

THE STONE NOVEL OF ÉIRE

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1. Introduction: Myths, stones and stars¹

Stones and stars are the closest to eternity and the most silent keepers of myths. Myth is a vaccination of eternity to a human being in our changing world.

Myths contain language of a given cultural tradition, together with some scraps of the descriptions of ritual. The stars (or, to be precise, the distinct heavenly bodies, e.g. the sun, the moon, the constellation of Orion, the Pole star etc.) are the elements that have direct connection with the calendar of preliterate traditions and with the prehistoric concept of time which, following K. Jaspers (1949: 53), can be taken as cyclical. Being an intrinsic part of this prehistoric concept of time, the heavenly bodies have a connection with life and death, fertility and harvest. They often figure in myths and turn orientation of the stones to themselves. Furthermore, the stones can keep the traces of the artistic, literary and practical-sacred (ritual-arranging) activity of the perhaps hundreds of generations that inhabited the territories where the stones can be found. In the words of Y. M. Lotman (2000: 367),

A society, which is built upon custom and collective experience, must inevitably have a mighty structure of prognosis. This necessarily stimulates observation of nature, especially of the heavenly bodies, and the associated theoretical cognition. Various forms of descriptive geometry (an ornament, a cross, a circle, a star) can be fully combined with the non-written character of culture as such, having as an addition oral poetry of a calendrical-astronomical nature (my trans.).

In what follows, we shall attempt to define the place of the megalithic stone structures in the outlook of the early Irish culture. We shall include some archaic Irish linguistic elements and look at relevant myths that have survived in various early Irish sources, and, in particular, in the compilation known as *The Metrical Dindshenchas* (hereinafter *MD*). In our contribution, we shall confine ourselves to defining such notions as ‘water’, ‘fertility’, ‘the Otherworld’ that are commonly

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associated with the megalithic stone structures in early Irish mythology and in Irish folklore beliefs and customs.

2. Water

All the stone structures that have any sort of connection with the stars – the dolmens and the *Bruig na Bóinde* complex which includes New Grange (*Síd in Brogo*), Knowth (*Cnogba*) and Dowth (*Dubad*) have immediate proximity to water, whether above or below the ground; and water is also a feature in the myths associated with some of them. The three mounds of New Grange, Knowth and Dowth are situated in the valley of the rivers Boyne and Mattock and by virtue of their location are surrounded with water (fig. 1).

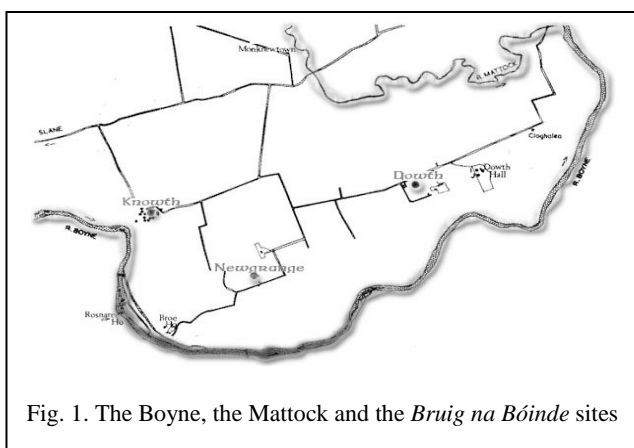


Fig. 1. The Boyne, the Mattock and the *Bruig na Bóinde* sites

Inside every one of the three mounds, archaeologists have found stone basins that could have contained water (Mac Uistin 2007: 46; see also Borlase 1897: 351, referring to the first published notice of December 1699 visit to New Grange).

However, it is only in the myth about New Grange that the link with water is explicitly contained. The myth connected with the origin of the mound and the river informs us of a sacred well that was inside a *síd*-mound. Alternatively, there is a legend about the confluence of two springs of important status:

*Nó Bóand bó ocus find
Do chomrac in dá ríg-lind
In t-usce a sléib Guaire glé
Ocus sruth na síde-se. S.*

Or, Boand is *Bo* and *Find*
from the meeting of the two royal streams,
the water from bright Sliab Guaire
and the river of the Sids here.
(MD III: 32-33, *Boand I*, lines 77-80).

