a final third successful birth, and the second conception caused by the mortal mother drinking something. The motif of conception through drinking is associated here in particular with reincarnation. Dionysus himself provides the physical "seed" for his conception when Semele drinks the ground up remains of his heart. While Cú Chulainn's second conception does not involve any physical remnant of his first birth, it is nonetheless clearly a case of reincarnation, and elsewhere in the Irish tradition we do find cases of reincarnation in which the mother drinks water containing some form of the child that they will bear.⁶¹ This occurs also in the story of Gwion Bach's reincarnation as Taliesin. In the stories about the births of Cú Chulainn and Dionysus, we see that the cycle of failed birth and rebirth found in the stories about the births of Atri, Lleu, Pryderi, and others, can be found with multiple cycles of repetition happening in order for the hero to be finally successfully born. These stories are also strongly associated with other forms of rebirth or transformation, such as ritual initiations and re-namings.

3.7 Conclusion: An Indo-European Myth?

In "Miscarriages and Miraculous Births in Indo-European Tradition," Gulermovich Epstein speculates that the narrative pattern under consideration here is an inherited type. There can be no doubt that this pattern is found in at least three Indo-European cultures – Celtic, Greek, and Indic – and this admits at least the possibility that the pattern is inherited. It may well be, but it must be recognized that the pattern is also found outside of the Indo-European world. The particular episode of containment in a surrogate womb and eventual emergence as a child is found in many non-Indo-European mythologies. In Polynesia, for example, Dixon notes that "In the Chatham Islands ... a myth has been recorded which states that man originated miraculously from a clot

⁶¹See section 4.3.1.3 in chapter four for examples.

of blood placed by two deities in a hollow tree.”⁶² A similar creation myth was recorded in the Admiralty Islands in Melanesia. As summarized by Dixon, the story describes how:

A woman, named Hi-asa, who lived alone, one day cut her finger while shaving *pan-danus* strips. Collecting the blood from the wound in a mussel-shell, she put a cover over it and set it away; but when, after eleven days, she looked in the shell, it contained two eggs. She covered them up, and after several days they burst, one producing a man and the other a woman, who became the parents of the human race.

A particularly close parallel is found in the Native American “Blood-Clot Boy” tale-type, which includes the male figure who facilitates the gestation in a container and adopts the child, referred to by both Gulermovich Epstein and Jones,⁶³ and tells of the birth of a particular hero, rather than the creation of mankind.

In *Tales of the North American Indians*, Stith Thompson gives the following description of this tale-type:

(3.15) Blood-Clot-Boy (T541.1). Old man abused by son-in-law brings in a clot of blood, from which a child is born. The blood-clot boy avenges the old man and also goes on adventures.⁶⁴

This brief synopsis leaves us with the questions of a) where does this clot of blood come from? and b) how is it transformed? The answer to the second question rests in the same cycle of containment and rebirth that we have already seen. When the old man brings the clot home, he asks that his wife make it into a soup. She puts the clot into a pot on the fire, and after some time a cry is heard from the pot. When they look inside, they find a child. We have here again the same pattern of some type of unformed blood or flesh entering a container, being transformed, and emerging as

⁶²Dixon (1916): 30.

⁶³Gulermovich Epstein (1994): 156-7 and Jones (2005): 224.

⁶⁴Thompson (1929): 322 n. 165.

a child. However, in contrast to most of the Indo-European stories, such as those about the births of Atri, Mārtāṇḍa, Lleu, and Dionysus, in this story there is no explanation of the origins of this blood-clot (or lump of tissue); the clot is simply found by the old man as he is out foraging for food. The identification of the blood-clots in the Indo-European stories as some form of fetal tissue or the results of failed birth is not found in the Native America Blood-Clot-Boy stories, nor is it present in most of the other mythological or folk traditions in which this type of story is found. In the Indo-European stories, however, the opening element of failed birth is very strongly associated with the following sequence of containment and rebirth.

What may be especially Indo-European here is the association of the widespread story of blood being transformed into a child through containment with stories of miscarriage or mis-birth. The episode of the transformation of blood into a child offers a solution to the problem of how a failed birth can be rescued or fixed. There may be here a combination of two separate narrative items: i.) a story pattern featuring a pattern of containment, transformation, and rebirth, and ii.) a “detachable” first feature that sets this up as the correction of a failed birth. Calvert Watkins introduces the use of the “detachable theme” to the comparison and reconstruction of Indo-European mythology in “The Third Donkey: Origin Legends and Some Hidden Indo-European Themes.” Watkins describes this as a theme “which may be deleted in one context and inserted in another,” and notes that this “process is perfectly familiar in folklore.”⁶⁵ Indeed, in examining various examples of the heroic biography pattern we have already seen that not every feature of the pattern will be present in every story. Similarly, there are stories featuring containment and rebirth but not the theme of failed birth in many Indo-European narrative tradition. Jones discusses various Welsh stories featuring containment and re-emergence that do not involve any form of failed birth. However, the theme of failed birth as the first theme in a sequence of failed birth, containment, and rebirth, is found only in Indo-European narratives, a distinction that supports Gulermovich Epstein’s assertion that the full pattern is Indo-European.

⁶⁵Watkins (2004): 77. Watkins bases his concept of the detachable theme on Hayden Pelliccia’s “detachable formula.” (Pelliccia (2002).)

4 COMPARING THE BIRTHS OF CONCHOBAR, INDRA, AND HERAKLES

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present a comparative case study of the birth narratives of the Irish king Conchobar mac Nessa, the Vedic god Indra, and the Greek hero Herakles, among others. The specific focus of my discussion is on the strikingly similar ways in which their conceptions and births are manipulated, particularly with respect to time, in order to produce a specific outcome. Themes of prophecy and temporal distortion play a particularly important role here, as does the prolongation of gestation as a form of containment and control. I pay particular attention to the motif of birth through the mother's side, and consider further comparanda from Ireland and India, as well as narratives found in Greek, Egyptian, Armenian, and Algonquin sources. These comparanda suggest a particular framework of meaning in which to situate the motif of birth through the mother's side, and provide a starting point for reflecting on the place of the motif in both Indo-European and non-Indo-European narrative traditions. Whereas the usual formulations of the heroic biography pattern we find a hero whose conception and birth are undesirable, in these stories we find mothers and fathers deliberately orchestrating the circumstances required to produce an extraordinary child. Nevertheless, a similar structure underlies these narratives, and many of the same motifs function to mark the extraordinary nature of the hero being born. For this reason, I will refer to the standard formulation of the heroic biography as "Type A," and the narrative pattern present in these stories as a "Type B" of the heroic biography.

My particular concern here is with acts of conscious control, usually undertaken by the hero's mother, in order to fulfill a prophecy rather than to avoid one, thus creating a hero rather than attempting to prevent a threat. While there are multiple types of prophecies in these types of hero-tales, the one central to most of the stories treated in this chapter is that:

(4.1) *If* a child is conceived or born under a specific set of conditions, *THEN* that child will have a specific destiny.

The specific conditions in most of these cases involve the timing of the conception or birth, while the destiny is typically kingship, but may also be fame or holiness. The specific identities of the parents are unimportant in these stories, since the prophecies refer to the conditions for creating a child, and not to the offspring of any particular individuals. Here, the role of the parents in the narratives is predominantly restricted to their actions, and not their their identities, and their importance to the narratives lies in the degree of their complicity in generating a hero.

There are two major categories of signs of the hero's future greatness: i) those involving or stemming from prophecy and ii) various other types of markers which operate independently of or in conjunction with prophecy and may function as supporting identifiers. Since the prophecies dealt with in this chapter are primarily of the conditional "IF...THEN..." type, the other signs of the hero's nature frequently operate to fulfill the "IF..." part of the prophecy. Often these will stipulate the timing and/or location of the birth. Unlike the prophecies found in the "Type A" formulation of the heroic biography pattern, these prophecies are typically positive rather than negative. They promise kingship or fame to the child without identifying him as a threat, and thus the exile/rescue sequence is frequently detached from the earlier components and absent from many of these stories, where some other form of separation and restoration may occur. An additional point of difference relates to the recipients of these prophecies. Whereas within the "Type A" pattern the prophecies are presented to the male relative to whom the child poses a threat, in these stories the prophecies are primarily directed towards the hero's mother, thus offering her the opportunity to fulfill the conditions of the prophecy and bring about the desired destiny for her child.

In addition to prophecy as an indicator of the specialness of the child who is the subject of these heroic birth narratives, multiple other signs of his extraordinary nature are present within the stories. These are generally not treated systematically or in any detail in studies of the heroic biography pattern. Von Hahn and Nutt refer merely to "tokens and warnings of the hero's fu-

ture greatness,”¹ whereas Rank only mentions difficulties preceding the conception,² and Raglan simply notes that “the circumstances of his conception are unusual.”³ In this chapter I examine a number of the additional signs that are subsidiary or entirely unconnected to prophecy. Although there are many possible ways of marking the conception and the birth of the hero as extraordinary, these signs all have their own specific functions within the story, and tend to operate not in isolation, but rather in conjunction with one another and with the other aspects of the narrative. One particularly common sign associated with “heroic” birth, as Raglan points out, is that the conception itself takes place under unusual circumstances. Again, this is vague and broadly defined, but as I argued in chapter two, there are identifiable and definite categories of “heroic” conception, and certain types feature prominently in the stories under consideration in this chapter. Specifically, certain types of asexual conception and conceptions (both sexual and asexual) that result in the birth of a semi-divine child appear in the stories under consideration. Other signs of “heroic” birth found here are prolonged gestation, birth through the mother’s side, fetal consciousness, and simultaneous births.

Although this may initially appear to be a disparate set of motifs, we will find them consistently grouped together and accompanying the prophecy that the correct timing of a child’s birth will result in his kingship or fame. I will therefore propose that these motifs and this prophecy form an interconnected motif “bundle” that may be viewed as a template for a “Type B” of the heroic birth tale, functioning alongside and interacting with the standard “Type A” pattern as sub-types of a more minimally defined narrative structure..

I begin my discussion with a study of the accounts of the birth of the Irish king Conchobar mac Nessa.⁴ There are three different accounts of his birth, and this affords me the opportunity to

¹Nutt (1881): 1.

²Rank (1914): 57.

³Raglan (1936): 138.

⁴“Conchobar,” “Conchobor,” and “Conchobur” are all attested variants of the spelling for this name, and all will

examine the interactions between the three texts and the development of the story. While these three stories are superficially dissimilar, a study of the functional aspects of the different motifs present in these narratives shows that in spite of their differences in form, they all conspire to express a concern with the timing of Conchobar's conception and birth as the key to his destiny. In all three narratives, we find circumstances being manipulated in order to ensure that Conchobar's birth fulfills the conditions of the prophecy so that he can become king. I then proceed to examine the uses of these same motifs elsewhere in Irish birth-tales, both in isolation and in conjunction with one another. From this emerges more clearly a particular set of motifs that offers a template for the "Type B" narrative structure. I place particular emphasis on the use of the motif of birth through the mother's side, since this is a particularly uncommon motif and can be located most effectively in other literatures. I proceed then to examine this grouping of motifs, and the motif of side-birth in particular, outside of Irish literature. I discuss instances in sources from Indic, Egyptian, Zurvanist, Algonquin, and Greek literature, all of which support the assertion that the template proposed based on the use of this grouping of motifs in Irish literature conforms to a more widespread type of "heroic" birth tale.

4.2 The Birth of Conchobar mac Nessa

4.2.1 The Texts

The conception and birth of Conchobar mac Nessa is described in three separate texts. *Compert Conchobuir*, "The Birth of Conchobar," is among five *comperta* or "birth-tales" whose titles are recorded in the B recension of the medieval Irish Tale-Lists.⁵ In *Die irische Helden- und Königsage* Rudolf Thurneysen describes two different texts with this title, each of which offers a different

occur in the passages of Old Irish text quoted in this chapter. For the sake of consistency, however, I will use "Conchobar" as the standard form in English.

⁵MacCana (1980): 53-4.

account of Conchobar's birth.⁶ Thurneysen labels these two texts as *Fassung I* and *Fassung II*, but I will refer to them instead as *Compert 1* and *Compert 2*.

Compert 1, by far the shorter of the two narratives, consists of only eight lines of text, and has been edited by Kuno Meyer in *Hibernica Minora* and by Vernam Hull in *Irish Texts IV*.⁷ The text is found in several manuscripts, primarily from the 14th-15th centuries, but has been dated to the 8th century by Thurneysen, Hull, and others, who speculate that it was one of the *Cín Dromma Snechtai* texts.⁸ The text focuses primarily on Conchobar's conception, and does not include an account of his birth. The content of this small text can be summarized as follows:

Ness encounters the druid Cathbad. She asks him what the present hour is good for, and he responds that it is good for begetting a king upon a queen, and that a son conceived at that hour would rule Ireland forever. As Cathbad is the only available man at that moment, Ness becomes pregnant by him. Her pregnancy lasts for three years and three months.

Like *Compert 1*, *Compert 2* is preserved in several manuscripts, but only the late 14th or 15th c. version found in Stowe Ms. No. 992 (now RIA MS. D. 4.2) has been edited; it appears in an article by Kuno Meyer entitled "Anecdota From The Stowe Ms. No. 992."⁹ *Compert 2* is a significantly longer and more complex narrative, consisting of 135 lines in Meyer's edition. It is the later of the two texts and has received far less critical attention.¹⁰ The text opens with a

⁶Thurneysen (1921): 273-6.

⁷Meyer (1894): 50. Hull (1934): 4-12. I will be working from Hull's edition of the text, but given the shortness of the text I will not provide specific references to line numbers.

⁸*Cín Dromma Snechtai* is a lost manuscript, sometimes identified in later manuscripts as the source of some of their material. Because of the archaic language of some of these texts, an 8th c. composition date has been proposed. For further discussion of manuscript sources and dating, see: Meyer (1894), Thurneysen (1921), Hull (1934), Ó Cathasaigh (1994), Findon (2011), and Findon (2013).

⁹Meyer (1883-5). A more recent translation appears in Koch and Carey (2003).

¹⁰To my knowledge, discussion of this text is restricted to Meyer's original edition, and commentary on the text

passage describing Cathbad's travels in Ireland as the leader of a *fian*, or band of warriors, who kill Ness' twelve tutors during a raid. Ness subsequently travels with a *fian* herself in order to find and take vengeance against the unknown warrior who murdered her tutors. One day, Cathbad comes upon Ness unarmed while bathing in a spring. Trapped and defenseless, Ness is forced to agree to marry Cathbad. The second part of the text, summarized here, deals with the actual conception and birth of Conchobar.

One night Cathbad becomes thirsty and sends Ness to get a drink for him. She returns with a cup of water from the nearby river Conchobar. When Cathbad looks into the water, he sees two small worms, and so forces Ness to drink the water herself. She becomes pregnant and the text attributes her pregnancy either to having swallowed the two worms, or, alternatively, to an affair with Fachtna Fathach, a neighbouring king. When Ness begins labour, Cathbad prophesies to her that if her child is born on the following day, his birth will coincide with that of Christ, and he will be king. Ness responds with the statement that unless the child comes out through her side, he will not be born any other way until that appointed time. She then sits on a flagstone beside the river (again, the river Conchobar) in order to prevent childbirth from occurring. Her child is then born on the following morning, with a worm in each hand. He falls into the river but is immediately pulled out by Cathbad, who then names him Conchobar, after the river.

While these two texts are the only two with the title of *Compert Conchobuir* and that are specifically focused on Conchobar's birth, a third account is embedded within a larger narrative about Conchobar's sovereignty, in the text *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*, "Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa." The text, found in the 12th c. Book of Leinster, was edited by Whitley Stokes¹¹ and

in Thurneysen (1921), Rees and Rees (1961) and Findon (2011). Findon (2011) and (2013) in fact provide the only comparative analyses of all three accounts of Conchobar's birth.

¹¹Stokes (1910).

has received more critical attention than the two *Compert Conchobuir* texts. The first part of this text is clearly the source for the beginning of *Compert 2*. Both texts begin with the murder of Ness' tutors by Cathbad and her pursuit of him. The two stories diverge, however, once Ness becomes Cathbad's wife. *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* (hereafter referred to as the *Scéla*) does not include any account of Conchobar's conception, but instead transitions to the birth episode immediately after the scene in which Ness agrees to marry Cathbad. A summary of the portion of the text dealing with Conchobar's birth follows.

Ness bears a son to Cathbad and he is named Conchobar. He is born in the same hour as Christ. Seven years before his birth, seven prophets had prophesied that a wondrous birth would coincide with the Nativity, and that the wondrous birth would take place on the very stone upon which Conchobar was born.

At this point the narrative moves on to describe how seven years after Conchobar's birth Ness secured the kingship of Ulster for her son.

Each of these three accounts of the conception and birth of Conchobar make use of a variety of themes and motifs to mark his birth as extraordinary. As the story develops across the three texts, numerous motifs are incorporated to expand the narrative, many of which are drawn from other Irish birth stories. The question here is whether each motif is selected and incorporated into the narrative individually and without dependence on the others, or whether they are chosen from a subset of possible motifs because they participate in a distinct interconnected complex of motifs. While the motifs used in the stories about Conchobar's birth may initially appear to vary widely, they are in fact largely consistent in their emphasis on *time*. In the following sections I present a detailed comparison of the motifs that mark Conchobar's birth as extraordinary in these three narratives. My analysis is divided according to the main stages of the structure of birth tales: conception (here including pre-conception), gestation, and birth (here including early infancy).

4.2.2 Conception

Three principle motifs feature in the accounts of Conchobar's conception across the three accounts of his birth. These are:

1. The conception takes place on an appointed day.
2. There is confusion about Conchobar's paternity.
3. The conception takes place via the worms that Ness ingests.

Each of these will be examined in turn.

4.2.2.1 The Conception Takes Place On An Appointed Day

The timing of Conchobar's conception is remarked upon only in *Compert 1*, where it is the subject of a prophecy presented by Cathbad to Conchobar's mother, Ness. The association between prophecy and the special timing of the conception of heroes is frequent enough that it is identified as a specific motif in T. P. Cross' *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*: M311.0.2.1 "Prophecy: conception of hero at a certain time."¹² The prophecy in this case, with its emphasis on special timing, is the central point of this short text. While the prophecy is explicit about the results of a conception taking place at that particular time, it makes no specific reference to Ness or even to Conchobar. Also, Cathbad does not seek Ness out in order to offer her this prophecy but rather does so at her specific request.

(4.2) *Atbert and ingen fris: 'Cid dianat maith in uair si indosa?' ol si. 'Is maith', ol se, 'do denum rig fri regain.'*¹³

Then the girl said to him: "What is this present hour good for?" "It is good," he said, "for begetting a king upon a queen."

When Ness asks Cathbad whether this is true, he affirms that:

¹²This motif is listed also in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, but Thompson refers only to Cross' index as a source for the motif.

¹³Hull (1934).

(4.3) *Mac dogenta isin uair sin forbia Erin co brath.*

A son conceived in this hour will rule over Ireland forever.

The specific nature of the prophecy in this text makes Conchobar's future kingship not something unique to him but rather a consequence of the timing of his conception, and so a destiny that could have fallen to any other child conceived at that moment. The use of timing as an indicator of Conchobar's importance is something that recurs throughout all three stages of his birth story, and across all three texts.

4.2.2.2 Confusion Regarding Conchobar's Paternity

Since the prophecies in the accounts of Conchobar's birth make no mention of his parents, the participants in his conception are primarily relevant for reasons other than any conflicts or obstacles that their union might create, and so their specific identities are of secondary importance. There are, however, disagreements among the three texts regarding Conchobar's paternity. In both *Compert 1* and the *Scéla*, there is no question about the identity of Conchobar's father. In both texts he is clearly identified as the son of the druid Cathbad. In *Compert 1* Ness chooses Cathbad in particular to father her child after having heard the prophecy, *o nach aca ferscal ind-ocus dí* "because she did not see a man other than him near her."

In the *Scéla* too, Cathbad is the only possible father for Ness' child. Following their first encounter at the river, during which she agrees to be his wife, we are told that:

(4.4) *co mbái-si do mnái gradaigthe oco-som, 7 combert mac dó. Ba hé in mac hí sin didu .i.*

*Conchobar mac Cathbad.*¹⁴

She became then his beloved wife, and she bore a son to him. That son was Conchobar, son of Cathbad.

