

# Medicine and Mythology: Health and Healing in Indo-European Myths<sup>1</sup>

Carole M. Cusack, University of Sydney

## Introduction

This paper examines myths that deal with issues of sickness and health from the Indo-European cultures of pre-Christian Europe, including the Ancient Greeks, the Vedic Indians, the Celts, and the medieval Scandinavians. The themes explored include: the relationship of physical perfection to moral excellence; mortality and attempts to avoid or reverse death; and the figure of the healer as exponent of both positive and negative powers. It will be demonstrated that the concepts of wellness and illness were located within a complex cosmological and social mythology that is common to all these Indo-European cultures, although there are certain cultural specificities identifiable within particular mythological texts.

## Body and Cosmos: Fundamental Indo-European Concepts

It is important to begin with a basic definition of 'myth', which too often carries the connotation of something that is 'not true' in the modern West. The Greek word *muthos* means story or narrative, and in this context:

myth or a mythology means a narrative or a collection of narratives about the gods or supernatural beings used by a people – clan, tribe or ethnic community - for purposes of interpreting the meaning of their experience and their world, both individually and corporately. What is fundamental in the definition of 'myth', however, and which distinguishes mythical narrative from other kinds of stories, is that myth articulates the basic self-understanding of the people and thereby operates as a kind of charter for the total cultural life.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in Indo-European cultures, the corpus of mythology functioned variously as law, philosophy, educational charter, political manifesto, and a range of other types of authoritative texts, which are understood to be distinct in modernity.

In Indo-European society the highest position was occupied by the priestly class, which theoretically outranked even the king. India had brahmins, the Celts had druids, and the Romans had several colleges of priests. To clarify the religion that these priests served, it can be seen that the reconstructed proto-Indo-European word for god \**deywos* meant 'celestial, luminous, radiant',<sup>3</sup> and located the gods in the sky, associated with the heavenly bodies. The gods are also consistently referred to as 'immortals', in contrast with humans who are defined by their mortality. We should

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald James Larson, 'Introduction,' in Gerald James Larson, C. Scott Littleton and Jaan Puhvel (eds), *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1974, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 5.

note ‘the relation of the Latin *homo*, “man,” and *humus*, “soil”<sup>4</sup>; thus, etymologically humans are identified as terrestrial beings.

These speculations regarding the nature of the gods connect with research into the Indo-European understanding of the universe. \**Dyew* means the ‘diurnal sky’; there ‘is also a nocturnal sky inhabited by the nocturnal gods and the spirits of the dead’.<sup>5</sup> The gods were generally felt to be benevolent if humans behaved towards them appropriately. The importance of a small number of gods can be reconstructed from the linguistic evidence. These include a sky-father \**Dyeus*, a sun god \**Swel*, the dawn goddess \**Ausos*, a fire god \**Egni*, a water god \**Nepto-no*, and a storm god, with several names deriving from the verb \**per* (meaning ‘to strike’).<sup>6</sup> All these deities are personifications of natural phenomena, which is logical in terms of the theory that religion was originally about human responses to the experience of life and death, and the experience of interacting with the natural environment.

Bruce Lincoln notes that in Indo-European myths there was a fascination with how the world was created. This is common to many religions and mythologies, and links to the basic human question, ‘Where did I come from?’ For Indo-European societies the two questions were linked, in that the physical universe was made from a human form, the primordial man. ‘[T]he creation myth, a complex, polyphonic story that told how the world was created when the first priest (often bearing the name Man, \**Manu*) offered his twin brother, the first king (often named Twin, \**Yemo*), in sacrifice, along with the first ox. From Twin’s body, the world was made, in both its material and social component ... [t]he Indic “Song of Purusa” (*Rgveda*, 10.90.11-14) dates to about 900 BCE’.<sup>7</sup>

This story is found in a range of sources, widely distributed across geography and history; for example, it features in two thirteenth-century sources, the Old Russian *Poem on the Dove King*, and the Icelandic *Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson*, and in the medieval Irish *Lebor Gebala Erenn*, which may be earlier, dating from around the tenth century CE. All these sources are preserved within a Christian cultural context, which makes them quite remarkable. However, the Vedic Indian text is the earliest, and presents the clearest account of the world’s creation:

When they divided Purusa, how many pieces did they prepare?  
What was his mouth? What are his arms, thighs and feet called?  
The priest was his mouth, the warrior was made from his arms;  
His thighs were the commoner, and the servant was born from his feet.  
The moon was born of his mind; of his eye, the sun was born;  
From his mouth Indra and fire; from his breath, wind was born;

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lincoln, ‘Indo-European Religions’ in M. Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, 1987, New York, Macmillan, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Haudry, ‘The cosmic religion of the Indo-Europeans’, in Mohammad Ali Jazayery and Wetner Winter (eds), *Languages and Cultures: Studies in Honor of Edgar C. Polome*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1988, p. 226.

<sup>6</sup> Lincoln, 1991, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

From his navel there was the atmosphere; from his head, heaven was rolled together;  
From his feet the earth; from his ears the directions.<sup>8</sup>

Because the first religious act was the sacrifice of Purusha in order to create the world, sacrifice was the principal religious ritual throughout the Vedic Indian period, and many of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* describe sacrifices to a variety of deities. The two principal sacrifices were the fire sacrifice and the Soma ritual. Both of these sacrifices were intended to uphold cosmic order, which is a central concept in the *Vedas*. The god who was nominally the ruler of the supernatural world, Varuna (a name probably corresponding to the Greek Ouranos, the sky god who was the consort of the earth goddess Gaia), is chiefly concerned with *rita* (cosmic order) and its maintenance. *Rita* is a word that is related to the English ‘rite,’ and comprehends the same meaning of formality and solemnity,<sup>9</sup> while also having some of the dimensions of the meaning of ‘right’ (correctness, moral appropriateness).

The most important gods, after the distant Varuna, were Agni, the god of fire (whose name is cognate with the Latin *ignis* and English ‘ignite’); Indra, the battle deity; Soma, the god of intoxication; Mitra the upholder of the law; and Rudra, the god of the ferocious aspects of nature (who might be a prototype of the later non-Vedic god Shiva). Goddesses generally played a minor role in the *Vedas*, though Ushas, goddess of the dawn has significance as the daughter of Dyaus Pitar, the sky god. She is associated with *rita*, as she returns every morning and reflects the order of the universe. Prthivi, the consort of Dyaus Pitar, is an earth goddess. She is connected with death, and there is a funeral hymn in which:

the dead one is asked to go now to the lap of his earth mother Prthivi, who is described as gracious and kind. She is asked not to press down too heavily upon the dead person but to cover him gently, as a mother covers her child with her skirt.<sup>10</sup>

It has been noted above that in early Indo-European culture the gods were associated with the heavens and with immortality, and humans with the earth and with death.

Before we examine myths of illness and wellness, it remains to note that most fundamental Indo-European concepts are derived from the human body. For example, the world was divided into right and left, with ‘right’ having connotations of masculinity and positivity; while ‘left’ was feminine and negatively connotated (with the earth and with death, as mentioned above). J. P. Mallory comments that:

[t]he reason for the dichotomization according to side is probably based on the anatomical universal which favors right-handedness. This system, however, has also crossed with the method of reckoning the cardinal directions among the early Indo-Europeans. The lexical evidence makes it clear that in IE

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<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> William Little (ed.), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 1837.

<sup>10</sup> David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, p. 8.

culture one quite literally ‘oriented’ oneself by facing the sun. In doing so one faced the rising sun in the east and hence the north would be on one’s left side while the propitious right side faced south. This can be seen, for example, in Celtic (OIr *dess* ‘right; south’, Welsh *dehau* ‘right; south’) and OInd *daksina* - ‘right; south’. Terms for north, however, are built on words for ‘left’, e.g., OIr *focla* ‘north’ from *cle* ‘left; sinister, unpropitious’, Welsh *gogledd* ‘north’ from *cledd* ‘left’; the Germanic words for ‘north’ (ON *nordr*, OE *norþ*, OHG *nordan*) but Umb *nertru* ‘left’.<sup>11</sup>