Due to Boand's illicit behaviour, the sacred spring bursts out to become a sacred river that bears her name. Another version of the origin-legend of the river Boyne speaks of "a secret well" that was situated inside the *síd*-mound:

*Topur diamair bóí 'na dún
assa maided cech mí-rún.
Ní fhail nodécced dia lár
nach maided a dá rosc rán.*

A secret well there was in his stead,
from which gushed forth every kind of mysterious evil.
There was none that would look to its bottom:
but his two bright eyes would burst (MD III: 28-29, *Boand I*, lines 43-46).

The river originating from the spring encircles the whole world, changing its name fifteen times in different locations; having reached Paradise, it returns to the *síd*.² It is most likely that the message of the composition relates to the unification of multiple fresh waters into a uniform water goddess and the identification of the river Boand with "some kind of universal river" (Carey, p.c.).

The concept of water is also very strongly connected with the dolmens. It has been suggested that the dolmens can provoke 'a dowsing effect' – a geological phenomenon of the underground waters attracted to the heavy boulders (Feeley 2000: 9). If one can presume that prehistoric peoples were aware of such effect, in this case the dolmens presented the structures that caused manifestation of water. They could also have been constructed deliberately near the underwater courses flowing beneath.

The sitting of portal-tombs has a tendency to cling to river valleys, often at an altitude of between 100 m, and almost half of the examples known are located within about 5 miles of the coast (Harbinson 1994: 54).

Scholars who have studied dolmens situated in the Western Caucasian area reached similar results:

Our research indicated that dolmens are situated near water springs. In the vicinity, at a distance of between five and fifty meters there is also a river, a stream, a spring. Even if the dolmen is situated on the slope or the top of a mountain, there is always a spring near it, which can sometimes be an underground one. The water is symbolized by a zigzag ornament found on various dolmens (Kudin n.d., my trans.).

² See more discussion of the episode in Mac Mathúna (2010) who postulates its connection with the notions of sacred milk and water mythology of the early Irish.

3. Fertility

In practical Irish folk medicine the dolmens were used as a cure for childlessness: the person either had to spend a night or to initiate a conception beneath the dolmen.



Fig. 2. Dolmen, Málainn Mhóir, Co. Donegal, Ireland

In the western half of Ireland especially, dolmens were once highly valued among women wishing to have a child. In order to facilitate conception, they would have slept on the capstones of the monuments (Zucchelli 2007:128).

In the legends of the Ossianic cycle and in the Modern Irish language and folklore, the dolmens are identified as “the beds of Diarmuid and Gráinne” – the overnight retreat for a pair of lovers who were trying to escape the wrath of Finn, the leader of the *fianna* and the prospective groom of Gráinne (Ó hÓgáin 1990: 161-3).

A similar attitude to dolmens as the points of fertility and conception is attested among the people of Adygeya of the North Caucasus, Russia (see fig. 3, note the zigzag ornament on the both sides of the monument symbolising water).

Scholars who have studied these monuments consider that the dolmens in the traditions in question can be interpreted within the framework of the ancient ritual cluster “cave-womb-fertility”.

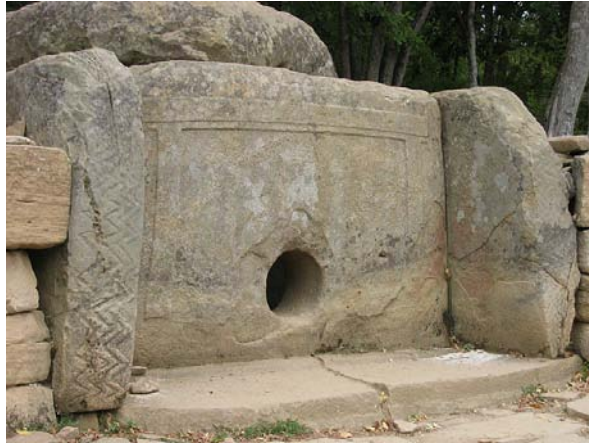


Fig. 3. Central dolmen of the river Zhane complex, Gelendjik, Russia

The dolmen symbolised the World Mountain that encapsulated in her womb a dead person so that the deceased is born again. The fertile substance of the mountain is well-known. She is addressed with the requests for future progeny, and ritual actions to treat barrenness are carried out inside it. Women try to crawl through the hole in the stone, rub themselves at menhirs, drink water from the holes near the dolmens.