In spite of this clear identification of Conchobar as the son of Cathbad, his paternity is nonetheless weakly valued in this text, as Conchobar is referred to primarily by his metronymic *mac Nessa*

¹⁴Stokes (1910): 22, §3.

“son of Ness.” The title and opening line of the text both identify him this way, and the text states, *o máthair ro hainmniged* “from his mother he was named.” Ness’ influence extends even to securing the kingship of Ulster for Conchobar, which she does through her marriage to Fergus mac Roích, the current king. While Cathbad’s paternity here is not in doubt, it is also unimportant.

Compert 2 presents a much more complex account of Conchobar’s conception and offers competing claims about his paternity. First, the text states that the conception takes place when Ness drinks a cup of water containing two worms.

(4.5) *Ibidh iarum in bean a dha digh don uisci 7 ibid duirb cacha dighi. Ro toirchedh in ben iar sin in fedh bis cach ben torrach 7 comad dona duirdaib ro toirrchidhthea in ben iar foirinn ann sin.*¹⁵

Then the woman drinks twice from the water, and she drinks a worm with each sip. After that, the woman became pregnant for the length of time that every woman is pregnant, and some said afterwards that it was by the worms that she became pregnant.

The text goes on, however, to offer two further alternative sources for the conception in the persons of Fachtna Fathach, a neighbouring king, and Cathbad himself.

(4.6) *Fachtna Fathach tra is é ba maclendan don ingen 7 is e doroinne in toirrcis sin fria dar cenn Cathbaid chaemdhrai.*¹⁶

Fachtna Fathach was the woman’s lover then, and it was he who caused the pregnancy, rather than Cathbad the noble druid.

While the text here asserts that it was Fachtna Fathach, and not Cathbad, who fathered Conchobar, in doing so it acknowledges the competing tradition according to which Cathbad is Conchobar’s father.

¹⁵Meyer (1883-5): ll. 47-50.

¹⁶Meyer (1883-5): ll. 50-1.

Indeed, this text generally prefers Fachtna's paternity over Cathbad's. In his prophecy concerning the birth of Conchobar, Cathbad states that:

(4.7) *Ní bá mac do Chathbad... Bidh mac d' Fhachtna Fhathach.*¹⁷

He will not be Cathbad's son... He will be the son of Fachtna Fathach.

Further, when Conchobar is born he is named Conchobar *mac Fachtna* "son of Fachtna." The final passage of the text reiterates Fachtna's paternity, and explains that Conchobar is known as Cathbad's son only because he was raised by Cathbad. Conchobar's claim to the kingship is said to rest with both his mother and his father, Fachtna Fathach.

(4.8) *Ro hailled in mac sin iar sin la Cathbad, coned aire atbertha Conchobur mac Cathbaid fris.*

*Gabais iarom Conchobur righi nUlad iar sin ar thochus a máthar 7 athar .i. Fachtna Fathach mac Rudraighe rí Erenn a athair 7 is e dorigine Conchobur dar cenn Cathbaid.*¹⁸

The boy was raised after that by Cathbad, so that he was called Conchobar, son of Cathbad. Afterwards, Conchobar took the kingship of Ulster by right of his mother and his father, since Fachtna Fathach son of Rudraige, the king of Ireland, was his father, and it was he who begat Conchobar in Cathbad's place.

This explicit statement regarding Conchobar's paternity is, however, somewhat undermined by the second poem that Cathbad recites, in which he claims Conchobar as his own son. He refers to Conchobar as *macan Cathbaid coeim / ocus Nessa nua*, "the son of noble Cathbad and of young Ness," and further calls him *mo mac ocus mh'ua*, "my son and my descendant." Here again the text acknowledges the existence of multiple traditions about Conchobar's paternity. These competing claims are found throughout the Ulster Cycle texts, where he is alternately referred to both as Cathbad's son and as Fachtna Fathach's son.

¹⁷Meyer (1883-5): ll. 97 and 101.

¹⁸Meyer (1883-5): ll. 129-132.

To summarize then, *Compert 1* and the *Scéla* both unambiguously identify Cathbad as Conchobar’s father. *Compert 2* acknowledges the tradition that Cathbad is Conchobar’s father but rejects it, making a firm claim that Conchobar’s father is Fachtna Fathach. This account also contains the motif of the conception being caused by the ingestion of the two worms Ness swallows, but does not fully endorse it, reducing it instead to the status of rumour - something that people said afterwards. The motif is reinforced, however, by the reappearance of the worms at Conchobar’s birth. The motif of conception through drinking a worm or other small insect also occurs in a number of other birth stories, including that of Cú Chulainn, as described in chapter three. It is likely that the presence of this motif at Conchobar’s birth is a deliberate attempt to reinforce his association with Cú Chulainn. This is in accord with Joanne Findon’s argument that during this period there was an increasing trend to create connections among the various Ulster Cycle texts.¹⁹

The fact that we find inconsistencies both among the different accounts of the conception and internal to the *Compert 2* account is very much in keeping with the confused parentage of the hero as typically presented in stories reflecting the heroic biography pattern, where it frequently indicates a potentially divine, or at least supernatural, facet to the child’s conception.

4.2.2.3 The Conception takes place via the worms that Ness ingests

One very significant aspect of Conchobar’s conception is its supernatural component, conception through ingesting worms in a drink of water. This motif is found only in the *Compert 2* text, and this episode presents sufficient points of interest that it is worth quoting in full.

(4.9) *Do forbuir dono íttu romhor co Cathbad i n-araile trat do aidhche. Teit dana Nes do cuingidh dighi dó sechnón in duine uile 7 ni fuair lind dighi dó. Doluidh iar sin do Concubur .i. don abainn 7 sithlais in uisci isin cuach tria chailli 7 beris do Chathbad iar sin. “Fursainter caindeald dun” ar Cathbad “co fegum in uisci.” Is ann batar dá dhuirb isin uisci. Nochtais dono Cathbad in claidhed os cind na mna dia marbad. “Ib-siu fein dana” ar Cathbad “in*

¹⁹Findon (2011): 49ff.

duthracht sa rob ail leat do ól damh-sa no bia-su marb mina eabha in uisci.” Ibidh iarum in bean a dha digh don uisci 7 ibid duirb cacha dighi. Ro toirchedh in ben iar sin in fedh bis cach ben torrach 7 comad dona duirdaib ro toirchidhthea in ben iar foirinn ann sin.²⁰

Once, at a certain time of night, a great thirst came over Cathbad. Ness went through the whole fort to get a drink for him, but she did not find one. Then she went to Conchobar, that is, to the river, and she strained the water into a cup through her veil, and after that she brought it to Cathbad. “Light candles for us,” said Cathbad, “so that we may look at the water.” There were two worms in the water. Then Conchobar bared his sword over the head of the woman, in order to kill her. “Drink yourself what you would ask me to drink, or you will be dead if you do not drink the water.” Then the woman drinks twice from the water, and she drinks a worm with each sip. After that, the woman became pregnant for the length of time that every woman is pregnant, and some said afterwards that it was by the worms that she became pregnant.

This means of conception introduces an aspect to Conchobar’s conception that is physically extraordinary rather than temporally so, which has been the case for the preceding motifs. The timing does remain significant, however, given that the event occurs in the middle of the night, indicating a liminal aspect to the episode.

The prominent role of rivers in this text also serves to signal the liminal nature of the conception, and Conchobar’s birth in general. This role will be discussed more fully with respect to Conchobar’s actual birth, but it is present at his conception as well. When Cathbad’s thirst sends Ness in search of a drink of water for him, she is forced to leave the fort and go to the nearby river, fortuitously named Conchobar, in order to find water. This river provides one possible source of Conchobar’s conception, in the form of the two worms that Ness consumes as she drinks the water meant for Cathbad. This motif, found elsewhere in Irish literature, is identified by Cross

²⁰Meyer (1883-5): ll. 39-50.

as T511.1.5.2 “Conception from swallowing worm (creature) in a drink (of water).”²¹ Other uses of this motif will be discussed in section 4.3.1.3, but in all other instances the conception occurs from a single worm. Conchobar’s conception is unique in featuring two worms rather than one. There is certainly a parallel here between the two worms and the two potential human fathers, Cathbad and Fachtna Fathach.

Cathbad’s role in the conception, though denied by the text, is nonetheless indirectly expressed through his agency in forcing Ness to drink the cup of water containing the two worms, in a scene that replicates their original meeting in a river. Their first encounter takes place when Cathbad catches Ness unarmed and bathing in a river. When he first sees her, *nochtsais Cathbad in claidheab os cind na hingine*²² “Cathbad bares his sword over the head of the girl” and then forces her to agree to be his wife. During the conception scene, when Cathbad sees the worms in the cup of water, we are told that *nochtsais dono Cathbad in chlaidhed os cind na mna*²³ “Cathbad bares his sword over the head of the woman” and then forces her to drink the water, thus causing her impregnation. True, the two rivers referred to in these two episodes are not said to be the same. The first is an unnamed river in the wilderness, while the second is the river Conchobar, which is near the land that Ness’ father granted to Cathbad upon their marriage. This river features again in the *Compert 2* narrative as the place of Conchobar’s birth and the source of his name. The source of his conception is thus identified as his birth place, and the liminal features of the river transfer to his conception and birth.

The two worms and two potential human fathers in this story indicate a dual nature to this conception, and this duality is present on three different levels.

²¹Thompson’s *Motif-Index* also includes this motif, but identifies it only in Celtic sources.

²²Meyer (1883-5): ll. 30.

²³Meyer (1883-5): ll. 44-45.

- 1- Supernatural: The conception involves two worms.
- 2- Human: There are two possible human fathers.
- 3- Mixed: There are both human and supernatural factors behind Conchobar's conception, either in the two possible natures of his paternity, or through a supernatural "father" and a human mother.

This duality is typical of the tension between the hero's human and supernatural heritage, or what Rees and Rees describe as the "third factor": "In every conception there is a third factor. The child may derive its biological inheritance from its earthly parents, but it is also the incarnation of a supernatural essence."²⁴ The hero combines these opposing sources within his person, embodying what McCone terms the "heroic halfway house."²⁵

In examining the accounts of Conchobar's conception presented in these three texts, we find that only the two *compert* mark the conception as extraordinary. *Compert 1* identifies the conception as a temporally significant event, characterizing it as carefully timed to create a child possessed of a great destiny because he was conceived on an appointed day. The conception in *Compert 2*, though it takes place in the middle of the night, is marked as extraordinary in a primarily physical manner. The conception takes place via supernatural means and has the makings of a dual conception. The ensuing confusion regarding Conchobar's conception is in no way resolved by turning to *Compert 1* and the *Scéla*, both of which firmly claim Cathbad's paternity, the one possibility *Compert 2* rejects.

4.2.3 Gestation

One of the signs that can mark the hero's future greatness is an unusual gestation. Neither *Compert 2* nor the *Scéla* have much to say regarding Ness' pregnancy. *Compert 2* merely notes that Ness was pregnant *in fedh bis cach ben torrach*, "for as long a time as every woman is pregnant."²⁶

²⁴Rees and Rees (1961): 226.

²⁵McCone (1990): 199.

²⁶As quoted above in (4.9).

In *Compert 1*, however, we are told that the gestation period was unusually long:

(4.10) *Bai in gein fo brú trí misa for teora bliadna.*

The infant was in her womb three months and three years.

This prolonged period of gestation represents a temporal distortion that is very much in keeping with *Compert 1*'s characterization of Conchobar's birth as extraordinary primarily in relation to its timing. Some suggestion of the centrality of timing is also to be found in *Compert 2*, in which Ness delays giving birth for a day. Though operating on a much smaller scale, this delay nonetheless represents as an unnatural prolongation of the gestation period. Similarly, although the temporal aspect is main point of interest related to the gestation period in *Compert 1*, the child's lengthy containment in his mother's womb presents a physically remarkable feature of the gestation. Ness' role as *container* is significant here. Her control over the physical being of her child for such a lengthy period of time, from the timing of his conception to his birth, is mirrored by her control over his destiny once he is born. For, as recounted in the *Scéla*, it is through Ness' machinations that Conchobar gains and retains the kingship of Ulster.

While *Compert 2* explains Conchobar's right to kingship as coming through both Ness and Fachtna Fathach (see above in 4.8), in the *Scéla* Ness single-handedly acquires the kingship of Ulster for Conchobar. She does this by offering herself in marriage to Fergus mac Roích,²⁷ the then-king of Ulster, in exchange for one year of kingship for the seven-year old Conchobar. During this year, Ness instructs her son how to rule, and at the end of the year the Ulstermen discuss their options. They decide that it was wrong of Fergus to give up his kingship as a bride-price to Ness, and resolve therefore that Conchobar should remain king.

(4.11) *Ba dímicin mór leo Fergus dia tabairt hi tindscra. ... Ba sí immoro a n-immacallaim, an ro*

²⁷Also known as mac Rossa and mac Rosa Ruaid. Fergus' role here as both Conchobar's step-father and the king whose power is usurped lends itself to fulfilling the function of the male relative threatened by the hero in the more typical heroic biography-type story. While no one plays this role in the accounts of Conchobar's conception and birth, he and Fergus will become enemies later in Conchobar's heroic career, when Conchobar betrays Fergus and dishonours him, leading to Fergus' defection to Connacht.

*rir Fergus scarad dó friss: an ro chennaig Conchobar anad aici.*²⁸

They thought it was a great insult that Fergus had given them up as a bride-price. ... This was their counsel then: that what Fergus had sold should be kept from him, and what Conchobar had bought should remain his.

The fact that Conchobar's kingship, which provides the political setting for the entire Ulster Cycle, is here referred to as Ness' *tindsra* "bride-price" shows his dependence on her. Ness' power over Conchobar is further demonstrated by the fact that he is most commonly known not as *mac Cathbaid* or *mac Fachtna*, but rather by the metronymic *mac Nessa*.²⁹

Conchobar's lengthy incubation within his mother represents the first of many periods of containment, inactivity and paralysis that plague him throughout his life. He is frequently taken out of action when afflicted by the *cess noinden*,³⁰ and the final years of his life are spent in a state of stasis due to the strange condition of having Mesgegra's brain lodged in his skull. The fact that Conchobar's mother is responsible for his first period of containment further marks her control over his life. As I have noted, in Conchobar's birth tales we do not find the typical obstacles stemming from conflicted parentage that we would expect to find in a heroic biography-type story, yet obstacles are established in different ways. We find here a suggestion of the numerous other ways in which the specific circumstances that make a birth extraordinary or "heroic" can set a pattern for conflicts and obstacles which will characterize the rest of the hero's career, including even his death. Conchobar is clearly characterized as immobilized and trapped in his birth tales, and this persists in other stories about him. The interaction between the themes of the birth narrative and those of the rest of a hero's biography will be further considered in chapter five.

²⁸Stokes (1910): §7.

²⁹See Findon (2013) for further discussion of Ness' role in the three accounts of Conchobar's birth.

³⁰This is the name given to the affliction that the men of Ulster suffer because of a curse which periodically causes them to experience birth pangs (*cess noinden*) and therefore renders them defenseless.

4.2.4 Birth

Birth itself is the central event of most birth tales, and so it is unsurprising that it is also the element in these narratives most heavily marked as extraordinary. The analysis of the different accounts of Conchobar's birth must rest entirely on the accounts of *Compert 2* and the *Scéla*, however, since *Compert 1* describes the conception and gestation but not the birth. *Compert 2* again provides the most detailed and remarkable account of the birth, as it did for the conception, and so it will be the primary focus of the following discussion. The account of the birth in the *Scéla* is not particularly detailed, and the motifs used to mark it as extraordinary are a subset of those present in *Compert 2*. Essentially, what we find in the *Scéla* is a more extensive prophecy involving the timing of Conchobar's birth and a brief reference to a stone as Conchobar's birth place. The motifs of the *Scéla* will therefore be included in study of those in *Compert 2*. The primary motifs present in these accounts are:

1. The birth takes place on an appointed day.
2. The delay of the birth is brought about via:
 - (a) a speech act (Ness' declaration that the only way for the child to be born earlier is through her side), and
 - (b) a physical act (Ness sits on a flagstone).
3. The location at which the birth takes place is on an (appointed) stone.
4. The river Conchobar plays an important role in the story.
5. The newborn child holds worms.

4.2.4.1 The Birth Takes Place on an Appointed Day

The birth episode in *Compert 2* begins with Ness starting labour while traveling from Cathbad's land to that of Fachtna Fathach, and so the birth takes place on the boundary between the territories of the two possible human fathers of Ness' child. Specifically, the birth occurs beside the river Conchobar, the third potential cause for Ness' pregnancy.

When Ness' pangs commence, Cathbad informs her that it would be far better if the child would be born on the following day.

(4.12) *“Mad dia m-beith at cumang, a ben,” ol Cathbad “in ghein fil fat bruindi gan a breith có abhárach, daigh ro budh ri Ulad no Erenn uili do mac 7 forbía a ainmn fa Eirinn co brath, uair is a comainm in lae cétna geinfis in gein irrdairc ro leth a clú 7 a cumachtu dar in domun .i. Isu Crist mac dé bithbi.”*³¹

“If only it were in your power, o wife,” said Cathbad, “not to bear the child in your womb until tomorrow, since your son would then be king of Ulster or of all Ireland, and his name would be famous in Ireland forever, because he would be the coeval of that famous child who will be born on the same day, and whose fame and power will spread throughout the world, that is, Jesus Christ, the son of God everlasting.”

The core of this prophecy is that the child born on that day will rule over Ireland forever. In this, the text replicates the prophecy concerning the timing of Conchobar's conception in *Compert 1*, given above in (4.2) and (4.3). Again, this prophecy is phrased generally and it not specific to Conchobar himself, focusing once more on the timing rather than the person. *Compert 2* provides the additional information that the birth will coincide with that of Christ, thus identifying why the timing of the birth is so important. Rather than offering a vague “auspicious day” type of prophecy, *Compert 2* explicitly connects the timing of the start of Conchobar's life with that of the start of Christ's life. The *Scéla* elaborates the connection between Conchobar's birth and that of Christ further. In that text we are told that:

(4.13) *Ba cáin tra a n-orddan ro genair i suidiu .i. intí Conchobar. Deithber són dano, uair issin úair ro génair Críst iss and ro genair-seom. Ro bátar secht fáthi oca thairchetul secht mbliádna riana genemain. No geinfed gein n-adamra la gein Críst forsín chloich ucut forsa ro genair Conchobar, 7 ropad irrdairc a ainm i n-Herinn.*³²

³¹Meyer (1883-5): ll. 54-8.

³²Stokes (1910): 22, §4. In the translation of this passage found in Arbois de Jubainville (1892): 6, the number

Fine indeed was the dignity that was born in him, i.e. in the aforesaid Conchobar. That was fitting, moreover, since it was in the hour that Christ himself was born that Conchobar was also born. Seven prophets were prophesying about him seven years before he was born: a wondrous child who would be born at [the same time as] the birth of Christ, on the very stone on which Conchobar was born, and his name would be famous in Ireland.

I will return shortly to the significance of this stone.

This passage explicitly connects Conchobar's greatness with the fact that he was born in the same hour as Christ, and not just on a generally auspicious day. The framing of the birth in this account situates it as the focal point of a fourteen-year period. The birth had been prophesied seven years earlier, and it is seven years following his birth that Conchobar becomes king.³³

(4.14) *Bá mór a n-orddan do Conchobur hi cind secht mbliadan iarna genemain, iss and ro gab ríge n-Ulad.*

Conchobar's dignity was great at the end of the seven years after his birth. It is then that he took the kingship of Ulster.

The significance of the timing of Conchobar's birth rests both in the more general motif of the birth taking place at an auspicious time, but also in the timing of his birth to coincide with Christ's. Cross identifies these as two separate motifs: M311.0.2 "Prophecy: birth of hero at a certain time (in a certain place)" and T589.7.2 "Hero born in hour of Christ's Nativity."³⁴ While the first motif occurs in a number of birth tales, the second is unique to Conchobar. The birth is extraordinary

of the prophets is four rather than seven. "Quatre prophètes l'annoncèrent sept ans d'avance." It is unclear what accounts for this discrepancy.