### **Physical Perfection and the Place of Disabled and Mutilated Gods**

In medieval Irish mythic and pseudo-historical sources one theme that is powerfully reiterated is that the body of the king represents the realm, and should the king become mutilated in any way, the realm will be blighted. The only way out of this destructive cycle is the consecration of a new unblemished king, which brings about the regeneration of the land. The crucial text, ‘The Second Battle of Mag Tured’ (found within the eleventh century text, the *Lebor Gebala Erenn*, or ‘book of the taking of Ireland’) tells of Nuada, king of the Tuatha de Danann (people of the goddess Danu, the old gods of Ireland). In the First Battle of Mag Tured Nuada lost his hand fighting against the enemy Fir Bolg. To rectify this problem, ‘Diancecht the leech put on him a put on him a hand of silver with the motion of every hand; and Credne the brazier helped the leech.’<sup>12</sup>

This ingenious solution does not eradicate the fundamental problem: as the tale progresses, ‘a contention as to the sovereignty of the men of Ireland arose between the Tuatha De and their women; because Nuada, after his hand had been stricken off, was disqualified to be king.’<sup>13</sup> Nuada’s maiming loses him the kingship, as a king must be perfect and unblemished, and the Second Battle of Mag Tured results when the ruler chosen in his stead, the dazzlingly handsome Bres, proves disastrous (at least in part because he is elected by the women of the Tuatha, rather than men). The Tuatha, under a new commander, Lug, defeat Bres and his enemy kin, the Fomhoire, at the conclusion of the myth.

Nuada is closely associated with other Indo-European deities who lose a hand or an arm such as the Norse Tyr and the Indian Savitr. Tyr places his hand in the jaws of the ferocious wolf Fenris as a bond, and when the gods bind the wolf he bites off Tyr’s hand. Savitr, one of the twelve Adityas and charioteer of the sun,<sup>14</sup> is especially relevant here ‘because in one source, he lost both his hands which were then replaced

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<sup>11</sup> J. P. Mallory and D. Q. Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, London and Chicago Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997, p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> ‘The Second Battle of Mag Tured (Moytura)’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1969, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Cross and Slover, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup> Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (ed. and trans.), *The Rig Veda*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981. See the hymns ‘Savitr at Sunset’ and ‘Savitr at Night’, pp. 195-199.

with hands of gold.’<sup>15</sup> Savitr is a sun god and Nuada a version of the Romano-British Nodens, whose chief shrine at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire has yielded a small bronze votive hand,<sup>16</sup> and who is probably a Celtic Neptune. This difference of function would suggest that all these deities have in common is that they lost hands through violence and had them replaced by functioning hands of metal.<sup>17</sup>

The Welsh Lludd Llawereint, who features in the early Arthurian text ‘Culhwch ac Olwen’, preserved in the *Mabinogion*, a fourteenth century collection of tales, is another reflex of Nuada (called ‘Argetlam’ meaning ‘of the silver hand’). Lludd’s appellation ‘Llawereint’ also means ‘of the Silver Hand’ and ‘this correspondence suggests that the name Lludd also originated from Nudd (= Nuadu)’.<sup>18</sup> What is significant about the metal hands of Nuada and Savitr is that they were artificial and surgically attached; they are the ancient and medieval equivalents of cutting edge twenty-first century medical technology. Cyborg theologian Antje Jackelen suggests that there are three possible applications of cyborg technology: to repair what had been broken, to correct ‘defects’ people are born with, and the ‘optimization’ of the healthy.<sup>19</sup> Nuada and Savitr are in the first, and most neutral, of these categories.<sup>20</sup>

Deities with replacement hands or arms are not the only type of disabled god that is encountered in Indo-European mythology. Hephaestus, the Greek smith god, is lame because his parents hurled him from Olympus. When he was born, his mother Hera was so disgusted by his feebleness that she threw him towards the earth, but he fell into the sea. Later, he returned to Olympus, becoming the smith of the gods and married Aphrodite, goddess of love. However, later he crossed swords with his father Zeus, reproaching him for:

hanging [Hera] by the wrists from Heaven when she rebelled against him. But silence would have been wiser, because angry Zeus only heaved him down from Olympus a second time. He was a whole day falling. On striking the earth of the island of Lemnos, he broke both legs, and though immortal, had little life left in his body when the islanders found him. Afterwards pardoned and restored to Olympus, he could walk only with golden leg-supports.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Bray, *What’s in a Name?* Unpublished Master of Philosophy thesis, University of Sydney, 2000. See also Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna*, trans. Derek Coltman, New York, Zone Books, 1988 [1948]. See especially Chapter IX, ‘The One-Eyed God and the One-Handed God’, and Chapter X, ‘Savitr and Bhaga’, pp. 139-174.