The dolmen reproduces the womb of the sacred Mountain – the archaic female first ancestor who is a great parent of all beings, on whom all the life and death of every living being depend. The embodiment and formation of this common idea was different in various parts of the megalithic universe, but everywhere the cult of the World Mountain was connected with the cult of fertility and of reproduction (Kyzlasov 1993: 112, my trans.).

In general, dolmens are wide-spread in Western Europe (Ireland, Great Britain, Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy), in Armenia, in Russia (along the Black Sea coast and in the mountains of the Western Caucasus, of the Altai region and in the vicinity of Ryazan as well as in the south of the Chelyabinsk region). They can also be found in Northern Africa (e.g. at Rocknia, a prehistoric necropolis situated in the region of Gelm in the North-East of Algeria) and in Asia (e.g. South Korea, Mongolia).

4. Analysis of the Boyne valley complex mythological motifs

In this part of our contribution, we shall compare the legends on the origin of the three mounds in question. We shall set the symbols and topics contained in the stories about each of them side by side with each other, pointing out the motif of fertility as the central one:

New Grange Boand, Nechtain's wife, walks around his sacred well (located inside New Grange) after having had an adulterous inter-course with Dagda and given birth to their son, Oengus. The well over-flows, and drowns Boand:

*Táinic Bóand ann andes
ben Nechtain cosin cairdes
co tech Elcmairi na n-ech
fer dobered mór ndeg-breth.*

Thither from the South came Boand
wife of Nechtain to the love-tryst
to the house of Elcmair, lord of horses
a man that gave many a good judgement.

*Is ann doralá in Dagda
i tig Elcmairi amra:
rogab for guide na mná
rodusasáit re hóen-lá...*

Thither came by chance the Dagda
into the house of famous Elcmair
he fell to importuning the woman:
he brought her to the birth in a single day.

*Luid Bóand ó thig co tric
dús dá tairsed in tiprait:
derb lé docheiled a col
da soised lé a fothrucod...*

Boand went from the house in haste
to see if she could reach the well:
she was sure of hiding her guilt
if she could attain to bathe in it...

*Doruacht Bóand mín
dochum na tiprat iar fír:
ércid tairsi in tobar tenn,
corosbáid hí cen forchenn*

Came gentle Boand
toward the well in sooth:
the strong fountain rose over her
and drowned her finally.

(MD III: 37, *Boand II*,
lines 25-32, 41-4, 52-3)

Knowth Mider has an intercourse and escapes with his lover, Englec, who is the beloved of Oengus and the daughter of Elcmar. Oengus goes in search of the girl, casting nuts on the ground, hence *chnó-guba* 'nut-wailing' is K.'s name:

*Ingen Elcmair ann robái
Ba lendán Mider don mnái...*

Elcmar's daughter lived there:
Mider was the woman's darling...

*Englec ingen Elcmair áin
Lendán Óengussa imláin
Óengus mac in Dagdai dil
Nírbo lendán don ingin.*

Englec, noble Elcmar's daughter,
was the darling of perfect Oengus;
Oengus, son of the loved Dagda,
was not the maiden's darling.

*Dolluid mac in Óc ergna
fodess co Cerainn Cermna
'sin tshamuin teintig thrállai
do chluiche fri comfhíannaib.*

The illustrious Mac in Oc (i.e. Oengus)
came southward to Ceru Cermna
on the blazing hurrying Samhain
to play with his fellow-warriors

*Dolluid Mider, messu de,
rosfarraid daranése*

Midir came – alas the day!
he came upon her after they had gone

*berid Engleic leis ó thig
assin co Síd Fer Fémín.*

he carries off with him Englec from her
home thence to the *síd* of the men of Femen.

*Ó rochúala Óengus án
a lenmain imma lendán,
dothéit dia fochmairc, fír dam,
cosín rochnocc óa rucad.*

When noble Oengus heard
of the pursuit of his darling,
he went in search of her
to the famous hill whence she was borne off.