³³Stokes (1910): 22, §5. It is worth noting that in one of Conchobar's death tales the period during which he is immobilized, from the time of his injury to the time of his death, lasts seven years. *Robói dano isin chuntabairt sin céin robo beō .i. secht mbliadna*, "He was thus in a doubtful state for as long a time as he lived, that is, seven years." Meyer (1906): 8.

³⁴Thomson's *Motif-Index* includes both of these motifs, but refers only to Cross' *Motif-Index* as a source for them.

in its timing, but in the case of *Compert 2*, this temporal marking of the birth is achieved through physical means, specifically the delay of the birth.

4.2.4.2 The Delay Of The Birth

The delay of the birth in *Compert 2* represents a convergence of three separate motifs as identified by Cross. The first of these, T589.8 “Woman strives to delay birth until auspicious day,” identifies the intent behind Ness’ actions.³⁵ As we have seen, there is no such delay in *Compert 1* or in the *Scéla*, although the prolonged gestation period in *Compert 1* is akin to this slight lengthening of the pregnancy. In *Compert 2*, Ness’ delay alters the natural course of Conchobar’s birth. This raises the question of how we should understand the timing of Conchobar’s birth. It is possible to think of this as preventing the occurrence of an “early” birth so that the child can then be born at the correct time, but it is also possible to read this as Ness containing Conchobar, forcing him out of his own natural timeline and into one determined by prophecy, and by Ness. In *Compert 1* we find Ness aligning Conchobar’s conception with a propitious time, so it would be consistent to find her exerting similar control over Conchobar in *Compert 2*. As previously noted, in both cases the prophecies refer only to the timing, not specifically to Conchobar himself.

Ness’ desire for her son to be born the following day causes her to take action to delay his birth. She accomplishes this by the combination of a declaration and a physical act. Upon being informed by Cathbad that it would be better if her son were born on the following day (see (4.12) above), Ness makes the following statement:

(4.15) *acht mina thí triam taebh sechtair, ni targa conair aile co tí in feadh sin*³⁶

But unless he comes out through my side, he will not come out any other way until that time.

The unusual physical act described here is identified by Cross as motif T584.1 “Birth through

³⁵Thompson’s *Motif-Index* includes this motif, but only on the basis of Cross’ identification of it.

³⁶Meyer (1883-5): ll. 59-60.

mother's side."³⁷ Conchobar is *not* born through his mother's side, however. Rather, this marked method of birth has been transformed into a mere threat or possibility here, and it is contrasted with the natural birth that eventually does occur. Ness constrains her child with this statement, forcing him into a position where he may be born in a physically natural but temporally remarkable way in accordance with the prophecy, *or* he may be born in a temporally normal but physically extraordinary way. The act of being born through the mother's side is connected with the idea of being born early here, even if only by a day. Conchobar is effectively trapped within his mother's body, and able to escape only in an extraordinary way - whether physical or temporal.

Ness' speech act is combined with a physical act to ensure the containment of the child. Following her statement, we are told that:

(4.16) *doluid Neas docum na léna boi im bord na habund díanadh ainm Conchobar. Nos fuirim iarum for in licc cloichthi boi for bru na habunn.*³⁸

Ness went to the meadow that was on the shore of the river with the name Conchobar.

She sat then on a flagstone that was on the edge³⁹ of the river.

We have here a combination of two motifs: T572.1.1 "Mother sits on stone to prevent premature birth" and T581.7 "Child born on flagstone."⁴⁰ By sitting on the flagstone, Ness is further constraining Conchobar's ability to emerge into the world and further asserting her control over his

³⁷This motif is listed in Thompson's *Motif-Index* and is known from many different narrative traditions, including Egyptian, Iranian, Malagasy, Haitian, and others. However, Thompson's sources include here both cases of caesarean birth and unassisted birth through the side. In a paper presented at the International Congress of Celtic Studies in 2011 (Pagé (2011)) I argued that these should be regarded as two separate types of extraordinary birth because caesarean births involve often violent external intervention, whereas "side-births" such as these are generally harmless and occur without outside interference. While caesarean births are well-known throughout the world, episodes of unassisted birth through the side are far less common and in this chapter I survey all instances of this type of birth of which I am aware.

³⁸Meyer (1883-5): ll. 60-2.

³⁹The Irish word used for "edge" here is *brú*. I suspect wordplay here and a reference to the *brú* that means "womb." See further the discussion on the "pregnancy" of the river Slane, which gave "birth" to Loch Garman, in section 3.2.

⁴⁰Thompson lists both of these motifs, but but are known only from Celtic sources.

birth and therefore over his destiny. Conchobar's passage into life is blocked and he is contained until Ness chooses to release him. This method for delaying birth occurs elsewhere in medieval Irish birth tales, as will be discussed in section 4.3.3.2. While there is no parallel for Ness' delaying act in *Compert 1* or the *Scéla*, the latter text does in fact mention Conchobar being born on a stone.

4.2.4.3 Birth Takes Place On An (Appointed) Stone

In (4.13) above, the *Scéla*'s prophecy concerning Conchobar's birth was given. A part of this prophecy was that the birth of the "wondrous child" in question would take place on the very stone on which Conchobar was born. Although there is no specific reference to Ness sitting on the stone, and certainly not to any intention to delay the birth, we do have corroboration here of the tradition that Conchobar's birth took place on a stone. Though both accounts of the birth make use of this same motif, they do so in very different ways. In *Compert 2* the birth on the stone is very much a part of the containment motif central to the narrative. It is the means by which Conchobar is trapped and forced onto the timeline of the prophecy. In the *Scéla* however there is no containment motif, nor is there any mention of the delay of the birth, and so the function of the stone is different.

In the *Scéla*, the primary function of the stone motif is to reinforce the identification of Conchobar as the "wondrous child" of the prophecy. The prophecy itself presented two criteria for the birth: first, that it coincide with Christ's Nativity, and second that it take place on a particular stone. Again, Conchobar himself is not specifically identified in this prophecy. Since it is conceivable that more than one birth may coincide with that of Christ, the stone motif functions as a secondary means of identifying Conchobar as the child of the prophecy. The birth on a stone in *Compert 2* also has a secondary function as sign of the extraordinary nature of Conchobar's birth.

(4.17) *Is and sin dono rucc an ingen in gein boi fa bruindi .i. an ghein án irrdhairc 7 in mac*

tharrngartaigh ro leath clú fa Eirinn. 7 mairid fos in leacc forsa ro geanair .i. fri hAirgdhigh

aníar.⁴¹

Then the girl gave birth to the child that was in her womb, that is the glorious famous child and the foretold boy whose fame spread over Ireland. And the stone on which he was born remains still, that is, west of Airgdech.

The stone remains therefore as tangible evidence of the extraordinary nature of Conchobar's birth, and of Conchobar himself.

The role of a stone in the birth of Conchobar takes on greater significance when the various accounts of his death are taken into account. It is the result of a strange and prolonged condition whereby his mobility is severely compromised because of having Mesgegra's brain lodged in his own skull.⁴² It is only upon hearing the news of Christ's crucifixion that Conchobar is released from his motionless state and is able to die. One account describes Conchobar's condition as follows:

(4.18) *Nírbo enġnamaid, acht a airisium inna súidi nammā .i. naco cūala Críst do chrochad do Iudaidib*.⁴³

He was not able to act, but only remained in his seat, that is, until he heard that Christ had been crucified by the Jews.

Mesgegra's brain is frequently referred to as a stone in the various versions of the *Aided Chonchobuir*. Meyer's "Version A" describes the brain being flung from a sling, and Conchobar's physician Fingen even calls the brain *in chloch*, "the stone."⁴⁴ In "Version D" of the *Aided*, we are

⁴¹Meyer (1883-5): ll. 105-107.

⁴²There are several different version of *Aided Chonchobuir*, "The Death of Conchobar." All agree on certain details. Mesgegra, king of Leinster, was killed and his head taken. His brain was then removed, calcified, and turned into a "stone." Later, Cet mac Mágach stole Mesgegra's brain and threw it at Conchobar during a subsequent battle. The brain became lodged in Conchobar's own skull, and his doctors told him that he could survive this way, but only if he remained very still and calm at all times.

⁴³Meyer (1906): 8. (= "Version B")

⁴⁴Meyer (1906): 8.

told how:

(4.19) *Ceat mac Māgach rotheilg in chloic .i. inchind Misedhra rīgh Laighen for Concubur*⁴⁵

Cet mac Māgach cast **the stone**, that is, the brain of Mesgegra, king of Leinster, at Conchobar.

This text specifies that Fingen refuses to allow *in cloich*, “the stone” to be removed from Conchobar’s head, and includes a poem addressed to the stone, prefaced by the introductory phrase *is don cloich sin romudaig Conchobar*, “concerning that stone which ruined Conchobar.”⁴⁶ The poem describes the relationship between Conchobar and the stone as follows:

(4.20) *Ciapsat náma dó rot-chelt,
secht mbliadna lána rot-alt
dia luid do dīgail Ríg recht,
is and fo-frīth a lecht latt.*

Although you were his enemy, he concealed you.

For seven full years he fostered you.

When he went to avenge the King of laws,

Then his grave was found because of you.

In comparing these accounts of Conchobar’s death with the accounts of his birth described above, we find that contact between his head and a stone (or an object labeled as a stone) plays a pivotal role in both the moment of his birth and the moment of his death.⁴⁷ At his birth, his mother uses this stone to contain him within her body and delay his entry into the world, and she does this in order to cause his birth to coincide with that of Christ. At his death, the stone is used

⁴⁵Meyer (1906): 18.

⁴⁶Meyer (1906): 18.

⁴⁷While *Compert 2* does not specifically mention contact between Conchobar’s head and the stone, other accounts of births involving birth on a stone do emphasize this contact, as will be discussed in section 4.3.3.3.

to prolong his life and to immobilize him and hold him in stasis (see (4.18) above) so that he lives long enough to hear the news of Christ's death. In some versions of the *Aided*, the emergence of the stone from Conchobar's head then triggers his baptism by blood. In both the birth and death tales, a stone is used as a mechanism of containment, to reinforce the connection between the timeline of Conchobar's life and that of Christ's life, and to provide opening and closure to Conchobar's existence.

Additional layers of meaning arise when the importance of the stone is examined in the broader context of wondrous birth tales and the symbolic and supernatural aspects of Irish kingship. First, as will be more fully discussed below, a stone at the birth-scene typically connotes a delay of the birth. In fact, the entire three-part sequence of i) the declaration of the mother's intent to suspend her labour until the auspicious time, ii) the mother sitting on a stone, and iii) the birth being delayed, has exact parallels in other birth stories, and further parallels can be identified if the speech act is left aside. Given this common association between the delay and the stone, it is quite possible that the mere mention of Conchobar's birth in the *Scéla* as taking place on a stone might have sufficed to convey that his birth had been delayed by this means in order to coincide with the Nativity. The motif of birth on a stone should be considered as more than simply part of a delaying tactic, however, since it is clearly also being used to mark the new-born child's extraordinary nature.

Given Conchobar's destiny as king, the traditional signs of kingship should also be considered. Although other Irish kings have been connected with this motif, it is also frequently used in the births of saints. It must be noted, however, that in general these saints typically are born into dynastic families. Irish kings do have a particularly strong association with a stone, however, and that stone is the Lia Fáil. It is possible that the original function of the motif of birth onto a stone as a marker of the birth of a future king was to prefigure his later standing on the Lia Fáil to confirm his right to be king, or interacting with other stone associated with tests of *good*

sovereignty.⁴⁸ The use of the motif was most likely extended from the birth narratives of kings to other extraordinary birth tales. This point will be taken up again when other Irish parallels to this aspect of Conchobar's birth story are examined.

In the case of *Compert 2*, the location of the stone next to the river Conchobar is of particular significance. As will be seen, the stone featured in the "birth-stone" motif is typically located beside or even in a river. In this text the river itself is also of great significance.

4.2.4.4 The Significance Of The River Conchobar

In (4.17) above, we saw that when Ness, beginning labour, sits on a stone in order to delay the birth, she is near the river Conchobar. The placement of this stone beside the river Conchobar effectively returns the child Conchobar to the place of his conception, as it was from this river that Ness took the water containing the two worms that led to her pregnancy. Following his birth, Conchobar is immersed in the river:

(4.21) *Co tarrla druim tar ais docum in t-srotha dianad comainm Conchobur 7 dobreatha in sruth dar ais, conus táraigh Cathbad iar dain 7 dobretha ainm fair o anmun in t-srotha .i. Conchobur mac Fachtna.*⁴⁹

Then he went head over heels towards the river Conchobar, and the river overwhelmed him, until Cathbad seized him, and he was named after the river, namely Conchobar mac Fachtna.

The river provides the worms that are a possible source of Conchobar's conception, the place of his birth, and the inspiration for his name. Given that many of the events of Conchobar's life are associated with Christ,⁵⁰ we must read his immediate immersion in the river as a form of

⁴⁸The Lia Fáil is particularly associated with the High Kingship of Tara. Various other stones are associated with sovereignty in Irish tradition, and particularly with tests of the suitability of a particular candidate for kingship. See further FitzPatrick (2003) and FitzPatrick (2004).

⁴⁹Meyer (1883-5): ll. 108-11.

⁵⁰While Conchobar is alone in having events in his life explicitly synchronized to those in Christ's life, stories about the "boyhood deeds" (*magnímrada*) of Cú Chulainn and Finn belong to a narrative type present also in Irish

baptism. Conchobar is considered to be one of the three people in Ireland who believed in the Christian faith before the coming of Saint Patrick,⁵¹ and the first to enter Heaven since the blood he shed at his death was a baptism. One account of his death states that:

(4.22) *is ē cēt-gentlide docōid hi flaith nimea, fobith robad bathais dō ind fuil donescmacht 7 rocreit ē do Chrīst.*⁵²

He was the first pagan who went to the kingdom of heaven, because the blood that he shed was a baptism to him, and he believed in Christ.

The early baptism imagery at his birth, which takes place at the same time as Christ's, would then anticipate the baptism at his death, which takes place upon his hearing the news of Christ's crucifixion.

4.2.4.5 Conchobar Is Born Holding Two Worms

The connection between Conchobar's conception and birth is asserted not only by both events taking place at the river Conchobar, but also by the final unusual detail of his birth, reflecting the motif T552.2.2 "Child born holding worm (in each hand)."⁵³

(4.23) *Is amlaid iarum ro geanair in mac sin 7 duirb cecha lamha dó.*⁵⁴

In this way then the boy was born, and he had a worm in each of his hands.

Clearly, these are to be identified as the two worms that figured in his conception, now returned to their source in the river Conchobar. At the moment of his birth Conchobar, is actually holding the means of his conception, and, again, these worms signal a duality. In being born from Ness' womb

sources in apocryphal stories about the boyhood of Christ. See further Nagy (1985): 227-8 n. 17 and Nagy (1984).

⁵¹This belief is mentioned in *Senchas na Relec* "The History of Burial Places," ed. and trans. O'Donovan (1845): 97 and 99.

⁵²Meyer (1906): 14.

⁵³Thompson includes this motif but cites only Cross' *Index* as an example of its occurrence.

⁵⁴Meyer (1883-5): ll. 107-8, p. 181.

along with Conchobar, they also connote twinning, reinforcing Conchobar's relationship with Christ, and they remind us once more of the combination of supernatural and human elements, the "third factor," characteristic of heroic births.

4.2.5 Some Preliminary Conclusions and Interpretations

Conchobar's conception and birth, in all three accounts, is marked by a number of temporal and physical anomalies. Prophecy sets the time of his conception or birth, and so the rest of his life, by connecting the chronology of the unfolding of his life with that of Christ. In *Compert 1* and *Compert 2*, we find that the timing of Conchobar's conception and birth are in fact deliberately manipulated by his mother Ness in order to fulfill the conditions of the prophecy and make her son king. Ness uses physical means in order to secure the required timing, including the deliberately prolonged labour in *Compert 2*, which echoes the lengthy gestation of *Compert 1*. While the place of the birth is secondary in importance to the timing of the birth, in the *Scéla* the birth takes place on a pre-ordained stone, a motif also found in the delay sequence in *Compert 2*. Additional physically abnormal events, including the possibility of an asexual conception brought about by Ness ingesting the two worms, further serve to mark Conchobar as a "hero" in a way characterized by the "third factor" of supernatural birth, a feature shared with the "Type A" heroic biography narratives.

The crucial difference between the latter and the accounts of Conchobar's birth is the total absence of an antagonist, a threatened male relative who, upon hearing a prophecy of the child's future greatness, decides to eliminate the child. This action is the required trigger for the exile and rescue sequence, also absent from Conchobar's biography. The absence of this feature can be attributed primarily to the substantially different type of prophecy that features in these stories. Rather than identifying a particular child as a threat, these prophecies merely present a window of opportunity for the child's mother to secure a heroic destiny for her child. This establishes a markedly different narrative structure, and the other unusual aspects of the birth function as further markers of the extraordinary nature of the child rather than identifying him as a threat

and making him vulnerable to his enemies.

In comparing the three accounts of Conchobar's conception and birth, we can begin to identify a story-type with clear affinities to the "Type A" heroic biography, yet different from it in several important ways. Contrary to Rees and Rees' statement that the birth of the hero is entirely pre-ordained, at least from the point of view of the supernatural world,⁵⁵ in these three stories it is only the time, and to a lesser extent the place, of the birth that is pre-ordained. The parentage is more a matter of opportunity and even conscious action on the part of the parents, and because of the un-targeted nature of the prophecies, even the child himself is not necessarily "chosen" until the moment of the birth. The hero's destiny is then not dependent on the identity of his parents or himself, but rather on their actions and on the fulfillment of the conditions of the IF... THEN... prophecy. Other factors are therefore required to mark the child being born as special. Foremost among these are: i) the worms that feature in Conchobar's conception and birth, ii) the prolonged gestation period, iii) the delay of the birth, including the mother's statement that the child can only be born early by emerging through her side, and the mother then sitting on a stone to prevent birth. These are the features, in combination with the IF... THEN... type of prophecy, that will be the focus of the following section.

4.3 Irish Parallels for Conchobar's Birth

In this section I examine the tales about Conchobar's conception and birth in the broader context of Irish birth tales in order to better understand the significance of the presence of particular motifs, and how the motifs function in conjunction with one another. The following discussion will focus exclusively on other instances of those motifs that are prominently featured in the accounts of Conchobar's birth, as discussed in the previous sections, and will follow a similar sequence, focusing on conception, gestation and birth. Particularly strong correspondences can

⁵⁵Rees and Rees (1961): 226: "...from the point of view of the supernatural world, the child's birth is destined the parents are chosen, the time and place are ordained, and the earthly life of the child is pre-figured before he is conceived."

be found in the stories about the births of Fiacha Muillethan, Saint Áed mac Bricc, Conall Cernach, and Cú Chulainn. Additional parallels for many of the motifs present in Conchobar's birth tales are provided by stories about Saint Columba, Saint Molaise, Saint Laisrén, Saint Patrick, Saint Brigit, Túathal Máelgarb, and Conchobar's own son, Furbaide Fer-benn, though there is a lesser degree of similarity than what we find in the first grouping of stories..

4.3.1 Conception

In section 2.2 above, we saw that Conchobar's conception was characterized by its timing as well as by supernatural events that confuse the question of his paternity. There are similar events in accounts of the conceptions of other kings, heroes, and saints.

4.3.1.1 The Timing Of The Birth And Prophecy

The IF... THEN... type of prophecy can function to identify the timing for a special conception or birth, as in the story of Conchobar's conception in *Compert 1*. While prophecy frequently marks a birth as extraordinary, it is somewhat less frequently used in respect to conception, and it is still more unusual for acts of prophecy to accompany both the conception and the birth. Of the other figures mentioned above, only Fiacha Muillethan, Saint Molaise, and Conall Cernach are said to have had prophecies concerning both their conceptions and births. Although these prophecies are certainly used to mark the child being conceived as special, they are different in kind from the prophecies concerning Conchobar, in that they have to do specifically with the children in question, as is typical in stories showing the "Type A" pattern of heroic birth.