<sup>16</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, p. 208.

<sup>17</sup> *Mahabharata* 10, 18 states that ‘Rudra cut off both Savitr’s hands, and, in his anger, put out both Bhaga’s eyes’, quoted in Dumézil, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>18</sup> Bernhard Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, trans. Cyril Edwards, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 1997 [1994], p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> Antje Jackelen, ‘The Image of God as Techno Sapiens’, *Zygon*, Vol. 37, No. 2, June 2002, pp. 292-293.

<sup>20</sup> This section owes a considerable debt to Carole M. Cusack, ‘The End of the Human: The Cyborg Past and Present,’ in Christopher Hartney and Andrew McGarrity (eds), *The Dark Side: Proceedings of the VIIth International Conference for Religion, Literature and the Arts 2002*, Sydney, RLA Press, 2004, pp. 223-234.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 1, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1955, p. 87.

Sometimes, though not always, physical perfection is associated with moral excellence. In the cases cited here, Hephaestus, Savitr, Tyr, and Nuada are all virtuous despite their physical imperfections. In fact, in 'The Second Battle of Mag Tured' it is the handsome Bres, elected as king in Nuada's place, who is truly wicked and immoral (although we as modern people may find it difficult to accept that this is the result of his being the offspring of an unsanctioned relationship, that is, he is 'born bad').

It is often asked what purpose do disabled gods serve? Following the French sociologist Gabriel le Bras, I would suggest that 'the sociology of heaven reflects the sociology of earth.' The gods in general represented only the upper classes, and there were no gods particularly protecting slaves or the oppressed. But among a warrior aristocracy there were frequent injuries, in addition to the customary number of birth defects. Ingeniously, Charles Seltman gives credence to this explanation by noting that Hephaestus' lameness was 'just a story to explain the fact that smiths constantly at work at the anvil tend to have powerful arms and weak legs.'<sup>22</sup>

### **Why Do Some Gods Die?**

It does seem that the earliest formulations of mythology, and not only Indo-European mythology, perceived the gods as immortal and mortality as the distinctive quality of humanity. Perhaps the classic formulation of this is in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the semi-divine hero Gilgamesh searches for the secret of immortality after the death of his closest companion, Enkidu. Siduri, a worldly barmaid, says to him:

Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.<sup>23</sup>

From an initial awareness that all humans will die, the concept of an afterlife developed. Across human history and cultures, a proliferation of shadowy realms in which the dead could dwell were imagined and reified. The notion of a post-mortem judgement emerged as a later refinement on the initial egalitarian land of 'shades'.

It is also sometimes made dimly apparent that perhaps divine immortality is not entirely desirable; here, the case of the Titan Prometheus is instructive. He initially used his creative ability to make human beings, but grew too fond of his feeble creations and eventually taught them to cheat the gods by putting scraps under fat when offering the gods meat (so that they could keep the good cuts to eat). He also stole divine fire and gave it to humans to keep them warm.<sup>24</sup> His punishment was terrible:

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Seltman, *The Twelve Olympians: Gods and Goddesses of Greece*, London, Pan, 1952, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> N. K. Sandars (ed. and trans.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971 [1964], p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> David Bellingham, *An Introduction to Greek Mythology*, Leichhardt, Sandstone Books, 1996 [1989], pp. 20-21.

For Zeus the Counsellor gave him this fate.  
Clever Prometheus was bound by Zeus  
In cruel chains, unbreakable, chained round  
A pillar, and Zeus roused and set on him  
An eagle with long wings, which came and ate  
His deathless liver. But the liver grew  
Each night, until it made up the amount  
The long-winged bird had eaten in the day.<sup>25</sup>

If this tortured existence was made possible by immortality, death might actually have some desirable qualities.