*Rob é lón a shlúraig, líth nglé,
cnói cró-derga na caille;
léicid a lón de for lár,
feraid guba immon cnocán.*

This was the food of his band – bright feast
blood-red nuts of the wood;
he casts the food from him on the ground;
he makes lamentation around the hillock.

(MD III: 40-43, *Cnogba*,
lines 13, 17-18, 21-36, 39-40)

Dowth Murrain comes upon Bresal's kingdom, hence all the cattle is destroyed, save for seven cows and a bull. In order to restore the kingdom's prosperity, he orders a tower similar to the Nimrod's Tower to be built in one day and one night. To complete the task, his sister helps him using her magic to stop the heavenly bodies from their course. The girl is violated by Bresal, her magic is destroyed and the task is not completed:

*Luidh Bresal na díaidh 7 com-
raicidh fría, conidh ón chul
doronadh and raiter Ferta
Chuile don inadh. Táinic
adhaidh doibh iarsin, ar
romilledh a draighecht mon n-
inghin.*

Bresal followed her and had union with
her: so that place is called Ferta Cuile from
the incest that was committed there. Night
came upon them, for the maiden's magic
was spoilt.

(MD IV: 272-3, *Dubad*)

All in all, these legends tell us about women located in/near the Otherworld (the *síd*). Clearly, there is a good deal of further overlap in symbolism among the three legends. All of the three speak about some form of sinful sexual behaviour. In the first legend, the myth not only speaks of the drowning of Boand, but alludes to the conception and birth of the most beautiful child, Oengus; and the treatment of Boand, though destructive, can yet be taken to be purificative and cleansing. Here, the topic of a sinful conception and subsequent retribution for the sin is probably a result of a Christian re-interpretation of the theme. Symbolically, we have an indirect reference to the theme of fertility, of a womb as its source and of its purification with water. In the second story, nuts that Oengus casts on the ground can be interpreted as symbols of his love (*cf. co cnóib serce Segsa*, 'with love-nuts of Segais', MD III: 131.31, *Rath Cnamrossa*) or else nuts of 'doubt and uneasiness' (*cnói amruis anshádail, ib.*, line 36); presumably, of Oengus who is upset by his lover's adulterous encounter with Mider. In the final legend, Bresal commits incest with his sister and destroys her magic and fails to fulfil his royal task that his people were trying to accomplish.

5. The Otherworld

As we have just pointed out, the three legends in question (directly or indirectly) refer to the underground Otherworld. Moreover, the first and the last legends provide references to the link existing between a female character of a legend and the upper world. In the legend on the origin of Dowth, the king's sister, having raised her hands to the heavens, stood on a hill and made a druidic spell to control the course of the sun, preventing it from setting:

Sínid uaithe a fiur for fecht, doní co dron a drúidecht: nir utmall grían ósa cind; rofasta hí 'sin oen-rind...

His sister stretches forth her hands... strongly she makes her druid spell: the sun was motionless above her head; she checked him on one spot.

(MD III: 44-5, *Cnogba*)

In the legend, the aspiration of the king to reach the heavens (*comadh de nodigsitis dochum nime*, 'that they might go by it to heaven', MD IV: 272-3, *Dubad*) can be interpreted as an allegory that signifies the aspiration to "find out the mysteries of the sky", i.e. to carry out astronomical observations.

In the New Grange legend, as we have already mentioned, Boand is transformed into a world river flowing everywhere, including the Heavens.

It is well-known that as far as New Grange is concerned, the central line of the passage leading to its burial chamber is purposefully aligned at the point of the winter solstice (21 December). In the morning of the day, as well as during the fifteen-day period before and after the solstice, "a pencil-thin ray of sunlight penetrates the chamber for a mere seventeen minutes, from 8.58 to 9.15 am winter time" (Harbinson 1994: 76). In so far as the three mounds of New Grange, Knowth and Dowth were seen as a single sacred complex, it may well be proposed that the *Bruig na Bóinde* complex on the whole was most likely connected with the idea of time observation. Central to this activity was probably the annual observation of the point on the horizon where the sun rises on the shortest day of the year, symbolising the start of a new cosmic cycle. Such deliberate orientation to a point of the rebirth of a cosmic temporal cycle (which probably figured in the outlook of the prehistoric settlers that inhabited Ireland) and their specific location at the energetic fertility nexus – in connection with the underground water courses – may have provoked the creation of myths and legends concerned with fertility. In this regard, the megalithic structures were linked both with the underground and the upper world, i.e. the underground and celestial realms were probably viewed as aspects of a single Otherworld in the pre-literate culture of early Ireland.