In the account of Fiacha Muillethan's conception and birth in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, the druid Díl marries his daughter Moncha to Éogan, and they then conceive a son.⁵⁶

(4.24) *'Maith, ám, a ingen', ar Díl, 'foi la Éogan dús in [m]bíad rígi Muman úaim-se co bráth'.*

Dérgidir don lánamain. Maith a ngein con-compred and .i. Fíacha Mulletha(i)n mac

⁵⁶Fiacha Muillethan is a legendary king counted among the ancestral figures of the Eóganachta dynasty of Munster.

Éogain.⁵⁷

“Good then, daughter,” said Díl. “Sleep with Éogan to see whether kings of Munster will be descended from me forever.” A bed was made for the couple. Great was the child that was conceived then, that is, Fiacha Muillethan son of Éogan.

As in *Compert 1* and *Compert 2*, this prophecy explicitly mentions the potential for kingship of the child about to be conceived. The source and recipient of the prophecy also mirror those present in the Conchobar stories in that a paternal figure offers the prophecy to the mother of the child. Cathbad, who is source of the prophecies in *Compert 1* and *Compert 2*, as well as some of those in the *Scéla*, is alternately described as Conchobar’s father or foster-father, and in *Compert 2* identifies himself also as the ancestor of the child. In this account Díl, the grandfather of Fiacha, is the source of the prophecy at his conception, and again at his birth. In these stories we find an inversion of the typical use of prophecy found in the “Type A” heroic biography pattern, in which the male relative figure is usually the recipient of the prophecy rather than the source.

This use of paternal figures as sources of prophecy in conjunction with conception is also found in the *Betha Mholaise Dhaimhinse*.⁵⁸ Saint Molaise’s birth had been prophesied thirty years earlier by Saint Patrick, but his conception is also the subject of a prophecy. Saint Molaise’s mother dreams one night of seven apples, the seventh of which is too large to fit into her hand. In the morning she describes this dream to her husband, whose interpretation of the dream takes the form of a prophecy about Molaise.⁵⁹

(4.25) *tuicimse sin ámh bar in fer ocus bérasa gein amhra airegda d’an bud lán beoil fher nEreann de ocus cindfidh ar a chomhdhíne.*

“I understand this indeed,” said the man. “And you will bear a famous and excellent child, because of whom the mouths of the men of Ireland will be full, and he will define his

⁵⁷O Daly (1975): ll. 198-202.

⁵⁸O’Grady (1892), Vol. 1: 17-37.

⁵⁹O’Grady (1892), Vol. 1: 18.

generation.”

Prophecy also features prominently in the account of Conall Cernach’s birth in *Cóir Anmann*,⁶⁰ and its use here corresponds most closely to the “Type A” pattern. Three prophecies are given, each identifying Conall as a threat to his maternal kin, and although the first is given directly to Conall’s mother Finnchaím, two of the three are made in the presence of male relatives, and specifically Finnchaím’s brother Cet mac Mágach. These three prophecies are:

(4.26) *dofuisehma mac 7 ní ba hingaire nech aile día matharmacne oldás .i. do Connachtaibh*

You will bear a son and there will not be anyone as undutiful towards his mother’s kin as he, that is, towards the Connachta.

(4.27) *go mbéradh a siúr in ghin no mhuirbhfed fer for leth Connacht*

his sister will bear a child who will kill the men of half of Connacht.

(4.28) *Ni ghinfi mac bhus ingaire oldás in mac so do Connachtaibh 7 ní bhíadh aidhchi gin chenn Connachtaigh fora criss 7 mairbhfidh fer for leth Connacht.*

A son will not be born who is as undutiful as that son is towards the Connachta and he will not spend a night without the head of a Connachtman on his belt and he will kill the men of half of Connacht.

The function of prophecy here corresponds to the “Type A” pattern in presenting the child as a threat to a male relative, but also to the function of prophecy in Conchobar’s conception in *Compert 1* in that a prophecy is made to the mother before the conception takes place. Finnchaím is essentially given a choice here. She is informed of the consequence of conceiving this child, and then proceeds to deliberately conceive him.

Although all of these prophecies act as markers of a forthcoming child’s specialness, they differ from the prophecies about Conchobar in that they make no reference to the timing of

⁶⁰Arbuthnot (2007) §264.

the conception or birth being significant. While the prophecy in *Compert 1* specifically referred to the destiny of the child conceived on that particular day (see (4.2) and (4.3) above), making no reference to the specific identify of the child or his parents, the prophecies in these cases are directed specifically at the mothers of Fiacha Muillethan, Saint Molaise, and Conall Cernach and refer explicitly to their children. It is significant therefore that in *Compert 1* Ness specifically requests a prophecy, instead of receiving one unrequested. This suggests that the destiny promised by Cathbad is one that anyone could have availed himself of, as opposed to the prophecies that specifically concern Fiacha Muillethan, Saint Molaise, and Conall Cernach.⁶¹

The use of “open” destiny prophecy, that is, prophecy not targeted at a particular individual, is not unique to the accounts of Conchobar’s birth however. A striking parallel for *Compert 1*’s question and answer prophecy scene and the deliberate fulfillment of that prophecy is to be found in the “Boyhood Deeds” of Cú Chulainn, as narrated in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*⁶² Cathbad, again, is the source of the prophecy when he is asked by one of his students what the day is good for. He replies:

(4.29) *ócláech no gébad gaisced and forbíad a ainm Héirind co bráth ar gním gaiscid 7 no mértáis a airscéla co bráth.*⁶³

A warrior who takes up arms on this day, his name will be famous in Ireland forever for deeds of arms, and his fame will last forever.

As a boy, Cú Chulainn overhears this prediction and decides to seize the moment himself, much to Cathbad’s surprise. Clearly, Cathbad had not intended the prophecy to apply to Cú Chulainn, but by acting on it Cú Chulainn is able to take advantage of the auspicious time and fulfill

⁶¹For another example of the prophecies fulfilled by serendipity rather than by (pre-)destiny, consider the renaming of Demne to Finn, as discussed in chapter two, after he fulfills a prophecy that another Finn (the poet) had hoped to fulfill himself.

⁶²O’Rahilly (1976).

⁶³O’Rahilly (1976): ll.613-5.

his heroic destiny of his choice. An almost identical scene directly follows this one in the text, in which Cathbad is again asked what the day is good for, and responds:

(4.30) “*Nech no ragad hi carpat and,*” for Cathbad, “*forbíad a ainm Héirind co bráth.*”⁶⁴

“Anyone who goes into a chariot today,” said Cathbad, “his name will be famous in Ireland forever.”

This is to be understood as a reference to a warrior’s first excursion in a chariot, a part of the transition into manhood that parallels the warrior taking up arms.

Again, the prophecy does not refer any specific individual, rather, the role of “actor” in the prophecy is open. When Cú Chulainn overhears, he is able to act to take the promised destiny for himself. What sets Conchobar and Cú Chulainn apart from Fiacha Muillethan, Saint Molaise, and Conall Cernach is that the prophecies that foretell their fame and greatness were not specifically directed at them, but revealed moments of opportunity that they, or in Conchobar’s case his mother, were able to exploit.

Where prophecies apply to a time rather than to a specific individual, the possibility exists of more than one individual fulfilling the prophecy, or of the intended subject of the prophecy being misidentified. The birth of Saint Brigit (from the Latin *Vita Prima*⁶⁵) features an interaction between prophecies specific to Saint Brigit and prophecies relating to the timing of the birth of an unspecified child. Saint Brigit’s mother was a slave impregnated by her master, Dubthach, whose wife was also pregnant. Dubthach’s wife was concerned that the slave’s child would be greater than her own. One day, when Dubthach and the slave were traveling by chariot, a druid prophesied that *mirabilis enim erit conceptus illius ... Vxoris tuae semen semini famulae seruiet vsque in finem seculi*⁶⁶ “the child she has conceived will be extraordinary ... your wife’s progeny

⁶⁴O’Rahilly (1976): ll. 644-5.

⁶⁵Bollandus (1658): 118-20. Trans. Connolly (1989). The *Vita Prima* is the first of five Latin texts of the *Life of Saint Brigit* printed by the Bollandists in the *Acta Sanctorum*. See Connolly (1989) for further discussion of the relationship between these texts and their dating.

⁶⁶Bollandus (1658): p. 119.

will serve your bondmaid's progeny until the end of the world." ⁶⁷

Further prophecies reaffirm this prediction to Dubthach's wife, who is unwilling to accept this fate for her own children and arranges to have Brigit's mother sold to a visiting poet, who then sells her to another druid. When Dubthach's wife eventually begins labour, the familiar prophecy is given, that *Si die crastino, orto sole nasceretur, neminem in terris haberet aequalem*,⁶⁸ "Were it [the child] born tomorrow at daybreak, it would have no equal on earth." Typically, this type of prophecy is assumed to apply to the child whose birth has begun, and it triggers a delaying action on the part of the mother. This particular sequence as will be discussed further in section 3.3.2, and we will see that when an attempt is made to delay the birth, it is always successful. In this text, however, Dubthach's wife does give birth that night, failing to fulfill the condition of the prophecy, while Brigit's mother gives birth the next morning and so the prophecy applies to her child. This presents an important variant of the pattern as it has appeared thus far and demonstrates the potential flexibility of these generic prophecies involving timing.

4.3.1.2 Confused Paternity

Among the stories under consideration here, only the account of Cú Chulainn's conception provides a parallel for the confusion regarding Conchobar's paternity. Cú Chulainn's birth tale is particularly complex and features a "triple conception." This story will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 3. Cú Chulainn is first born to a mysterious couple that the Ulaid encounter while chasing a magical flock of birds. The following morning the couple and their house have vanished, but the child has already been entrusted to Deichtine, Conchobar's daughter and charioteer.⁶⁹ The child soon dies but Deichtine herself then becomes pregnant. The conception begins with an episode in which Deichtine attempts to drink from a cup of water, but each time she tries

⁶⁷Connolly (1989): §2.3.

⁶⁸Bollandus (1658): p. 119

⁶⁹There is some confusion in our sources as to whether Deichtine was Conchobar's sister or his daughter. I will assume that she is his daughter, following the text of the earlier version of *Compert Con Chulaind* (ed. van Hamel (1978)).

to take a sip, a small creature jumps towards her lips. This reflects motif T511.1.5.2 “Conception from swallowing worm (creature) in a drink (of water).” That same night she dreams of a man who identifies himself as the god Lug. He tells her that she is carrying his child, that he was the man in the house, and that her dead foster-son had been his son and has now come into her womb. Lug also tells Deichtine that the boy’s name is to be Sétanta. There is a secondary pattern of triple-conception here in that the small creature in her water, the appearance of Lug in her dream, and the subsequent rumours that Conchobar is the father of Deichtine’s child are all offered as possible explanations for Deichtine’s pregnancy. In response to these rumours, Conchobar marries Deichtine to Súaltaim. Ashamed of going to her new husband already pregnant, Deichtine terminates her pregnancy and subsequently becomes pregnant again by Súaltaim. She give birth to a son who is then named Sétanta.

It is clear that we are meant to understand that this is the same child throughout, and throughout his life Cú Chulainn is known both as the son of Súaltaim and of Lug.⁷⁰ As discussed above, such confusion regarding the paternity of a child frequently points to a supernatural or divine aspect to his nature. McCone gives the following analysis of Cú Chulainn’s conception:⁷¹

(4.31) There is obviously more to this intricate pattern than the normal heroic halfway house represented by the scheme of human mother plus supernatural father or an incestuous equivalent, with or without the addition of a human being generally acknowledged as the father but in reality a mere step-father. Here Cú Chulainn’s fully supernatural origin in stage one is mediated by stage two, comprising an annunciation and the non-sexual impregnation of a virgin human mother by the supernatural father, into the fully human

⁷⁰In the LU TBC (ed. O’Rahilly (1976)), for example, the description of Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* at lines 2245-2315 and his subsequent appearance in his beautiful form at lines 2335-2370 are associated with him as the son of Lug in the first instance, and of Súaltaim in the second. His monstrous transformation takes place after an episode in which Lug appears to him and identifies himself as Cú Chulainn’s father, and the text states that other versions of the story claim that Lug accompanied Cú Chulainn during this rampage. On the following morning, Cú Chulainn displays his beautiful form to the hosts in order to negate the dishonour of having been seen as monstrous the night before. In this passage, he is named as *Cú Chulainn mac Súaildaim* (l. 2342).

⁷¹McCone (1990): 199.

stage three.

In Conchobar's conception in *Compert 2* we find a more standard version of the "heroic halfway house," with the worms representing the supernatural father and Cathbad as the human father/step-father. The complication here is the addition of Fachtna Fathach as an additional, fully human, alternate father.

4.3.1.3 Conception Via Worms

I have already examined Cú Chulainn's conception as the possible result of his mother's swallowing a small creature in her water has previously been mentioned, but there are several additional parallels for this particular feature of Conchobar's conception. Conall Cernach's conception presents the most striking parallel to Conchobar's: in both cases a worm involved in the hero's conception is present also at his birth. Unlike the accounts of the conceptions of Conchobar and Cú Chulainn, however, no other possibility regarding paternity is mentioned in the case of Conall Cernach. In fact, his mother Finnchaím is explicitly described as being barren: *rosacht chlainne*.⁷² Because of this condition, Finnchaím asks a druid for help in conceiving a child. The druid chants spells over a well and prophesies that her son will destroy her kin. The druid then instructs her to bathe in the well, but Finnchaím opts instead to drink from the well, and in doing so she swallows a worm. She subsequently conceives a son and, as in Conchobar's case, her son comes into the world with the worm in his hand.

(4.32) *Atibh an ingen digh assin tiprait iar sin 7 ro slúig duirb laisin digh 7 baí in duirb sin a laimh in meic a mbroinn a mháthar. Gura tholl an lámh 7 gurus cernaigh.*⁷³

The girl drank a drink from the well then, and she swallowed a worm with the drink, and that worm was in the hand of the boy in the womb of his mother. It pierced his hand, so that it was swollen.

⁷²Arbuthnot (2007): §264.

⁷³Arbuthnot (2007) §264.

Although the worm is not explicitly described as being *held* in the child's hand at birth, it damages his hand during the gestation, and so marks Conall Cernach physically and inspires the name *Cernach* by its presence.

The motif of conception via of a worm is also found in *De chophur in Da Muccida* "Concerning the Quarrel of the Two Swineherds"⁷⁴ and *Tochmarc Étaíne* "The Wooing of Étaín." In both texts, we find the motif appearing in conjunction with the idea of reincarnation. In the first mentioned text, two swineherds are caught up in a cycle of repeated reincarnation, which ends only when they are at last born as the two bulls Findbend Ái and the Dond Cúailnge, the bulls who are the cause of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Their final incarnation comes about when, as worms in different rivers, they are swallowed by two cows who consequently become pregnant.

(4.33) *Do-fuittet díb línaib assind áer, comtar dā dorbbi. Tēit indala n-aí i topur Glaisse Cruind i Cūalngiu, conda-essib bó Dáiri meic Fiachnai. Ocus tēit alaile i n-Ūarán nGarad la Connachta, conda-ib bó Medba ocus Ailella, conid díb ro-chinset in dā tharb, in Finnbennach Aí ocus in Dub Cūalngi.*⁷⁵

They both fell out of the air so that they became two worms. One of them went into the spring of the river Cronn in Cúailnge, so that a cow of Dáire mac Fiachna. And the other went into the wellspring of the Garad in Connacht, so that a cow of Medb and Ailill drank it. Thus from those two cows were born the two bulls, the Finnbennach Aí and the Dub Cúailnge.

In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the motif is again explicitly connected with a cycle of reincarnation. Étaín is the lover of Ailill, and is the victim of the jealousy of his wife Fúamnach. Fúamnach transforms Étaín into a pool of water, which dries up and becomes a worm, which then becomes a fly. As in the story of the swineherds, we have a series of multiple regenerations leading to the final reincarnation. The fly is then driven throughout Ireland for seven years by a magical wind conjured

⁷⁴Ed. Roider (1979).

⁷⁵Roider (1979): ll. 79-84.

by Fúamnach, until eventually it falls into a cup of water and is swallowed by the wife of Étar.

(4.34) *conda timart athach gaithi ar troige 7 lobrai 7 conda chorastar for cleithe thighe la hUlltu i mbatar ic ól, co torchair issin n-airdigh n-óir ro baí for laim mna Édair in cathmiled o Inbér Chichmaine a coiced Concobuir, condo sloicsidhe lassin dig bai isin lestur coimperta di síude foa broind combo hingen iar tain. Dobreth ainm dí .i. Edain ingen Édair. Di bliadain déc ar mili tra o gein tuiseach Edáine o Ailill cosin ngein déigenach o Edar.⁷⁶*

Then the gust of wind drove her in misery and sickness until she reached the roof of a house of the Ulaid, in which they were drinking. She fell then into a golden cup that was in the hand of the wife of Étar, the champion from Inber Cíchmaine in the province of Conchobar, so that she swallowed the fly with the drink that was in the vessel. Thus she conceived her in her womb so that she was her daughter afterwards. A name was given to her, that is, Étaín daughter of Étar. It was one thousand and twelve years from the first birth of Étaín from Ailill until her last birth from Étar.

She becomes pregnant and bears a daughter who is known as Étaín, daughter of Étar. We are told that one thousand years had passed between Étaín's first birth and her rebirth as the daughter of Étar.

It is noteworthy that the swallowing of a small worm by a man rather than a woman also yields remarkable results in Irish tradition. In *Compert 2*, Cathbad responds to seeing worms in the water that Ness has brought him to drink by forcing her to drink them instead. In her discussion of this episode, Joanne Findon argues that Cathbad views these worms as a threat or even an attempt to poison him.⁷⁷ She notes that an Old Irish charm, as preserved in an Anglo-Saxon medical text, offers a treatment for one who has swallowed a worm in a drink of water.⁷⁸ Findon points out that “such creatures or parasites may be poisonous, or if engendered by spells they may even become

⁷⁶Bergin and Best (1938): §21.

⁷⁷Findon (2013): 31.

⁷⁸See also Watkins (1995): 522 and Stifter (2012): 378.

demons inside their human hosts.”⁷⁹ This occurs in the the satirical Middle Irish text *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* “The Vision of Mac Conglinne,” in which the king Cathal swallows enchanted worms and as a result a demon of gluttony forms in his belly and steals his food, effectively starving him.⁸⁰ It is not difficult to envision this a form of conception providing a negative counterpoint to the positive conceptions that arise when women swallow worms and that produce heroes or kings, rather than demons. Further stories that make use of worms/serpents in connection with birth are discussed below.⁸¹

4.3.2 Gestation

One of the most striking details of the account of Conchobar’s birth presented in *Compert 1* is the extraordinarily long gestation period. The text states that Ness was pregnant for three years and three months. In examining other Irish birth tales, this proves to be one of the most uncommon features of Conchobar’s birth. In section 2.3 above, this prolonged gestation period was connected to the idea of containment, suggested also by the delay in Conchobar’s birth as described in *Compert 2*. There are few parallels for this lengthy gestation. We could certainly read the time between Cú Chulainn’s first and final births as a very prolonged gestation or containment, but that does not seem to be the primary purpose of his ‘triple conception’.

Apart from the *Compert 1* account of Conchobar’s birth, Cross lists only two other occurrences of the motif T574 “Long Pregnancy.”⁸² The first is found in a poem about Loch Garman in the

⁷⁹Findon (2013): 31.

⁸⁰See further Borsje (2013).

⁸¹While there are no worms or small creatures involved in the conception of Saint Molaise, it is worth noting that it is sometimes treated as a case of conception through eating. Schoepperle (1913): 276 theorizes that in older versions of this story Molaise’s conception may have been directly attributed to his mother eating the apple. If this is so, then this story would also contain a motif of conception in a dream that could be compared to Cú Chulainn’s second conception, which features both a consumption motif and a visit from Lug in Deichtine’s dream. The connection between a magical apple and conception has previously been discussed in connection with the conception of Volsung in the *Saga of the Volsungs*.

⁸²Thompson also includes this motif in his *Motif-Index*, and provides sources from numerous different folk traditions, as this is a very widely known motif.