However, it is the case in certain Indo-European mythologies that the gods are not truly immortal and can themselves die under certain circumstances. We will here explore the death of the Scandinavian god Balder, whose name means ‘lord’ and who was the god of justice, the one legitimate son of the king-god Odin. Odin himself is a disabled (or mutilated) god, as in his quest for knowledge he tore out one of his eyes in order to sip from the Well of Mimir, a wise giant.<sup>26</sup> He also seduced a giantess, Gunnlod, in order to steal the mead of poetic inspiration, which the giants had stolen from two quarrelsome dwarves.

There are other important deities in the Norse pantheon, in addition to the sinister Odin. Thor, from place name evidence, was to the most popular deity. He is the god of thunder and lightning, and he is a huge ruddy-faced peasant. His role is to defend the gods, which he does with the help of his magic hammer, Mjollnir. He also has an agricultural function, in terms of assisting the peasant farmer whom he so resembles, and is thus often worshipped in combination with Frey and Freya, the Vanir brother and sister (their names mean ‘lord’ and ‘lady’) who are the patrons of nature and sexual fertility.

This focus on fertility extends to the goddesses. Most of these are not very clearly defined. Odin’s wife Frigg, patron of marriage, is wise and reliable; and the great goddess Freya, goddess of sex with strange connections with death, is also fascinating. Other goddesses each have a myth where she has lost her fertility symbol and great hardships result from this loss. Thus, Sif, wife of Thor has her golden hair cut off and is shamed until it is replaced by magic hair of pure gold; and Idunn, wife of Bragi the poet god, has her golden apples of youth stolen and all the gods begin to age and grow feeble until they are recovered; and Freya’s wonderful necklace Brisingamen is stolen by Loki, and is later returned to her by Heimdall who has battled Loki for it in the shape of a seal.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dorothea Wender (trans.), *Hesiod: Theognis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990 [1964], p. 194.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark, 1994, p. 112, p. 117.

Each one of these patterns of loss is in Scandinavian mythology a step towards the final devastation of Ragnarok, the ‘doom of the gods’.<sup>28</sup> This is eventually heralded by Balder’s nightmares. To calm his fear of death his mother Frigg travels the world, asking everything, animate and inanimate, not to harm her son. When she is satisfied, she returns to Asgard and tells Balder to be troubled no longer. The gods take to playing games with Balder, hurling missiles at him as they all bounce off harmlessly. Loki, the trickster god, fashions a dart of mistletoe, a plant so small that Frigg did not even ask it not to harm Balder, and suggests to Balder’s blind brother Hod (another disabled god), that he might throw it. Balder is fatally wounded, dies and must descend to the realm of the dead, Hel. The poem *Baldrs Draumr* (‘Balder’s Dreams’), in the form of a conversation between Odin and a seeress (*volva*), from whom he tries to gain information to save Balder, says:

Hodur the Blind the branch shall throw  
From his brother’s body the blood to drain  
Sucking the life from the son of Odin.<sup>29</sup>

Until this point the story of Balder reads very much as many other myths of ‘dying and rising’ gods do. In Egyptian mythology there is Osiris, killed and dismembered and then resurrected;<sup>30</sup> Greek myth has Adonis and Dionysus as dying and rising gods; and in the Middle Eastern traditions Baal, Tammuz and Attis all appear in various versions of this myth. The essential feature of these stories is that the gods who die (all attractive, young, male and greatly loved) rise again, usually through the intervention of a loving goddess (wife, lover or mother - the role played here by Frigg). The story of Balder, more than anything else, reveals the essential gloom and fatalism of Old Norse religious consciousness.

For this god, who is so clearly a ‘dying and rising god’, does not rise. In order to save Balder and his wife Nanna who had flung herself onto her husband’s funeral pyre (in a gesture resembling the Vedic Indian custom of *sati*, named for the self-immolating first wife of Siva), Frigg has to persuade all creatures in the world to mourn for him. One old giantess called Thokk refuses. Some texts suggest that it is Loki in disguise, and by this one gesture he manages to remove all good from the world. From this point on, doom is inevitable, as the world slowly inches toward destruction.<sup>31</sup>

### **And What About The Afterlife?**

It is not surprising that such a worldview lacks a clearly articulated picture of the afterlife; Hel is a grim and gloomy place, where all the dead (save Odin’s warrior bodyguard, the *einherjar* of Valhalla, go. Nevertheless, there are hints of life beyond death, not least of which is Odin’s own sacrifice of himself in order to gain the power of the runes. Tonight I wish to concentrate on a kind of ‘afterlife’ that is common to

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas A. Dubois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. 80-81, p. 91, p. 150, and p. 162.