6. Conclusion

Our conclusions are indirectly supported by the early Irish linguistic evidence. V. Kalygin (2002: 92) in his work on Celtic cosmology refers to the textual data relating to the correlation of darkness, water and the origin of the universe in the early Irish language:

EIr. *domun* ‘world’ is a regular continuation of the stem **domn-* < **domno-s* < **dubno-* (MW. *dwfn*, Bret. *doun* ‘deep’) and is related to Ir. *domain* ‘deep; riverbed, depth’ < **dubni-* and **dobur-* ‘dark; water’ < **dubro-* (MW *dwfr* ‘water’, *dyffryn* ‘plain’ < **dubro-senton* ‘water course’).

(Kalygin 2002: 92; my trans.)

He also refers to the evidence of Ogam inscriptions, archaic Irish poetry and Welsh sources:

EIr. *Domongein* < **dubno-geno-s*, which is sometimes interpreted as ‘Son of the Earth; Born by the Earth’ (Korolev 1984: 147);

EIr. *Doborgen* < **dubro-geno-s* ‘born by the water’

EIr. *Dommal* < **dubno-walo-s* ‘lord of the world’;

EIr. *Domongart* < **dumno-garto-s* ‘head/beginning of the world’ (**gart* as in vocalic EIr. gloss *gart* .i. *cend*, related to the Welsh *garth* ‘hill, mound’)...

In Welsh, among the derivatives from the stem **dubno-/*dubro*, are represented, besides the aforementioned *dwfn* and *dwfr*, such words as *anoddyn* ‘abyss’ < **anwo-dubno-*, and *Annwfn/Annwfyfyn* ‘the Otherworld’ < ... **ande-dubno* that can be interpreted as either ‘under-lower/dark’ or ‘the very lowest/darkest’.

(Kalygin 2002: 92-3, 96; my trans.)

On the basis of the above linguistic data, we can suppose that the ideas of depth, water, darkness and the source of the universe were productive and life-giving principles in early Irish cosmology and consciousness. These attributes are transferred onto the stone which thus becomes a mediator between the underworld and the upper world.

On the one hand, the stone points at the movements of the stars and other celestial objects; on the other, at the movement of the waters – the underground springs. From this we can infer that the humans of the early times aligned their activity not only with the cosmic energies, but also with those of the inner earth. The central element in this triadic system was the stone itself and the world of humans. The celestial character of the latter should not be taken in the Christian sense, but in the one that established the character and the time of rituals due to the cyclicity of the movement of the heavenly bodies, and thereby regulated the annual cycle of human activity. The sky was the law and yet, was a calendar. The underground was the world that granted fertility. The stone structures absorbed the “upper” and the “lower” attributes of both worlds and were seen as providers of fertility in folk belief.

We have come to the conclusion that the megalithic stones became connected with two positive sources in the pre-literate culture of early Ireland: the dark and wet source of fertility in the Otherworld situated under the ground; and the light and sunny source of the conception of the new life and of the new year in the celestial Otherworld. The stone was the eye and the door of the Otherworld: it was able to generate and return the energies transmitted to it, and was associated with fertility, revival and recovery.³

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Abbreviation

MD – *The Metrical Dindshenchas* (Gwynn 1903-1935)

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³ As well as with justice and law. The analysis of the complex subject of the character and origin of the standing and inaugurating stones that bear connotations of justice and truth requires additional research. Let us briefly note that, for instance, nineteenth-century Irishmen used perforated stones for sealing contract agreements and marriage engagements: "prior to the intervention of the Church, the Bargaining Stone has been a popular meeting place to settle all kinds of contracts from marriage arrangements to the sale of land. The parties would shake hands through the hole to affirm the deal" (Zucchelli 2007: 124).

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