Metrical Dindshenchas.⁸³ In this poem Cathair has a vision which is later interpreted for him as being about the birth of Loch Garman from the river Slane. In the vision itself, these bodies of water are personified, and the pregnancy is described as follows:⁸⁴

(4.35) *'S amlaid robói in ben bán,* Thus was the white woman,
torrach, is a brú bith-lán, pregnant, and her womb ever full,
co cend ocht céit mblíadna mbil, until the end of eight hundred good years,
cid ingnad fria innisin: although it is a strange thing to tell:

The pregnancy of the river is envisioned here as its *brú* ‘womb’ or ‘banks’ being full for eight hundred years, at which point the waters have accumulated enough to form the lake that is then “born.”

A prolonged gestation also features in an incident described in the *Beatha Lasrach* “Life of St. Lasair.”⁸⁵ Although the length of the gestation is far more modest than the eight hundred years attributed to Loch Garman, this story is parallel in other ways to the birth of Conchobar. The episode occurs when Saint Lasair, who it should be noted is a disciple of Saint Molaise, encounters a sick pregnant woman at her church. When the woman arrives, Lasair asks her what has happened to make her so ill. The woman replies:

(4.36) *ataimsi re secht ráithe torrach gusin aimsirsi 7 me go hanffann easlán égrúaidh 7 go meirbh meirtneach míláthairm 7 atáid dá athairnimhe nimhneacha ar fud mo chuirp do mo bhithoirleach dom chrinn 7 dom chognam 7 dom chnaimhgearradh risin bhfeadh sin.*⁸⁶

I have been pregnant through seven year-quarters [=21 months] until this time, and I am very feeble, sick, weak and lifeless, exhausted and ravaged. And there have been two

⁸³Gwynn (1913): 168-83.

⁸⁴Gwynn (1913): 176.

⁸⁵Gwynn and O’Duigenan (1911).

⁸⁶Gwynn and O’Duigenan (1911): ll. 14-18.

venomous snakes inside my body, wounding me and gnawing me and eating away at me and splitting my bones throughout this whole time.

In addition to the prolonged gestation in this episode, we find an added point of comparison in the two serpents inhabiting the mother's body, which later emerge in the hands of the child when it is born. This is the first and only incident in which the signs of the remarkable birth are actually presented as being harmful to the mother. Ness is able to carry Conchobar for three years and three months, according to *Compert 1*, and to carry him along with the two worms of his conception, according to *Compert 2*, in both cases without suffering any ill-effects. Conall Cernach's mother also carries the worm of his conception along with him, and although Conall Cernach himself is damaged by the worm, no harm comes to his mother. Although the circumstances of the birth may sometimes prove harmful to the mother, in this episode from the *Beatha Lasrach* we have the the only case of the pregnancy itself causing her any damage.

4.3.3 Birth

The motifs that operate to mark Conchobar's birth as unusual are present also in the other texts under consideration here . These parallels will be discussed according to roughly the same categories as in section 4.2.4 above.

4.3.3.1 The Timing Of The Birth And The Use Of Prophecy

Prophecy is the primary way in which the timing of Conchobar's birth is marked as auspicious. Specifically, the prophecy foretells that a wondrous birth will take place on a particular day. In *Compert 2* this prophecy leads Ness to delay the birth of her child. As with the prophecy in *Compert 1* and those discussed in connection to Cú Chulainn taking arms and a chariot, this prophecy is not specifically directed at Conchobar, and instead only applies to him because Ness manipulates the circumstances of his birth in order to meet the conditions of the prophecy. There are several examples the type of prophecy that identifies the birth of a special child at a particular

time, and in each case this leads to a delay of the birth in question.⁸⁷ These will be addressed in the following section in which the delay sequences are examined in detail.

There are other instances of prophecy regarding births that apply more specifically to the children in question. Most commonly, prophecy is about a specific child, parent, or set of parents, which is more typical of the “Type A” pattern. We have already seen that Saint Molaise’s birth was predicted thirty years earlier by Saint Patrick. Other prophecies, however, are given closer to the time of birth and are unambiguous about their intended subject. In the *Betha Colaim Chille*, for example, a holy man comes to visit Saint Columba’s mother while she is pregnant, because:⁸⁸

(4.37) *na foillsiugad d’aingel Dé dó go raibe an toirrches bendaigthe naemtha-sin*

It was revealed to him by an angel of God that the pregnancy was a holy blessing.

While most prophecies of this type offer a positive destiny to the child in question, some also mark the child as a potentially destructive force. We have already seen such a prophecy regarding Conall Cernach in (4.26) - (4.28). Upon hearing these prophecies, Conall’s uncle Cet mac Mágach guards his sister until she gives birth and then attempts to kill the child. He fails in this but leaves Conall maimed.

Conchobar’s own son, Furbaide Fer-benn, is also the subject of a prophecy of destruction. Unlike the other prophecies that we have seen, however, this one is addressed not to Furbaide’s mother, but rather to her sister, Clothra. One account of Furbaide’s birth states that:⁸⁹

(4.38) *Asbert dano a drúi fri Clothraind [ingin Echach Feidlig] macc a sethar da marbad.*

Indeed, her druid told Clothra [daughter of Eochaid Feidlech] that the son of her sister would kill her.

Prophecies of this nature typically lead to an attempt to kill the child in question in order to

⁸⁷The only exception to this is found in the *Vita Prima* account of Saint Brigit’s birth, as previously noted.

⁸⁸O’Kelleher and Schoepperle (1918): 36-7.

⁸⁹Stokes (1895): 38.

eliminate the potential threat that he poses. In this case, Clothra is particularly aggressive and instead of waiting for the child to be born, she orders her sister to be killed. Furbaide survives after being removed from his mother's body after her death.

4.3.3.2 The Delay Of The Birth

The particularly striking delay sequence in *Compert 2*, consisting of Ness stating that unless the child is born through her side he will not be born any other way until the next day and then sitting on a stone in order to delay birth, has two exact analogs. Both are precipitated by prophecies stating that if the birth were to occur on the following day, then the child would be a king, or famous, or holy.

The first analog is found in accounts of the birth of Fiacha Muillethan. In the version discussed above, from *Cath Maige Mucrama*, Moncha's declaration is essentially identical to Ness'. However, a second version of the story features a significant variation in the wording of the utterance.⁹⁰

(4.39) "*Mina thi,*" ar si, "*treb thaeb-sa, ni tharga in chonair choir co amairech.*"

"Unless he comes," she said, "through my side, he will not come out along the correct path until tomorrow."

The explicit reference here to the "correct path" is in contrast to the incorrect path that a birth through the side would take. This strengthens the imagery of the unnatural birth to which the child would have to resort in order to escape its containment prematurely, and will be very significant when discussing the Vedic parallel in section 4.4.3.

A second analog is found in the story of the birth of Saint Áed mac Bricc, whose mother again makes essentially the same statement as Ness, in the account of his life in the *Codex Salaman-ticensis*. In fact, both parts of the sequence of events, from the delivery of the prophecy to the mother sitting on a stone to delay birth, are identical. Plummer, in his study of the Irish saints'

⁹⁰Stokes (1890): 42-3.

lives, described this episode as “merely borrowed from the story of the birth of Fiacha Muillethan, with change of name.”⁹¹

(4.40) *Que cum esset pregnans vicinaque partui, quidam propheta venit secus domum eius, qui dixit comitibus suis: «Est in domu hac mulier parturiens. Si cras nasceretur infans quem parturit, hora matutina, erit magnus coram Deo et hominibus in tota hac insula Hybernie.» Audiens autem puella quedam, hec omnia retulit parturienti. Que respondens ait: «Nisi per latera venerit, usque cras non egredietur de utero meo.» Exsurgens igitur abiit foras et sedit super petram.*⁹²

When she was pregnant and the time came for her to give birth, a certain prophet came past her house, who said to his companions: “There is in this house a woman giving birth. If the child she is bearing is born tomorrow, in the early morning, he will be great before God and men in the whole island of Ireland.” A girl also heard him, and repeated all to the woman in labour. She, responding, said: “Unless he comes through my side, he will not come out of my womb until tomorrow.” Rising then, she went outside and sat on a stone.

Birth through the side of the mother stands in strong contrast with the births by caesarean. While in these texts no side-birth actually occurs, such births do occur in other mythological contexts. These are very different from the cases of caesarean births where the child is not born through its mother’s side but rather removed from her, often after her death. This is what takes place when Furbaide Fer-benn, Conchobar’s son, is born. After his mother’s death by drowning, her killer *dobert a mac treithi* “took her son through her.”⁹³ This is a separate form of unnatural birth, involving an often violent external intervention. Further, where caesareans are concerned, the agency of birth is that of the person performing the operation (except in the case of Ibonia), whereas with birth through the side, the child is born by his own agency.

⁹¹Plummer (1910): v. 1, cxxxii.

⁹²Heist (1965): 167-8.

⁹³Stokes (1895): 39.

A further reference to birth through the mother's side occurs in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, "The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne."⁹⁴ A pregnant Gráinne informs Diarmaid that she will die if she does not eat certain berries. The berries are guarded by a giant, however, and this giant refuses to allow Diarmaid to take any of them, even if it means that Diarmaid will never have any children, or that *go rachadh sé tré thaobh Ghráinne* "it [the child] will go through the side of Gráinne."⁹⁵ Ní Shéaghdha has added to this the note: "i.e. that it would kill her." It is not necessary, however, to interpret birth through the mother's side as entailing the death of the mother. In the previous three occurrences of this motif that I have discussed, side-birth seems primarily to refer to a birth that occurs too soon. In this case the giant may simply be implying the possibility of premature birth or even miscarriage rather than Gráinne's death.

There are a number of other stories in which the delay sequence features only the IF... THEN... prophecy that the child born the next day will benefit from auspicious timing, followed by the mother reacting by sitting on a stone in order to delay the birth. This occurs in the accounts of the births of Saint Molaise, as already discussed, and Tuathal Mael-garb.⁹⁶ Saint Columba's birth follows this pattern as well but also contains an echo of the side-birth motif. When his mother is visited by the holy man, Fergna, who came bringing news of a vision that he had received about her child, Saint Columba:⁹⁷

(4.41) *failte reimh Ferghna, 7 do evir se a ordóg tre broinn a mathar, mar comarta failte 7 luthgairi remhe*

welcomed Fergna and put his thumb through the belly of his mother as a sign of welcome and joy for him [Fergna].

⁹⁴Ed. Ní Shéaghdha (1967)

⁹⁵Ní Shéaghdha (1967): l. 1171.

⁹⁶Arbuthnot (2005): §176 and Arbuthnot (2007): §286. In this particular case, no explicit prophecy is mentioned. Tuathal's mother sits on a stone to delay birth while waiting for a good omen.

⁹⁷O'Kelleher and Schoepperle (1918): 36-7.

The flagstone motif is also elaborated in this story, as Columba’s mother is directed by a youth in a shining robe to a particular flagstone floating in a lake, which she must retrieve and move to a specific spot before giving birth on it.

4.3.3.3 Birth On A Stone

The motif of birth on a stone participates frequently in the delayed birth sequence, but is also found in isolation. Cross speaks of two different motifs that feature in these two separate scenarios: T572.1.1 “Mother sits on stone to prevent premature birth,” and T581.7 “Child born on flagstone.” In all, I am aware of eight cases of birth onto a stone in medieval Irish literature, and no instances in non-Irish contexts. This motif appears therefore to be a uniquely Irish one. Of the eight cases, five follow the pattern of the stone being used as a means to delay birth, and only three occur simply as birth onto a stone. These are listed in the following table. Note that in these eight cases, five of the children born on stones become saints, and three become kings.

Delay + Stone	Stone
Conchobar mac Nessa ⁹⁸	Saint Patrick ⁹⁹
Fiacha Muillethan ¹⁰⁰	Saint Columba ¹⁰¹
Saint Aed mac Brice ¹⁰²	Saint Declan ¹⁰³
Saint Molaise ¹⁰⁴	
Tuathal Mael-Garb ¹⁰⁵	

⁹⁸Meyer (1883-5): ll. 106-7.

⁹⁹Stokes (1887b): 8, ll. 9-12.

¹⁰⁰O Daly (1975): 34, and Stokes (1890): 42.

¹⁰¹O’Kelleher and Schoepperle (1918): 40.

¹⁰²Heist (1965): 188.

¹⁰³Power (1914): 8

The incident of a special child being born onto a stone is in some texts reduced to the mere mention of the birth having taken place on a stone, with no motivation given, or even any narration of the event itself. In the account of Saint Patrick's birth given in the *Tripartite Life*, for example, he is merely said to have been born on a flagstone. Following his birth this flagstone gains supernatural properties.

(4.42) *Ocus ind lec forsa rogenair intí Patraic, cech oen dogní luga ñeithig foithi dofuisim husce amal bid oc cained ingúforgaill. Mád fír immorro, a luga, tairisid in cloch in a haicned chóir.*¹⁰⁶

And the flagstone that Patrick was born on, if anyone makes a false oath on it, it pours out water as if it were reproaching a false testimony. But if his oath is true, however, the stone remains in its correct nature.

The treatment of the stone in this story corresponds to the minimal use of the stone motif in the *Scéla* to provide a physical proof of the story. In other stories about the births of saints who are born on stones, those stones also gain magical properties. The stone that Saint Áed was born on, for example, bears an indentation in the shape of his head, and the water that gathers in that indentation is said to have healing powers.

In those stories where the desire to delay birth makes the mother sit on a stone, this action is typically triggered by a prophecy relating to the timing of the birth of the child, as we have seen in the stories of the births of Conchobar, Fiacha Muillethan, and Áed mac Bricc. Another Irish king, Tuathal Máel Garb, is born onto a stone not because of a specific prophecy, but because his mother was waiting for a good omen. *Cóir Anmann* gives the following account of his birth:

(4.43) *Cummain ingen Daillbrónaigh máthair Thúathail. Iss í ro fossaigh a chenn fri cloich in tan*

¹⁰⁴O'Grady (1892): 19.

¹⁰⁵Arbuthnot (2005): §176 and Arbuthnot (2007): §286.

¹⁰⁶Stokes (1887b): 8, ll. 9-12.

*not rug díá mbaí ag irnaide dhaghtséóin dó. Co nderna in chloch luicc 7 cnuic ina chiunn comma máel. Coni[d] de dogarar Tuathal Máel Garbh de.*¹⁰⁷

Cumain, the daughter of Dallbrónach, was the mother of Tuathal. She fixed his head against a stone when she was giving birth to him while waiting for a good omen for him. For this reason, the stone made dents and bumps on his head so that he was bald. So that is why he is called Tuathal Máel [“bald”] Garb [“rough”].

Whereas prophecy and auspicious timing certainly affect the handling of the motif of birth onto a stone, it functions primarily on the physical level. The stone is used as a physical barricade to the birth. A birth that takes place on a stone leaves a permanent mark, either on the child or, more frequently, on the stone. Fiacha Muillethan and Tuathal Mael-Garb both receive deformations to their heads through the manner of their births. The marking of a hero with a distinctive scar is a fairly typical occurrence in myth and folktale. The birth of Fiacha as well as the births of the saints Áed, Molaise, Patrick, Columba and Declan all result in a mark on the stone, usually an indentation formed by contact with their heads. The stone becomes a permanent record of the miraculous birth, and the stone itself often gains magical properties, or at least the status of a landmark, as is the case in *Compert 2*. Conchobar’s case is unique, however, in that neither he nor the stone is described as being physically marked in any way.

The main function of the motif of birth on a stone, for all its associations with kingship and the later miracles of the saints, is, I would argue, to test the child being born. The heroic biography employs a basic pattern of miraculous birth followed by a childhood during which the hero is tested and reveals his extraordinary nature. In the stories under consideration here, the testing begins even before birth. The mothers sit on a stone in order to delay birth and ensure that the child is born at an auspicious moment, thus proving his worthiness to be a king or a saint. The child must force his way into the world. The identifying scar of the hero, usually received later in life, is here received instead at the moment of birth. It is significant that this physical marking

¹⁰⁷Arbuthnot (2007): §286.

or blemish does not exclude Fiacha Muillethan from kingship but is a part of the ordeal required for him to be identified as the future king foretold by prophecy.

The saints are not deformed; instead the stone itself is marked. At the moment of birth, evidence of the power of the child is already present. The test provided by the stone shows the child to be special with respect to the auspicious timing of his birth, his physical strength, and his control over his surroundings. The motif of birth on a flagstone carries a substantial functional load in the narrative. It brings with it the connotation of miraculous birth, kingship, and the later miracles of saints. The motif also supplies a means of generating a physical and permanent record of the miraculous birth by leaving behind landmarks and stones with magical powers. It allows the heroic career of the child to begin at the moment of birth by introducing a challenge for him to confront; the child overcomes his first obstacles, and where that child is destined to become a saint, he performs his first miracle.

4.3.3.4 Association with serpentine creatures

Yet another sign of the child's special nature is that his birth may be accompanied by the birth of other creatures. In the *Compert 2* account, Conchobar's conception occurs when his mother drinks two worms, an event that belongs to a larger category of stories in which takes place when the mother ingests some sort of small creature, generally a *dorb* "worm." When Conchobar is born, he is holding the two worms in his hands, and so they are in a sense born with him as "twins." Similarly, Conall Cernach's conception occurs when his mother drinks a worm, but rather than being born with the worm in his hand, the worm has damaged his hand. The manner of his conception leaves a physical trace on him, just as Fiacha Muillethan and Tuathal Mael-garb are marked by the manner of their birth.

The *Life of Saint Lasair* also features a child born holding serpents. In the episode described above in section 4.3.2, a pregnant woman is carrying two serpents in her body that are making her ill. Saint Lasair makes a *díneach* "healing draught" for the woman, who then goes into labour.

(4.44) *rug sí tríur dénlucht .i. dá eirc sreibhe 7 gein mhínaluinn mhullachleathan mic 7 is amlaidh*

*dobhádar an dá earc sin 7 earc i ngach láimh don leanb sin dibh.*¹⁰⁸ She bore three from that birth, that is, two vipers and a slender, strong, broad-crowned son, and thus were the two vipers born, one of the two vipers in each of the child's hands.

The description of the child here as “broad-crowned.” *mullachleathan* bears an obvious resemblance to Fiacha's descriptive name *muillethan*, which also means “broad-crowned.”

4.3.3.5 The Importance of Water

A final common detail shared among these stories is that bodies of water, and in particular rivers, feature prominently in the conception and birth scenes. A river provides both the source of Conchobar's conception and his name, as well as his birthplace. As soon as he is born, he is immersed in this water and rescued from it by his foster-father. In other, similar, conception scenes Conall Cernach, Cú Chulainn, Étaín, and the two swineherds are all conceived in the same way: by their mothers drinking water containing some small insect.

Water is frequently an important feature in the landscape of the birthplace. In those stories where heroes and saints are born onto stones, the stones are generally located beside or even in a river. Conchobar, Fiacha Muillethan, and Furbaide Fer-benn are all born beside or in rivers. In Saint Columba's case, his mother has to retrieve the stone that he is to be born on from a lake and then move it to another location. Many of these stones gain magical properties after serving as the site for the births of saints, and these properties often are tied to water. The stones that Saint Patrick was born on, as we have seen, pours forth water if someone swears falsely on it. The stone that Saint Áed mac Bricc was born on imbues any water that gathers in the indentation of his head with healing properties.

(4.45) *Nam caput infantis stetit super petram et fecit concavitatem quamdam in ea secundum similitudinem capitis infantis, et usque hodie manet, et aqua que fit in eo concavo omnem*

¹⁰⁸Gwynn and O'Duigenan (1911): 81.

*langorem sanat omni credenti.*¹⁰⁹

Then the head of the child rested over the stone and made an indentation in it, and it remains today, and the water that fills that indentation heals all the afflictions of believers.

In these birth stories we find a range of ways in which conception and birth is associated with water. Water serves as the source of magical conceptions, it lends its liminal qualities as the location of births, and is imbued with miraculous properties at the births of the saints.

4.3.4 A Template for Irish Birth Tales

Many of the stories examined in the preceding section show points of agreement with the “Type A” heroic biography pattern. There are, however, a number of differences that, given their consistently appearing and functioning in a grouping, suggest a “Type B” pattern.