<sup>29</sup> Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden (trans.), *The Elder Edda*, Faber and Faber, London, 1973 [1969], p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Patrick, *All-Colour Book of Egyptian Mythology*, London, Octopus Books, 1972, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> DuBois, 1999, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.



both Scandinavian and Celtic texts, the continued survival of a head after it has been severed from the body. Odin's advisor Mimir, custodian of the well of wisdom mentioned earlier, was given with Odin's brother Hoenir as a hostage during the war between the two families of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir. The Vanir beheaded him and sent his head back to Odin, who pickled it and continued to consult it when in need of counsel.<sup>32</sup>

This is a single instance of head-preservation in Scandinavian mythology, but Celtic religion and mythology yields a rich hoard of examples. The Greek geographer Strabo (c. 64 BC to 21 AD), whose writings are indebted to the lost works of Posidonius of Apamea (c. 135-51 BC), reports on the custom of head-hunting, which Celtic chieftains engaged in.

There is also among them the barbaric and unusual custom (practiced most of all by the northern tribes) of hanging the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses when departing from battle, and nailing the spectacle to the doorways of their homes upon returning. Indeed Posidonius says that he saw this himself in many places, and that while he was unaccustomed to it at first, he could later endure it calmly due to his frequent contact with it. The heads of those enemies that were held in high esteem they would embalm in cedar oil and display them to their guests, and they would not think of having them ransomed even for an equal weight of gold.<sup>33</sup>

The curious importance accorded by the Celts to severed heads is attested by later mythological stories such as the second tale of the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion*, 'Branwen' (for which the earliest manuscript dates from the thirteenth century CE, though the tales may be much older). In this myth the gigantic warrior Bendigeidfran (Bran), after travelling to Ireland from Wales to rescue his sister Branwen, is wounded. He counsels his men to sever his head, and that he will remain to keep them company in that state. The story says 'nor was it more irksome having the head with them then than when Bendigeidfran had been with them alive. And because of those fourscore years it was called the Assembly of the Wondrous Head'.<sup>34</sup>

This Celtic interest in heads appears also in Irish texts. Like the Scandinavian case of Mimir, and the Welsh case of Bran, the severed heads have prophetic and informative capacities. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ('The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'), the king, Conaire Mor, is beheaded. His champion Mac Cecht reacts as follows:

Mac Cecht struck off the head of one of the two men who had beheaded Conaire. The other man then was fleeing with the king's head. A pillar-stone happened to be under Mac Cecht's feet on the floor of the Hostel. He hurled it at the man who had Conaire's head and it drove through his spine, so that his

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<sup>32</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1975 [1964], pp. 142-3.

<sup>33</sup> John T. Koch and John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, Malden, Celtic Studies Publications, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> *The Mabinogion*, edited and translated by Gwyn and Thomas Jones, London, Everyman's Library, 1950, p. 39.

back broke. After this Mac Cecht beheaded him. Mac Cecht then poured the cup of water into Conaire's gullet and neck. Then Conaire's head said (after the water had been put into his neck and gullet):

A good man Mac Cecht!  
An excellent man Mac Cecht!  
He gives drink to a king,  
He does a deed.<sup>35</sup>

### **Healers as Positive and Negative Figures in Mythology**

The final topic to be discussed in this paper is the figure of the healer in Indo-European mythology. Perhaps the classic healer god is Asclepius (Roman Aesculapius) who is a son of Apollo, and was educated by the wise centaur Chiron.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, Asclepius became such a wondrous healer that he offended against the gods and the natural order, by raising his human patients from the dead. It is hardly surprising that he became a very popular god in the Greco-Roman world.

Similarly, Diancecht, the leech from 'The Second Battle of Mag Tured', discussed above, was a remarkable healer. He, with Credne the brazier, fashioned the silver hand that replaced Nuada's hand of flesh that had been severed in battle. From that anecdote alone it might be concluded that Diancecht was a force for good, channelling only positive power. However, the story is more complicated than that. Diancecht has two children, his son Miach and his daughter Airmed, both of whom follow in his footsteps and are healers. Miach is not pleased with the silver hand fashioned for Nuada by his father, and he determines to do better. This leads to a violent struggle between father and son:

Miach went to the hand which had been replaced by Diancecht, and he said 'joint to joint of it and sinew to sinew', and he healed Nuada in thrice three days and nights. The first seventy-two hours he put it against his side, and it became covered with skin. The second seventy-two hours he put it on his breast ... That cure seemed evil to Diancecht. He flung a sword on the crown of his son's head and cut the skin down to the flesh. The lad healed the wound by means of his skill. Diancecht smote him again and cut the flesh until he reached the bone. The lad healed this by the same means. He struck him a third blow and came to the membrane of his brain. The lad healed this also by the same means. Then he struck the fourth blow and cut out the brain, so that Miach died, and Diancecht said that the leech himself could not heal him of that blow.<sup>37</sup>

Elizabeth A. Gray completed an in-depth study of this text over three lengthy academic articles, and identified relationships between sons and fathers as one of the key themes, with Diancecht and Miach as the worst possible option, where

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<sup>35</sup> Koch and Carey, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>36</sup> Evi Melas (ed.), *Temples and Sanctuaries of Ancient Greece: A Companion Guide*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1970, pp. 33-34.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Second Battle of Mag Tured' *op. cit.*, p. 32.

professional rivalry makes mutual help and support impossible.<sup>38</sup> However, she identifies the purpose of the incident as being the assertion of Diancecht as the supreme god of healing, and to define the limits of medicine. This is made clear when he successfully frustrates his daughter Airmed's attempt to classify the herbs that grow when her immensely gifted brother is buried. The text says that 'herbs three hundred and sixty-five, according to the number of his joints and sinews, grew through the grave'. This reference to three hundred and sixty-five is most likely of cosmological significance, mapping the body of Miach onto the year, so that humanity provides the measure of time as well as the shape of the physical universe. Diancecht, however, 'came to her, and he confused the herbs, so that noone knows their proper cures'.<sup>39</sup> This frustrates Airmed's desire to preserve something of her brother's skills through the use of the herbs that grew from his body.

During the battle that concludes the text Diancecht's powers are shown to be considerable, in that he is able to revive the dead warriors of the Tuatha De Danann so that they continue to fight and their enemies the Fomhoire are defeated. This ability to raise the dead also appears in the *Mabinogion* story 'Branwen', where a magical cauldron will revive dead warriors who are thrown into it.

### **Conclusion**

Archaeology also provides evidence of the place of healing in Celtic religious life. Water sites were frequently regarded as entry points to the supernatural world, and excavations at a number of such sites have yielded much in the way of religious artefacts. Most famous of these shrines is the Roman Baths at Bath (formerly Aquae Sulis) in the south-west of England. This site, distinguished by hot springs, was dedicated to the Celtic healer goddess Sulis, whom the Romans associated with Minerva (Greek Athena). Among the artefacts recovered are curse tablets, requesting the goddess' assistance in the getting of revenge against enemies. A less well-known, but equally deserving, site is the sanctuary of the goddess Sequana at the source of the Seine, where nearly two hundred wooden figures have been recovered. It is believed that these were deposited by worshippers and supplicants who were asking the goddess for cures.<sup>8</sup> These sites provide evidence for the piety of ordinary members of society.

Because the body was, for the Indo-Europeans, the fundamental model for the universe, health and healing had wide-ranging cosmological consequences. Gods were injured and healed or not healed, and could die, and the inevitability of human death was a constant theme that was examined in a variety of related mythologies over several millennia. These varying views of illness and wellness, life and death, were enduringly meaningful to people, until in the early medieval period missionaries of the new religion of Christianity converted the Welsh, the Irish, and the Scandinavians to the religion of the one god.

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth A. Gray, "Cath Maige Tured: Myth and Structure (24-120)", *Eigse*, Vol. XIX, 1982-1983, pp. 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> 'The Second Battle of Mag Tured' *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, London, Hamlyn, 1970, p. 15.