Prophecies about the conception or birth of a child follow the “Type A” pattern when they apply to a particular child or set of parents, as in the birth tales of Saint Molaise and Saint Columba. This type of prophecy can predict that the child in question will be destructive or otherwise threatening, and thus provoke attempts to get rid of the child, as in the stories about Conall Cernach, Furbaide Fer-benn, and Saint Brigit. In contrast to this type of prophecy, however, we also find prophecies that identify a particular *time* as optimal for the creation of a hero, rather than singling out a certain child as a future hero. We find this type in the accounts of the births of Conchobar, Fiacha Muillethan, and Saint Áed mac Bricc. In some of our stories, both types of prophecies are at work. In the *Vita Prima*, for example, there are prophecies unique to Saint Brigit herself, but she is also born at the time identified by an “auspicious day” type prophecy. Fiacha Muillethan too is the subject of both types of prophecies. His conception takes place according to the instructions of his grandfather, who is hoping that his descendants, thus produced, will be kings, but the timing of his birth is then manipulated in order fulfill a second “auspicious day” type prophecy.

¹⁰⁹Heist (1965): 168.

Most of the prophecies under consideration here are of the IF ... THEN ... type. These prophecies are typical of both the “A” and “B” patterns of “heroic” birth. In the “A” type, these prophecies generally take the form: IF a certain individual has a child, THEN that child will be a threat to another individual, usually a male relative of the mother. The consequence of this type of prophecy is that the threatened individual will attempt in one way or another to remove the threat. In the “B” type, the prophecy is typically formulated as: IF a child is born at a particular child, THEN that child will be become king (or famous, or holy). In the cases that we have seen here, the consequence of this type of prophecy is a delay in the birth: the gestation period is prolonged in order for the child to be born at the correct time. The delay of the birth can be accomplished through a two-part sequence consisting of the mother’s declaration that the child can only be born early if he emerges through her side, and the mother sitting on a stone in order to delay birth until the appointed time.

Based on these elements, I suggest that based on the Irish evidence the “Type B” template for heroic birth contains the following components:

1. Prophecy: If a child is born at a certain time, he will be king.
2. Delay in the birth or generally long gestation.
3. It is possible for birth to occur through the mother’s side, but this shortens the gestation, resulting in an “early” birth.
4. The mother may sit on a stone to delay or prevent natural childbirth. This creates a physically difficult birth, and can make the birth itself an obstacle that the child must overcome.

These components are characterized by their shared ability to create a situation in which the birth of a hero can be controlled, or even planned, by his parents, and especially his mother. The deliberate creation of a hero is a crucial feature of the “Type B” pattern, and contrasts with the “Type A” pattern, in which the hero’s birth is opposed. As we have already seen, these two patterns interact with one another and should not be thought of as entirely separate narrative patterns.

To the components that I have suggested for the “Type B” pattern, I would add two motifs that

do not necessarily interact with the others, but that are frequently associated with them. First, we frequently find the presence of serpentine creatures such as worms or serpents, and, second, the presence of water or specifically rivers plays an important role in association with the conception and/or birth. These motifs contribute to shaping the “third factor” present in heroic birth and the hero’s consequently liminal characteristics. They also offer obstacles to the hero’s birth that come from the natural or supernatural world, but questions about the hero’s paternity loom large in a number of these stories, this problem is also typical of the “Type A” pattern and is likely to be a universal feature of the heroic biography pattern and birth tales in general.

4.4 Indic and Other Parallels

In this section I locate parallels for the “Type B” template for heroic birth developed in the preceding section based on the Irish sources. By examining the uses and groupings of the components of this template in other mythologies, I will determine whether a narrative type comparable to the Irish one exists elsewhere, and whether the function of certain motifs - such as side-birth as an indication of early birth - is specific to Irish narrative or more widespread. While prophecy is a prevalent, even universal, feature of all types of the heroic birth tale, other components of the proposed “Type B” pattern are far less common and are therefore more useful for the identification of potential parallels. Side-birth in particular is a striking and unusual motif, and can therefore serve as a focal point for the comparison of these stories.

4.4.1 The Buddha

The most famous occurrence of birth through the mother’s side is likely that found in the story of the birth of the Buddha, which also shares a number of other features with the Irish stories discussed in the preceding sections. The story of the Buddha’s birth is recounted in a number of Sanskrit and Pāli texts. The exact dating of these texts and their chronological relationship to each other is not certain and they differ from one another in various aspects. A full examination of these sources is beyond the scope of the current work, and in referring to these sources I follow

the discussion of Vanessa Sasson in *The Birth of Moses and the Buddha*.¹¹⁰

The Buddha's birth is entirely predetermined, and to a much greater extent than any of the Irish conceptions and births already discussed. The Buddha's birth corresponds much more strongly to Rees and Rees' statement that in a "heroic" birth "the child's birth is destined, the parents are chosen, the time and place are ordained, and the earthly life of the child is "pre-figured" before he is conceived."¹¹¹ In the Buddha's case, however, it is not "fate" or the gods, or any other supernatural force which determines the circumstances of his birth. Rather, it is the Buddha himself who plans his conception and rebirth from his current position in the heaven known as Tusita. Because the Buddha is fully aware at this stage, he is able to plan his final rebirth. Through his *pañcamahāvilocanā* or "five great investigations," the Buddha predetermines the specifics of his conception and birth with respect to time, continent, country, family, and mother.¹¹² The Buddha's birth is, of course, subject to a great number of prophecies, and is accompanied by a wide range of extraordinary signs; his conception, gestation, and birth all show remarkable features.

The Buddha chooses his mother, Māyā, as well as the specific method and timing of his conception. He selects as his mother a woman of appropriate lineage and character, but also one who had up until that time apparently been barren. She should therefore not have been capable of conceiving a child by ordinary means, much like Conall Cernach's mother. Further, the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* (AKS) and the *Mahāvastu* (Mtu)¹¹³ accounts of the Buddha's birth both claim

¹¹⁰See Sasson (2007): 16-20 for a description of the sources, and 90-152 for a full analysis of the features of the Buddha's birth.

¹¹¹Rees and Rees (1961): 226.

¹¹²Sasson (2007): 95.

¹¹³The *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* (trans. Beal (1875)) is known only from a late 6th c. Chinese translation from the original Sanskrit, which is believed to be several centuries older. (Sasson (2007): 20.) The *Mahāvastu* (trans. Jones (1976)) is a Sanskrit compilation that includes a biography of the Buddha along with other materials. The core of the text is thought to date to the 2nd century, and the final version to the 3rd or 4th century. (Sasson (2007): 19).

that before the conception, Māyā had taken a vow of abstinence.¹¹⁴ The conception must therefore take place through asexual means. As with the conceptions of Saint Molaise and Cú Chulainn, the conception in fact takes place in a dream. Māyā dreams that a white elephant¹¹⁵ enters her womb through her right side. This elephant is the Buddha himself, and so we find the Buddha acting as the source of his own conception, even as Étaín in her fly form, and the two swineherds in their worm forms were also the sources of their conceptions as they entered their final reincarnations.

Upon awakening, Māyā describes her dream to her husband, and Brahmins are summoned to interpret it for her. When they arrive, they prophesy that:

(4.46) if he will live the life of a householder, he will become a wheel-turning king; but if he goes forth [from the home life into homelessness], he will become a Buddha, one who has freed himself from all worldly mental and spiritual coverings.¹¹⁶

Variant versions of this prophecy occur at different points in the story of the Buddha's birth in the various texts that narrate it. This prophecy is more complex than those examined in the Irish context, which merely describe the potential consequences of a conception or birth taking place at a particular moment. This is not a fixed prophecy, but rather one that describes the consequences of particular choices made by the Buddha. The fact that these choices are to be made by the Buddha himself is a reflection of his awareness and control over all of the circumstances of his life, even from the time before his conception.

While the Buddha's gestation is accompanied by many unusual occurrences and signs of his extraordinary nature, most of these are quite specific to the Buddha himself. His mother, for example, gains healing powers and is able to look into her womb and watch the Buddha as he waits for the moment of his birth. He cannot even be said to be gestating in the usual sense

¹¹⁴AKS 36 and Mtu ii 6. See further Sasson (2007): 116.

¹¹⁵Or white and gold, or white and red, depending on the account.

¹¹⁶*Majjhimanikāya Commentary* (MA) iii 119.29, trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi (1995). The Buddha's birth is described in the *Acchariyabbhūtasutta* section of the Pāli *Majjhimanikāya Commentary*. See further Sasson (2007): 117.

of the word. In the context of the present discussion however, the Buddha's gestation does not present any particularly significant points of comparison with the Irish texts or with the proposed "Type B" pattern in that there is no prolongation of the gestation or any delay in the birth. The birth itself, however, presents a number of remarkable features with respect to both timing and physical realization.

The birth occurs at a time decided upon by the Buddha, and in a predetermined location. All accounts of the birth agree that it happened at Lumbinī, though they differ in their explanations for Māyā's presence there at that moment.¹¹⁷ In other accounts she is *en route* from her husband's house to her father's when, like Ness in the *Compert 2* version of Conchobar's birth, she begins her labour in mid-journey. In other texts, however, she specifically desires to travel to Lumbinī, just as Saint Columba's mother must travel to a particular spot in order to give birth. Remarkably, the moment of the birth is determined neither by the Buddha's mother, nor by nature, but rather by the Buddha himself. According to the *Mahāvastu* account:

(4.47) When the Sage, the benefactor of the whole world, was tired with his stay in the womb, he stepped forth eagerly, as it was his last sojourn there.¹¹⁸

Also remarkable about the birth is the synchronized emergence of the *sahājātas*: seven things that enter the world at the same time as the Buddha. According to the *Jātaka-nidāna* (JN) account of the Buddha's birth, these seven things are: 1) the Buddha's wife Yaśodharā, 2) the Buddha's charioteer Channa, 3) the Buddha's horse Kanthaka, 4) the minister Kaludāyi, 5) an elephant, 6) the Boddhi tree, and, finally, 7) four treasure urns.¹¹⁹ I have already discussed Conchobar's birth as coinciding with that of Christ. The simultaneous birth of the "hero's" future horse here is also familiar from Celtic sources, in that both the Irish Cú Chulainn and the Welsh Pryderi are

¹¹⁷On this point see Sasson (2007): 130-135.

¹¹⁸Mtu ii 21, trans. Jones (1976).

¹¹⁹JN 45, trans. Jayawickrama (1990). See further Sasson (2007): 145.

born at the same time as their horses.¹²⁰

The physical circumstances of the birth are remarkable in two major ways. First, the Buddha's mother gives birth while standing. Like the mothers in the Irish stories who bore their sons while sitting on stones, Māyā's posture here is not only unusual, but dangerous or even fatal under other circumstances. In Sasson's analysis of this aspect of the birth, she notes that while "the birth process is a dynamic one, and thus women need to change positions regularly throughout the process," giving birth while standing is in fact unsafe and can lead to severe complications.¹²¹ The most unusual aspect of the birth, however, is that the Buddha is born through his mother's side. Side-birth never actually occurs in any of the Irish texts, but where it is referred to it is associated with early birth and contrasted with a natural and correctly-timed birth. The Buddha's birth is certainly not early, and the function of the side-birth motif here differs greatly from the stories that we have already seen. There are many descriptions of the Buddha's birth as occurring through his mother's side, and I give only one example, from the 1st-2nd c. CE. *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa (1.9):

(4.48) *tataḥ prasannaś ca babhūva Puṣyas / tasyāś ca devyā vratasaṃskṛtāyāḥ / pārśvāt suto
lokaḥitāya jajñe / nirvedanaṃ c' āiva nirāmayāṃ ca.*

Then, as Pushya turned propitious, a son was born from the side of the queen consecrated by rites, without pain and without ill, for the welfare of the world.¹²²

The specific form of the Buddha's birth here recapitulates the form of his conception, recalling Conchobar and Conall Cernach born holding the means of their conceptions in their hands. Because of the consistent contrast between side-birth and a natural, timely birth in the Irish sources,

¹²⁰Pryderi's birth tale occurs in the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*, *Pwyll Penduic Dyuet*. Williams (1964).

¹²¹Sasson (2007): 136. Sasson cites several medical studies, in particular that of Gareberg (1994), which concludes that third-degree lacerations are seven times more likely to result from birth in a standing, rather than sitting, position, and that these lacerations can result in "severe long-term ailments" for the mother.

¹²²Olivelle (2009): 6-7.

I have suggested that side-birth is associated with early birth. The Buddha's birth, however, occurs at the moment of his choosing and is therefore by definition perfectly timed. In this case, birth through the mother's side, as well as conception through her side, is in no way associated with timing but rather functions as a sign of the purity of both the Buddha and his mother. This form of birth, as Sasson describes it, "severs the child from all ties to his mother's sexuality and bodily pollution."¹²³ Although the the birth is marked as extraordinary partly through the presence of the side-birth motif, here we find a functionally different sort of side-birth than that alluded to thus far.¹²⁴

The Buddha's birth is followed by a great number of further signs of his greatness, including his ability to walk and talk immediately after emerging from his mother. Among these signs are the showers of water that miraculously appear and pour down on the Buddha, and in some texts his mother as well. In the Irish sources, when the presence of water is featured in a birth tale it is typically in the form of a river beside which or in which the hero is born, and is generally used to signal his liminal nature. In the case of the Buddha's birth, however, this water serves the purpose of affirming his purity.¹²⁵

The source of these showers is explained in different ways in the various stories about the Buddha's birth. In Buddhaghosa's account, for example, the showers are poured from golden and silver water pitchers in the sky. In the *Lalitavistara* (LV), however:

(4.49) The two Nāga kings, Nanda and Upananda, remaining in semi-developed form under the sky, bathed the Bodhisattva by pouring two streams of water, one hot and the other

¹²³Sasson (2007): 137.

¹²⁴I have seen references to an apocryphal tradition that Jesus was born from his mother's side. For example, in his discussion of Glooscap's birth in Algonquin myth (on which see further below in section 4.4.6), Leland remarks that "the Armenians believe that Christ was born through the right side of the Virgin," (Leland (1884): 15). I have not yet located an original source for this story, but it would clearly follow the pattern of the Buddha's birth with its emphasis on purity.

¹²⁵Sasson (2007): 142.

cold.¹²⁶

As Sasson notes, “serpent kings make a number of appearances in the Buddha’s hagiography, the most famous episode involving the many-headed serpent Mucalinda, who shielded the Buddha from the elements by opening his numerous hoods over him during his meditation into awakening. Their appearance at his birth therefore marks the beginning of a very long friendship that lasted well beyond his death as they eventually became the guardians of some of his most important relics.”¹²⁷ In the Irish texts, the presence of worms or serpents at birth signal the extraordinary nature of the child. In the cases of Conchobar and Conall Cernach they served as a reminder of the nature of their conceptions, whereas in the birth described in the *Life of St. Lasair* the serpents were a destructive force to be overcome by the saint. In the Buddha’s case, the presence of the serpent king functions very differently, and seems to primarily indicate the Buddha’s absolute supremacy over all things.

While the stories of the Buddha’s birth contain many shared formal properties with the “Type B” pattern and the Irish stories on which it is based, the stories about the Buddha are operating on a very different functional level. Whereas the Irish stories feature mothers and (to a lesser extent) fathers or other male relatives taking control of circumstances in order to create a child with a specific destiny, the Buddha himself controls and determines every aspect of his birth. The Buddha’s birth presents him not as a liminal figure, or a hero of complex and even conflicted origins whose birth is an obstacle, but rather as a pure and supreme being, entirely aware and in full control.

4.4.2 The Birth of Māndhātara

In describing the Buddha’s birth through his mother’s side, *Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita* makes reference to a number of other births from unusual body parts. Among these is the birth of

¹²⁶LV 114, trans. Mitra (1998).

¹²⁷Sasson (2007): 143.

Māndhātar.

(4.50) *Māndhātur Indrapratimasya mūrdhnaḥ*¹²⁸

as Māndhātar, Indra's coeval, from the head.

While this particular source describes Māndhātar as born from the head, other sources describe him as being born through the side. The *Bhagavata Purāṇa* (BhP)¹²⁹ and the *Vishnu Purāṇa* (ViP)¹³⁰ both refer to Māndhātar as having been born through his father Yuvanāśva's side. Both begin by describing Yuvanāśva's unhappiness with his childless state. He, along with his hundred wives, seeks help from a group of sages (*ṛṣis* according to the BhP and *munis* according to the ViP), who perform sacrificial rituals in order to assist Yuvanāśva. According to the BhP, these rituals are dedicated specifically to Indra:

(4.51) *iṣṭim sma vartayām cakrur aindrīm te susamāhitāḥ*¹³¹

They performed Indra-sacrifices with great care.

The conception then takes place on a night when Yuvanāśva becomes thirsty and goes out in the middle of the night to find a drink. He drinks consecrated water that the sages have left on the altar. The BhP describes this water as *pumsavanam jalam* "water for bringing forth a male."¹³² On the following morning, the sages discover that the water is gone and, after discovering who drank the water, prophesy about the consequences:

(4.52) *kenaitaṃ mantrapūtaṃ vāri pītam*

*atra hi rājño yuvanāśvasya patnī mahābalaparākramaṃ putraṃ janayiṣyati*¹³³

¹²⁸Olivelle (2009): 1.10.

¹²⁹BhP 9.6.25-32, ed. GRETIL (2003).

¹³⁰ViP 4.2.49-65, ed. GRETIL (2014).

¹³¹BhP 9.6.26.

¹³²BhP 9.6.28.

¹³³ViP 4.2.54-5.

Who drank the consecrated water? The queen of the king Yuvanāśva [who did] will give birth to a great, powerful, boldly-advancing son.

Yuvanāśva, having drunk the water himself, becomes pregnant and in due course gives birth to a son, Māndhātara, who emerges from his right side.

(4.53) *tatas kāla upāvṛtte kukṣiṃ nirbhidya dakṣiṇam*

*yuvanāśvasya tanayaś cakravartī jajāna ha*¹³⁴

Then time passes. A child, having split the right side of Yuvanāśva's belly, was born as a wheel-turning ruler.

The birth in this case is of course doubly extraordinary: Māndhātara is born not only through the side, but also from his father. There are several elements here familiar from the Irish sources, as well as some that are shared with the story of the Buddha's birth. As in the story of Conall Cernach's birth, we find a childless individual turning to a sage (a *muni*, an *ṛṣi*, or a druid) for assistance in conceiving a child. This assistance takes the form of a drink of water with the power to cause conception. In Conall Cernach's case, as well as those of Conchobar, Cú Chulainn, Étaín, and the two cowherds, the conception was caused by the presence of a worm or other insect in the water, whereas in the case of Māndhātara's conception the power of the water rests in its having been consecrated in order to produce a male child. The motif of conception through drinking water is a significant shared feature. Further, Yuvanāśva's midnight search for a drink of water, which so closely resembles Ness', produces an somewhat different component in Māndhātara's conception in that it is both deliberate, as the result of sacrifices and rituals, and accidental, since Yuvanāśva was never the intended recipient of the consecrated water.

In association with side-birth here, we again find a prophecy about the specific circumstances of conception or birth as indicators of future greatness, as well as a certain vagueness regarding the subject of the prophecy. Certainly, whoever drinks the water will bear an extraordinary

¹³⁴BhP 9.6.30

child, and the intent is clearly that one of Yuvanāśva's hundred wives should have been the one to drink the water. The greatness of the child conceived in this way, however, would have been dependent on the method of his conception, not on his parents, and the attempt to narrow the range of 'candidates' down to Yuvanāśva's wives is circumvented by the king's own actions in drinking the water and thus demonstrating that *anyone* - male or female - who happened upon that cup of consecrated water and chose to drink it could bear the prophesied child. As with the Buddha's birth, however, there is no suggestion that side-birth is associated with early birth, and the motif instead serves another function. In this case, the most likely explanation is that this is envisioned as the most practical method for a male to give birth.

Māndhātār's birth is explicitly connected with both other cases of side-birth known in Indic mythology: that of the Buddha and that of Indra. In addition to the comparison between Māndhātār's birth and the Buddha's made by Aśvaghōṣa, where Māndhātār is referred to as *Indrapratimasya* "Indra's coeval," both Māndhātār and the Buddha are descendants of Ikṣvāku, a king from the distant past who was himself born by being sneezed out by Manu.

(4.54) *kṣuvatas tu manor jajñe, ikṣvākur ghrānataḥ sutaḥ*¹³⁵

Ikṣvaku was born from Manu's sneezing, brought forth from his nose.

The *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra* account of the Buddha's birth notes the relationship when it narrates the Buddha's time in Tusita contemplating the *pañcamahāvilocanā* and choosing the family into which he will be born.¹³⁶

In addition to his epithet of *Indrapratimasya* in the *Buddhacarita*, Māndhātār is further connected to Indra by the fact that his conception comes about through sacrifices made to Indra on behalf of Yuvanāśva. Their connection is most strongly marked however, by Indra's arrival in person after Māndhātār's birth. When Māndhātār is born he cries because he wishes to nurse,

¹³⁵BhP 9.6.4.

¹³⁶AKS 30-31, trans. Beal (1875). See further Sasson (2007): 101.

and his father of course cannot provide for him in this way. Indra himself arrives, however, and offers his finger for the child to suckle.

(4.55) *māṃ dhātā vatsa mā rodīr itīndro deśinīmadāt*¹³⁷

“[You] will suck me, o child. Do not cry,” said Indra. He gave him his index finger [to suck].

Indra’s words, *māṃ dhātā* ‘[you] will suck me’ are the source of Māndhātār’s name, and so, like several of the Irish heroes, including Conchobar, the naming of the child is based on a particular event associated with his birth.

4.4.3 The Birth of Indra

The birth of Indra is the subject of two hymns in the *Rig Veda*: 3.48 and 4.18. The latter provides the more detailed account, and presents a number of parallels to the Irish texts. The hymn does not narrate the birth in a chronological manner, and makes no reference to the circumstances of Indra’s conception. The first verses of the hymn contain a dialogue between Indra and his mother about the manner of his birth.

(4.56) *ayām pānthā ānuvittaḥ purāṇó | yāto devā udājāyanta víśve ||*

ātaś cid ā janiṣīṣṭa právrddho | mā mātāram amuyā páttave kaḥ ||

nāhām áto nír ayā durgáhaitát | tiraścatā pārśuvān nír gamāṇi ||

bahūni me ákṛtā kártuvāni | yúdhayi tuvena sám tuvena pṛchai ||

[Indra’s mother:] This is the well-known and ancient path along which all the gods were born. From this he should be born, having developed more fully. Do not cause your mother to fall in that way.

[Indra:] I will not come forth from this, [there are] difficult passages this way. I will go out cross-wise, through her side. Many things must be done by me that are yet undone. I will do battle with one, and with another I will make peace.

¹³⁷BhP 9.6.31

Indra’s mother asks him to wait until he has grown more fully before being born, and not to cause her to fall, thus making it clear that his birth at this moment would, from her perspective, be too soon. Here the birth may even be premature in a medical sense. When Indra’s mother asks him not to cause her to “fall,” she uses the verb \sqrt{pad} , which can be used of miscarriage.¹³⁸

Indra responds that he, much like the Buddha, has determined the time and manner for his birth, and that he is eager to emerge. He states that he will not exit along the usual path because “there are difficult passages,” *durgáhā*, that way. Indra says that instead he will come out cross-wise and through his mother’s side. A contrast is made here between an exit along the *pánthā ánuvittah purāṇó*, the “well-known and ancient path” and one that is *tiraścátā pārśvān*, “cross-wise from the side.” This same contrast is present in the Irish texts, and most fully expressed in the Book of Lecan version of Fiacha Muillethan’s birth. In that text, the two types of birth are described as either on *in chonair choir*, “the correct path” or *tre thaeb-sa*, “through the side.” The description of the “well-known and ancient path” as having *durgáhā*, “difficult passages” also recalls the blocking of the “correct path” in the Irish tradition by the stone that the mother sits on in order to delay birth. The dialogue between Indra and his mother firmly expresses the association of side-birth with early birth in contrast to a natural and well-timed birth, and also makes reference to natural birth as facing an obstacle.

Since RV 4.18 makes no reference to Indra’s conception, and the story is known from no other sources, we cannot guess whether prophecy played any role in the conception. While there is no prophecy requiring anyone to take control of the circumstances of Indra’s birth in order to achieve a particular outcome, Indra himself does appear to be in control of events, and he also provides the closest thing we have to a prophecy about his birth when he states that: *bahūni me ákṛtā kártuvāni | yúdhyaí tuvena sám tuvena pṛchai* || “Many things must be done by me that are yet undone. I will do battle with one, and with another I will make peace.”¹³⁹ In describing his

¹³⁸See Jamison (1991): 203-4 for a discussion of the idiomatic use of \sqrt{ava} \sqrt{pad} with reference to birth, and specifically to refer to miscarriage.

¹³⁹RV 4.18.2 c-d.

future deeds in this way Indra explains his motivation for being born as quickly as possible, and at the time and in the manner of his choosing.

In spite of these suggestions that Indra's birth is in some way early, at least from the perspective of his mother, the gestation period had in fact been a very long one. With respect to his mother, Indra is described as one:

(4.57) ... *yáṃ sahásram | māsó jabhára śarádaś ca pūrvīḥ* ||¹⁴⁰

... whom for one thousand months and many autumns she bore.

While no motivation for this prolonged gestation is provided, it is clear that Indra's mother wishes to delay birth further.

The details of Indra's birth are not described by RV 4.18, although other references to Indra's birth make it clear that it was an extraordinary event, accompanied by earthquakes and upheavals.¹⁴¹ RV 4.18, however, does imply that after his birth Indra's mother attempted to hide him, and may even have set him adrift in water, which would be typical of the "Type A" pattern of heroic birth. RV 4.18.5 describes how Indra's mother hides him because she sees him as a disgrace in some way, and in RV 4.18.8 Indra's mother speaks of casting him away. The hymn also makes reference to the presence of water in connection with Indra's birth. Indra speaks of waters breaking through a barrier at 4.18.6, and his mother refers to the waters having mercy on Indra after she cast him away. This could be a reference to water carrying the abandoned child to safety, if we envision this part of the story as corresponding to the "Type A" pattern, which generally features the child being exposed or set adrift. This interpretation would be further supported by the final lines of the hymn, in which Indra is described as having destroyed his father after seeing his wife (Indra's mother) without honour.

Although the story of Indra's birth appears to have many elements of the "Type A" pattern, including abandonment and conflict with a paternal figure, it also contains many of the features of

¹⁴⁰RV 4.18.4a-b

¹⁴¹RV 1.61 and 4.17, for example, as cited in chapter one.

the proposed “Type B” pattern, including control over the circumstances of the birth, a prolonged gestation, a physical barrier to birth, and finally the presence of the waters. The final element, the role of serpents or worms, is inherent in any reference to Indra because of his inescapable association with *Vṛtra*. However RV 4.18 does make explicit reference to Indra’s future battle with the serpent at 4.18.9 and 11. The serpent is not present for Indra’s birth, but is such an important part of Indra’s future that even a description of Indra’s birth makes reference to him.

4.4.4 Egyptian

Another instance of birth through the side is found in Egyptian mythology. The following is a passage from Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride*, which recounts the Egyptian myth of the birth of Seth, here given the Greek name Typhōn:

(4.58) τῆ τρίτῃ δὲ Τυφῶνα μὴ καιρῶ μηδὲ κατὰ χώραν, ἀλλ’ ἀναρρήξαντα πληγῆ διὰ τῆς πλευρᾶς ἐξάλεσθαι.¹⁴²

On the third [day] Typhōn [was born], neither at the right time nor from the right place, but bursting forth with a blow he leapt through [his mother’s] side.

Although this is a Greek version the story, it is consistent with Egyptian sources. J. Gwyn Griffiths, the editor of the text, comments that this passage “constitutes the most striking of the correspondences with the earliest Egyptian sources.”¹⁴³ He is referring to Utterance 222.205a-b of the *Pyramid Texts*, addressed to Horus of the North:

(4.59) *nšnš(w)~n jwr.t j-spš~n=k grh*
*dd mdw ḥtm=tj m Stš šb(š)b(w) (w3djw) ḥs(w) n (3s).t*¹⁴⁴

“You whom the Pregnant One ejected when you did cleave the night, adorned are you like

¹⁴²Griffiths (1970): §12, p. 136.

¹⁴³Griffiths (1970): 301.

¹⁴⁴From the inscriptions of the Pyramid of Neit. Carrier (2010): 2508.

Seth, who came out forcibly!”¹⁴⁵

Samuel Mercer, in his commentary on the *Pyramid Texts*, states that “The sense of this remark by the priest is clear. The birth of Horus of the North, which clove the womb (night) of his mother is as remarkable as that of Set (now Horus of the South) who nightly broke forth through the side of his mother.”¹⁴⁶

Here, as in the Irish sources, we find an explicit association between side-birth and birth occurring at the wrong time, although in this case no mention is made of whether the birth is early or late. In the Irish stories, birth was delayed in order for it to occur on an auspicious day, and correspondingly, in this story, where side-birth actually does occur, it is on an inauspicious day. It is noted later in the same passage of *De Iside et Osiride* that:

(4.60) διὸ καὶ τὴν τρίτην τῶν ἐπαγομένων ἀποφράδα νομίζοντες οἱ βασιλεῖς οὐκ ἐχρημάτιζον
οὐδ’ ἐθαράπευον αὐτοὺς μέχρι νυκτός

For this reason the third of the epigomenal days [i.e. Seth’s birthday] is customarily held to be inauspicious, [and] the kings do not do business nor do they attend to themselves until night.

We have no further details about the story of Seth’s birth. We know that he was born third in a sequence of five siblings born on consecutive days, but his birth is only described as occurring at the wrong time by Plutarch.

4.4.5 Zurvanist

The side-birth motif also occurs in a passage from the 5th century Armenian writer Eznik of Kolb, in which he describes the Zurvanist creation myth. Eznik writes that Zruan desired a son who would become the creator of the world. He spends one thousand years performing sacrifices so that a son called Ormazd would be born and become the creator. After the thousand years

¹⁴⁵Trans. Mercer (1952) v. ii: 97.

¹⁴⁶Mercer (1952) v. ii: 97.

of sacrifices, Zruan experiences a moment of doubt. In that instant two sons are conceived; Ormazd's conception is the result of the thousand years of sacrificing, while Arhmn's is brought about by Zruan's moment of doubt.

(4.61) *Apa imac'eal Zruanay, asē. erku ordik' en yorovayni and, or ok'i noc'anē vał ar is hasc'ē zna t'agawor araric'. ew canuc'eal Ormazdi zxorhurds hawrn yaytneac' Arhmenin. asē, Zruan hayr mer xorhec'aw t'e or ok'i mēnj vał ar na ert'ic'ē, zna t'agaworec'usc'ē: Ew zayn lueal Arhmenin cakeac' zorovaynn, ew el ekac' aṛaji hawrn: Ew tesimal zna Zruanay, oč' gitac' et'ē o ok' ic'ē, ew harc'anēr et'ē ov? ew du: Ew na asē. es em ordin k'o: Asē c'na Zruan. im ordin anušahot ew lusawor ē, ew du xawarin ew žandahot es: Ew minš' deṛ nok'a zays and mimeans xawsēin, cneal Ormazdi i žamu iwrum lusawor ew anušahot, ekn ekac'aṛaji Zruanay:*

Then Zruan, having understood, says: “There are two sons in the womb. Whichever one comes to me earlier, that one I will make king.” And Ormazd, having understood the thoughts of his father, revealed them to Arhmn. He said: “Zruan, our father, thought that whichever of us gets to him earlier, that one he'll make king.” And Arhmn, having heard that, pierced the womb, and came to be in front of his father. And Zruan having seen him, he did not know who he was. And he asked him “who are you?” And he says “I am your son.” Zruan says to him: “My son is sweet-smelling and brilliant and you are dark and smelly. And while they were saying this to each other, Ormazd, having been born in his own time, brilliant and sweet-smelling, came to stand before his father.¹⁴⁷

We have here a prophecy that the first-born of a set of twins will become king. The twins discuss this, and Arhmn, the one who should have been born second, pierces his mother's side in order to be born first. Here again we find that side-birth is birth that occurs at the wrong time, and in this case we do have it specified as too early. In this story, as in the stories about Conchobar

¹⁴⁷Eznik of Kolb, II.1. I am grateful to Jessica DeLisi for bringing this text to my attention and for providing me with a transliteration and translation. For a full translation of the text see Blanchard and Young (1998), where this passage is located at §145.

and Fiacha Muillethan, kingship is dependent on the timing of the birth. Arhmn attempts to usurp his brother's kingship, and so side-birth is an indicator of his bad character. Given the use of side-birth here to allow a "younger" sibling to be born first and usurp his brother's power, it is worth considering the significance of the birth of Seth taking place through his mother's side, since he too is one of many children born in close succession. Although he does not precede his brother Osiris out of the womb, he does later usurp his power.

Arhmn's father does not even recognize him when he sees him, and describes him as "dark and smelly." Consequently, the manner of Arhmn's birth must be understood as an indicator of his wrongness. A strong contrast is made between Arhmn and his twin Ormazd, who is born in his own time, and therefore at the correct time, and who is immediately recognized by his father as the son who should have been born first and consequently become king.

Zruan will not allow his plans for Ormazd to be interrupted, however, and so he creates a new destiny to restore Ormazd to his correct position of supremacy.

(4.62) *Ew Zruann aṛ i č'jreloy zuxtn asē c'Arhmnn. ay sut ew č'aragorc, tueal lic'i k'ez*

t'agaworut'iwnn inn hazar ami, ew zOrmizdn i veray k'o ark'ay kac'uc'ea. ew yet inn hazar ami Ormizd t'agaworesc'ē, ew zinč' kamic'i aṛnel arasc'ē.

And Zruan in not renegeing on his oath says to Arhmn: "Oh false and evildoer! I will give you the kingship for 9000 years, and I will set Ormazd as lord above you. And after 9000 years Ormazd will become king, and whatever he wishes to do he will do."

In this way Zruan is able to rectify the imbalance caused by Arhmn's early side-birth, and set the creation of the world back on its correct path.

This story presents a number of familiar features. We have a childless parent who takes deliberate action in order to produce a son, as in the cases of Conchobar, Conall Cernach, and Māndhātār. We have also a prophecy that establishes a destiny of kingship to one born at the correct time. Finally, we find side-birth again presented as birth which occurs too early, in contrast with a natural birth that occurs at the correct time.

4.4.6 Algonquin

A striking analog to the story of the birth of Ormazd and Arhmn is attested in an Algonquin story from New Brunswick, Canada. A retelling of the story is printed in Charles Leland's 1884 *The Algonquin Legends of New England*. Leland's informant for the story was Gabe Aquin, a Maliseet from the St. Mary's community of New Brunswick. His story is preserved in a letter from Edward Jack, "an experienced New Brunswick civil engineer and self-styled 'woods cruiser'," ¹⁴⁸ to Leland, dated March 18, 1884. Parkhill (1991) reproduces the relevant portion of that letter. I have inserted punctuation.

(4.63) Glooscap & his brother [Malsum] were twins. They talked to one and [sic] other before they were born. The youngest said to the oldest they must be born right away, they must get out into this world. The oldest said we must wait. He could not stop him. The other however, he must get into the world. So he went out of his mother's side, this killed the mother.¹⁴⁹

As in the Zurvanist story, we have twins who discuss the manner of their birth before it occurs. The older wants to wait and be born in the correct way, while the younger refuses to wait and exits through his mother's side, which kills her. Also, as in the Zurvanist story, side-birth allows the second twin to enter the world first, and again with negative repercussions to the family structure: in one case rejection by the father and in the other the death of the mother. The Algonquin story differs markedly from other uses of this motif that we have seen, however. Here there is no association with kingship or any other sort of destiny dependent on the timing or order of the birth. The death of the mother as a result of this type of birth is also unknown elsewhere. The motif of side-birth here seem to function exclusively as a sign of Malsum's destructive nature.

¹⁴⁸Parkhill (1992): 49.

¹⁴⁹Parkhill (1992): 54.

4.5 The Birth of Herakles

In the stories examined thus far, it is clear that side-birth consistently appears in conjunction with certain other motifs. This would indicate that these motifs form a specific subgroup of the full set of motifs available for marking the birth of the hero as extraordinary. As with the stages of the “Type A” heroic biography pattern, not all the motifs of the group will appear in a single story. The birth of Herakles, although it does not contain the side-birth motif, nonetheless presents a number of striking parallels both to the Irish sources and to other stories discussed in the preceding sections. Two sources will be examined in the discussion of Herakles’ conception and birth: Diodorus Siculus’ *Library of History* IV.9-10¹⁵⁰ and *Iliad* 19.95-133.¹⁵¹

As in the *Compert 1* account of Conchobar’s conception and gestation and the *Compert 2* account of his birth, time plays a pivotal role in Herakles’ conception, gestation and birth. As in my discussion of the Irish birth stories, I will structure my discussion of Herakles’ birth according to the three stages of conception, gestation, and birth.

4.5.1 Conception

Herakles’ conception is described only by Diodorus Siculus:

(4.64) τὸν γὰρ Δία μισγόμενον Ἀλκμήνην τριπλασίαν τὴν νύκτα ποιῆσαι, καὶ τῷ πλήθει τοῦ πρὸς τὴν παιδοποιίαν ἀναλωθέντος χρόνου προσημῆναι τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς τοῦ γεννηθησομένου ῥώμης.¹⁵²

For when Zeus had intercourse with Alkmēnē, he made the night triple, and by the time spent in procreating he foretold the superiority of the strength of the begotten child.

¹⁵⁰Ed. Oldfather (1935).

¹⁵¹Ed. West (2000).

¹⁵²DS 4.9.2-3.

Olga Merck Davidson, in her article “Indo-European Dimensions of Herakles in *Iliad* 19.95-133,” interprets this as a sign of Herakles’ abnormality: “he has overweening strength from birth: it took Zeus three nights to impregnate Alkmēnē ... so that Herakles can be born with a ὑπερβολή [hyperbole] of strength.”¹⁵³ This prolongation of the period of conception is comparable especially to the conception of Ormazd through Zruan’s thousand years of sacrifices in the Zurvanist story.¹⁵⁴

The way in which the accounts of Herakles’ birth deal with his paternity is also significant. As in the *Compert 2* tradition that Fachtna Fathach is Conchobar’s father, Herakles is the result of an adulterous union between Zeus and Alkmēnē. Diodorus differentiates Zeus’ seduction of Alkmēnē from the god’s usual *modus operandi*, stating that:

(4.65) καθόλου δὲ τὴν ὁμιλίαν ταύτην οὐκ ἐρωτικῆς ἐπιθυμίας ἔνεκα ποιήσασθαι, καθάπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων γυναικῶν, ἀλλὰ τὸ πλεον τῆς παιδοποιίας χάριν. διὸ καὶ βουλόμενον τὴν ἐπιπλοκὴν νόμιμον ποιήσασθαι βιάσασθαι μὲν μὴ βουληθῆναι, πείσαι δ’ οὐδαμῶς ἐλπίζειν διὰ τὴν σωφροσύνην· τὴν ἀπάτην οὖν προκρίναντα διὰ ταύτης παρακρούσασθαι τὴν Ἀλκμήνην, Ἀμφιτρώωνι κατὰ πᾶν ὁμοιωθέντα.¹⁵⁵

In fact, he did not bring about this intercourse out of a desire for love, as he did with other women, but for the purpose of procreating. Therefore, wanting to make the intercourse legitimate, and not wishing to force her, and in no way hoping to persuade her because of her integrity, he chose deception. He deceived Alkmēnē by becoming entirely like Amphitryōn [her husband].

Much like Ness in *Compert 1*, Conall Cernach’s mother, the Buddha, Yuvanāśva, and Zruan in the Zurvanist creation myth, Zeus’ intent here is to create a specific child for a specific purpose. Zeus

¹⁵³Davidson (1980): 198.

¹⁵⁴Consider also the conception of Sinfjotli, as discussed in chapter two, which takes place after Signy spends three nights sleeping with her brother Sigmund and imbues Sinfjotli with the full strength of the Volsung family line.

¹⁵⁵DS 4.9.3.

ensures the success and *legitimacy* of the conception by taking the form of Alkmēnē’s husband and by altering time so that he is able to ensure sufficient strength in the child being conceived.

4.5.2 Gestation

Once the usual period of gestation has passed and the time comes for Alkmēnē to bear her child, Zeus makes the familiar prophecy that the child born on that day will be king, fully expecting that Herakles will be the one to fulfill the prophecy. Diodorus Siculus presents the prophecy as follows:¹⁵⁶

(4.66) Διελθόντος δὲ τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν χρόνου ταῖς ἐγκύοις, τὸν μὲν Δία πρὸς τὴν Ἡρακλέους γένεσιν ἐνεχθέντα τῇ διανοίᾳ προειπεῖν παρόντων ἀπάντων τῶν θεῶν ὅτι τὸν κατ’ ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν Περσειδῶν γεννώμενον ποιήσει βασιλέα.¹⁵⁷

Once the time required for producing offspring had passed, then Zeus, bearing in mind the birth of Herakles, foretold in the presence of all of the gods that he would make the person being born that day king of the descendants of Perseus.

While Zeus certainly intends for this prophecy to apply to Herakles, his formulation is insufficiently specific, and thus it is possible for his intent to be subverted.

Like the prophecies found in the stories about the births of Conchobar, Fiacha Muillethan, Áed mac Bricc, Ormazd and Arhmn, and Māndhātār, this prophecy concerns a set of circumstances designed to produce a remarkable child. By leaving the prophecy open rather than targeting a specific child, these stories allow the possibility of usurpation, confusion, and struggle for the hero. Because of this lack of specificity, Hera is able to manipulate circumstances to her own advantage. In fact, in the *Iliad*, the story of Herakles’ birth is set up as an example of Zeus’

¹⁵⁶The corresponding passage from Il. 19.103-5 reads: σήμερον ἄνδρα φώσδε μογροστόκος Εἰλείθυια / ἐκφανεῖ, ὃς πάντεσσι περικτιόνεσσιν ἀνάξει, / τῶν ἀνδρῶν γενεῆς, οἳ θ’ αἵματος ἐξ ἐμοῦ εἰσιν. “Today Eleithyia will bring to the light of day a man who will rule all those who dwell around here, a man of the race of men who are of my own blood.”

¹⁵⁷DS 4.9.4.

fallibility.¹⁵⁸ As in the other cases, the prophecy leads to a delay of the birth. Here, however, the action is taken by Hera rather than Alkmēnē, and it is done in order to prevent the child from fulfilling the prophecy rather than to ensure that he does. Manipulating the birth to avoid fulfilling the prophecy rather than in order to fulfill it is in keeping with the “Type A” pattern, in which prophecies lead to negative or destructive actions against the hero.

The prophecy nonetheless must be fulfilled, as it is aimed at any child born on that day, and so in addition to lengthening the period of Herakles’ gestation, Hera also causes that of another child to be shortened. Diodorus Siculus describes Hera’s actions as follows:¹⁵⁹

(4.67) τὴν δ’ Ἥραν ζήλοτυποῦσαν καὶ συνεργὸν ἔχουσαν Εἰλείθυιαν τὴν θυγατέρα, τῆς μὲν Ἀλκμήνης παρακατασχεῖν τὰς ὠδῖνας, τὸν δ’ Εὐρυσθέα πρὸ τοῦ καθήκοντος χρόνου πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀγαγεῖν.¹⁶⁰

Hera, being jealous and working with her daughter Eileithyia, held back Alkmēnē’s labour pangs and brought Eurystheus to light ahead of his proper time.

Herakles then has both a prolonged conception, like Ormazd, and a prolonged gestation, like Conchobar and Indra, effected through a delay in his mother’s labour. These heroes are each marked by the extra time required for them to reach their full strength before being born, and their conceptions and births again illustrate the ability of participants internal to the narrative to take conscious control over aspects of reproduction in order to control a child’s destiny.

¹⁵⁸Il. 19.96-8: ἀλλ’ ἄρα καὶ τὸν / Ἥρη θῆλυς ἐοῦσα δολοφροσύνης ἀπάτησεν / ἥματι τῷ. “But Hera deceived even him, although she was a woman, on that day with her craftiness.”

¹⁵⁹The corresponding passage from Il. 19.114-9 runs: Ἥρη δ’ ἀΐξασα λίπε ρίον Οὐλύμποιο, / καρπαλίμως δ’ ἵκετ’ Ἄργος Ἀχαιϊκόν, ἐνθ’ ἄρα εἶδη / ἰφθίμην ἄλοχον Σθενέλου Περσηϊάδαο· / ἢ δ’ ἐκύει φίλον υἱόν, ὃ δ’ ἔβδομος ἐστήκει μείς, / ἐκ δ’ ἄγαγε πρὸ φώσδε καὶ ἠλιτόμηνον ἐόντα, / Ἀλκμήνης δ’ ἀπέπαυσε τόκον, σχέθε δ’ Εἰλειθυίας. “Hera, darting, left the peak of Olympus and swiftly came to Achaean Argos. There, she knew, was the strong wife of Sthenelus, son of Peleus. She was pregnant with her own son. The seventh month had come, and she brought him forth to the light of day, and him missing the right month. And Hera stopped the childbirth of Alkmēnē, and held back Eileithyia.”

¹⁶⁰DS 4.9.4.

4.5.3 Birth

Although Herakles' intended destiny has been stolen from him by Hera, Zeus offers another, greater destiny that will lead him to immortality. Diodorus tells us that:

(4.68) τὸν δὲ Δία καταστρατηγηθέντα βουλευθῆναι τὴν τε ὑπόσχεσιν βεβαιῶσαι καὶ τῆς Ἡρακλέους ἐπιφανείας προνοηθῆναι· διό φασι αὐτὸν τὴν μὲν Ἥραν πείσαι συγχωρῆσαι βασιλέα μὲν ὑπάρξει κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν ὑπόσχεσιν Εὐρυσθέα, τὸν δ' Ἡρακλέα τεταγμένον ὑπὸ τὸν Εὐρυσθέα τελέσαι δώδεκα ἄθλους οὓς ἂν ὁ Εὐρυσθεὺς προστάξῃ, καὶ τοῦτο πράξαντα τυχεῖν τῆς ἀθανασίας.¹⁶¹

Zeus, having been outgeneralled, wished to make good his promise and provide for the fame of Herakles. Therefore, they say, he persuaded Hera to agree that Eurystheus should be king first, as he had promised, and Herakles would be placed below him and perform twelve labours as set by Eurystheus. After having passed through these, he would gain immortality.

We have here a close parallel for the Zurvanist creation story. Like the destiny that Zruan intended for Ormazd, Zeus' plans for Herakles are disrupted because of a deliberate reversal of the natural order of birth. Eurystheus is born first and early, and so usurps Herakles' position and future. However, unlike Ormazd who was born at the correct time, Herakles is in fact born late. This leads to Herakles' being what Gregory Nagy describes as an "unseasonal hero," marked by the disequilibrium of his birth and forced to attempt to gain the "equilibrium of immortality" through his labours.¹⁶² Neither Zruan nor Zeus can allow his will to be entirely thwarted, however, and so both provide alternate avenues for Ormazd and Herakles to fulfill their appointed destinies. Ormazd, as we have seen, is set over Arhmn during the latter's 9000-year reign, and takes the kingship himself at the end of that time. Zeus offers Herakles an even greater destiny

¹⁶¹DS 4.9.5.

¹⁶²Nagy (2006): §106.

than what he had originally intended for him, and Herakles gains the opportunity to become immortal.

A further point of correspondence with the “Type B” pattern is the presence of serpents. Hera, in her desire to harm Herakles, sends serpents to kill him when he is still a baby. Diodorus describes the incident as follows:

(4.69) Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἡ μὲν Ἥρα δύο δράκοντας ἀπέστειλε τοὺς ἀναλώσοντας τὸ βρέφος, ὁ δὲ παῖς οὐ καταπλαγεῖς ἑκατέρῳ τῶν χειρῶν τὸν ἀύχένα σφίγγας ἀπέπνιξε τοὺς δράκοντας.¹⁶³

Then Hera sent two serpents to kill the baby, and the child, not scared, squeezed the necks of each of them in his hands and choked the serpents.

Here we have the image of the baby holding a serpent in each of his hands, identical to that of Conchobar born holding a worm in each of his hands, and also to the boy born with Saint Lasair’s help. Diodorus’ description of the event makes it clear that Herakles is able to harness and control the potentially destructive force of the serpents. In the account of Conchobar’s birth, there is no hint that the worms had any potential to harm him, but when other uses of this motif in the Irish tradition are considered, we find that the harmless nature of the worms in Conchobar’s case is quite unusual. In this context, we can see that like Herakles, Conchobar is in fact harnessing a potentially destructive force when he is born holding the two worms in his hands and is entirely unharmed by them.

It seems then that although the birth of Herakles does not contain the side-birth motif, in most other ways it follows the same pattern evident in the other stories examined thus far. The importance of timing is emphasized by the prolonged conception, which occurs for a particular purpose, and also by the length of the gestation period, which is unnaturally and deliberately prolonged. A prophecy linking the timing of the birth with the future kingship of the child is given, and this leads to Herakles’ birth being delayed and his destiny being usurped by one who

¹⁶³DS 4.10.1.

is born early. All of this is consistent with the details of the “Type B.” We also have the episodes of mastering serpents or serpent-like creatures by Conchobar and Herakles, which can further be connected to Indra’s slaying of Vṛtra.

4.6 Conclusion

A study of the side-birth motif from a cross-cultural perspective demonstrates that the function of this motif is remarkably consistent in almost all cases as an indicator of untimely birth, and specifically early birth. Moreover, this motif carries with it the potential to undermine the correct and natural sequence of events in a hero’s life. The side-birth motif does not function in isolation, however, but rather in concert with a particular set of motifs which frequently accompany it. In light of the narrative materials that I have examined in this chapter, I propose a “Type B” of the heroic biography pattern consisting of the following elements:

- i. Planned conception for a specific purpose.
- ii. Prolonged conception and gestation.
- iii. Prophecy linking the timing of birth (or conception) with a particular destiny.
- iv. Temporal distortions aimed at fulfilling or circumventing that prophecy, primarily through delaying birth.
- v. Side-birth as a negative identifier and mechanism for manipulating the timing of birth, the conditions of the prophecy, and the order of birth.
- vi. The role of rivers, stones, and serpents or serpentine creatures offering obstacles to birth and dangers to the hero, and also functioning as identifiers of miraculous birth.

The “B” pattern contrasts from the standard or “A” formulation of the heroic biography pattern in a number of vital ways. Whereas the birth of the hero of the “A” pattern is undesirable and warned against, the hero of the “B” pattern is deliberately created, and the circumstances of his conception and birth are orchestrated to generate a specific outcome. In the “B” pattern, prophecy functions not to warn against a certain child, but instead as instructions to produce a certain

child. Threats to the child in the “B” pattern do not come from male family members reacting to a perceived threat, as in the “A” pattern, but instead are the results of the process of birth itself. The gestation period and the birth itself in particular are complex and extraordinary in ways that endanger the life of the child, and is frequently a direct result of the actions required to fulfill prophecy. Much of the action of the “B” type narrative in fact centers around attempts to fulfill prophecy, rather than attempts to thwart prophecy, as is typical of the “A” type. The “A” and “B” subtypes of the pattern do not exist in isolation, but rather interact with one another, and many stories show features of both patterns. The story of Conall Cernach’s birth, for example, describes how his mother deliberately conceives him through supernatural means, but also features three prophecies warning of his destructiveness towards her kin, and includes an attempt on Conall’s life immediately after his birth by his uncle Cet mac Mágach. Both the “A” and “B” pattern, however, are manifestations of a more general narrative pattern consisting of an extraordinary birth involving a threat to the child and the child overcoming that threat as an early indicator of his special nature.

5 CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters I have presented a study of specific types of birth tales, focusing on the ways in which the liminal or ambiguous nature of the hero is determined by his conception, how the birth process itself can function as the first test of the hero, and how events can be manipulated in order to create an extraordinary child. These stories fit into a larger body of birth tales, a genre known worldwide, and the consistency of structure and content in these stories suggests an overriding pattern and purpose behind the genre. These stories offer explanations for the superhuman or non-human nature of heroes, as well as monsters, and explore the ways in which abnormality and wrongness can distort various aspects of the birth process to create extraordinary beings. The narrative structure of all such stories is informed and determined by the natural progression of childbirth and the processes involved in reproduction, and so it is perhaps understandable that the basic pattern of these stories is universal. Nevertheless, unique and distinct structures are discernible in the uses and combinations of particular themes and motifs.

The heroic biography pattern has been the main point of departure for this examination of birth stories, and has provided a general framework in which to study the narrative structure of the birth stories themselves. We have seen that the birth tales show a high degree of flexibility in terms of how different features of the underlying structure are represented within a particular narrative. For example, an unusual conception is often the most expedient way of producing an unusual individual, but there is a great range of possible ways for the conception to be marked as unusual. The specific ways in which motifs and themes are combined within the narratives creates multiple sub-types of the more general pattern, which in turn establish specific types of heroes and sets of problems for those heroes to navigate throughout their lives.

In this way, the birth narrative has a strong influence on the rest of the biography of a particular hero. Otto Rank views the birth as creating the primary conflict of the hero's life, and

states that “The rest of the hero’s fate is nothing but the working out of this situation, namely, the reaction to a specially severe birth trauma, which has to be mastered by over-compensatory achievement.”¹ We have seen how the birth stories of Deirdre and Conchobar provide them with a particular set of challenges and attributes that strongly influence their later actions.

Deirdre’s disruptive nature is signaled by her pre-natal scream, and her attempts to escape destiny lead her through her own “heroic” biography and bring about the very destruction prophesied before her birth. She takes strong action to remove herself from the situation, and thus allows the possibility that the prophecy may remain unfulfilled, but Conchobar draws her back, strips away the other life that she had built for herself, and forces her back into the destiny that he had determined for her, thus bringing about the destruction that had been prophesied. He does not do this himself directly, but manipulates his people into carrying out his plan for him. He uses Fergus mac Roich to lure Deirdre and the sons of Uisliu back to Emain Macha, a betrayal which leads Fergus to leave Ulster, and it is Eogan mac Durthacht, and not Conchobar, who kills Noísiu.

The inability or refusal to take direct action in this instance is characteristic of Conchobar, who also refused to take steps to protect his people from Deirdre’s destructive presence by killing her as an infant or sending her into permanent exile. Rather, he elected to keep her close by and wait, effectively trapping her in a sort of containment or stasis similar to the periods of containment and stasis that characterize Conchobar’s own life. These begin with his prolonged containment in his mother’s womb before his birth and culminate in the seven years that he spends before his death, immobilized by having Mesgegra’s brain lodged in his skull, as discussed in section 4.2.4.3.

In these two cases, we see clearly the influence of the birth narrative on the whole of the biography, and in Deirdre’s case in particular we see that in broadening our understanding of the “hero” as the subject of the heroic biography we can greatly increase our understanding of the flexibility and multi-functionality of the pattern itself. Just as the birth story shows a

¹Rank (1952): 106.

variety of sub-types, so too does the heroic biography pattern. In chapter four, I argued for a sub-type in which the birth of the hero is deliberately orchestrated, rather than warned against and feared. While the heroic biography as formulated by von Hahn, Rank, Raglan, and others is known worldwide, some of the sub-types may prove to be more culturally specific, and may be of Indo-European heritage.

Myths cannot be interpreted in isolation. Their meaning can only be understood within the context of the mythological or narrative network in which they participate. Any arguments for the reconstruction of any narrative or narrative feature for Proto-Indo-European must rest not on the presence of individual themes or motifs, as most are found universally, or even on full stories, but rather on specific, or even unique, combinations of particular themes, motifs, and networks of narratives. Where possible, comparison must take place not only at the formal level, but also at the functional level, and a reconstruction that takes into account the meaning that particular motifs or motif bundles carry is stronger than one that considers only the superficial similarities between stories. As Lévi-Strauss has argued: “If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined.”²

Given the universality of birth narratives showing the general structure and many of the features examined in the preceding chapters, it is inconceivable that such stories would not also have been part of the Proto-Indo-European mythological and narrative system. With that said, however, arguing that any of the stories attested in the various Indo-European corpora are directly inherited from the proto-culture is an entirely different claim. Given the tendency of stories to travel by means of borrowing and cultural influence, to be reshaped and reinvented based on any number of external factors, and to diverge and converge, it is impossible to trace a direct line of descent without extensive textual documentation. While it is unlikely that it will ever be possible to reconstruct a Proto-Indo-European story as such, this study identifies aspects of the

²Lévi-Strauss (1955): 431.

Proto-Indo-European story-teller's repertoire and provides insight into the rules that govern the structuring of stories about the births of important mythological and cultural figures.

APPENDIX: FORMULATIONS OF THE HEROIC BIOGRAPHY

PATTERN AND BIRTH-TALES

1. Features of Celtic Birth-Tales according to Alwyn and Brinley Rees³

1. The advent and future greatness of the hero have been foretold.
2. His advent is destined to bring death or misfortune to a presiding power, his grandfather, his uncle, or his own mother.
3. Certain difficulties have to be overcome before his future mother can fulfill her destiny:
 - (a) She is closely guarded or confined in a fortress. Or,
 - (b) She has to be induced to leave home. Or,
 - (c) Her own resistance has to be overcome by force or by cunning. Or,
 - (d) She is married, but barren.
4. There is a mystery about the hero's begetting:
 - (a) Whether he has an earthly father or not, he is usually begotten by another – a king, a man from another race, or a supernatural being.
 - (b) Others say he is born of incest.
 - (c) Others again attribute his conception to a creature swallowed by his mother in water.
5. There is an auspicious time for his birth, which is heralded by signs in the natural world; his birth is delayed until the appropriate time.
6. Certain animals are also associated with his birth and upbringing.
7. He is lost at birth, or an attempt is made to kill him; he is thrown into the sea or borne away in a boat.
8. At birth and in his youth he displays qualities that reveal his extra-ordinary nature.

³Rees and Rees (1961): 223-4.

9. Difficulty is sometimes experienced in securing a name for him, or he is given a name in peculiar circumstances.

2. The Structure of Irish Birth-Tales (Pagé 2012).⁴

1. The encounter of the parents.
2. Prophecy.
3. Imbalances or obstacles in the relationship between the parents.
4. Deliberate conception.
5. Unremarkable conception.
6. Remarkable conception.
7. Threat to the child.
8. The death of one or both parents.
9. Remarkable gestation.
10. Damage to the child.
11. Special timing of the birth.
12. Unusual events accompanying the birth.
13. The naming of the child is significant.
14. The child is precocious.
15. The child is exiled or otherwise separated from his point of origin.

3. The Heroic Biography Pattern according to J. G. von Hahn and Alfred Nutt⁵

1. Hero born out of wedlock, *or posthumously, or supernaturally*.
2. Mother, princess residing in her own country.
3. Father, god or hero from afar.
4. Tokens and warnings of hero's future greatness.
5. He is in consequence driven from home.

⁴Pagé (2012): 18-30.

⁵Nutt (1881): 1-2.

6. He is suckled by wild beasts.
7. Is brought up by a childless (shepherd) couple, *or by a widow*.
8. Is of a passionate and violent disposition.
9. Seeks service in foreign lands.
 - 9a. *He attacks and slays monsters.*
 - 9b. *He acquires supernatural knowledge through eating a magic fish.*
10. He returns to his own country, retreats, *and again returns*.
11. Overcomes his enemies, frees his mother, and seats himself on the throne.
12. He founds cities.
13. The manner of his death is extraordinary.
14. He is accused of incest; he dies young.
15. He injures an inferior, who takes revenge upon him or upon his children.
16. He slays his younger brother.

4. The Heroic Biography Pattern according to Otto Rank⁶

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or an oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors.

⁶Segal (1990): 57.

5. The Heroic Biography Pattern according to Lord Raglan⁷

1. The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
2. His father is a king, and
3. Often a near relative of his mother, but
4. The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
5. He is also reputed to be the son of a god,
6. At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him,
but
7. he is spirited away, and
8. Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
9. We are told nothing of his childhood, but
10. On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
11. After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
12. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
13. Becomes king.
14. For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
15. Prescribes laws, but
16. Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and
17. Is driven from the throne and city, after which
18. He meets with a mysterious death,
19. Often at the top of a hill.
20. His children, if any, do not succeed him.
21. His body is not buried, but nevertheless
22. He has one or more holy sepulchres.

⁷Segal (1990): 138.

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