

## Water, Milk, Eviscerated Eyes and Severed Heads: An Iconographic Pattern in Indo-European and Near-Eastern Mythology

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In Egyptian mythology Horos and Set, who are competing for the kingship, meet for battle in the waters. Isis attempts to intervene, and Horos beheads her in fury. Thoth then replaces Isis' head with that of a cow. The conflict resumes, and Set gouges out Horos' eyes. The cow goddess Hat-Hor, however, restores Horos' vision by pouring milk into his eye sockets. Horos is then able to defeat Set. A similar set of events occurs in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Cú Chulainn, while contending with Lóch at the ford, is simultaneously attacked by the Mórrígan. Cú Chulainn smashes her head, wounds her eye and breaks her leg. After Cú Chulainn has defeated Lóch, the Mórrígan comes to him disguised as a one-eyed crone milking a cow. He asks for a sip of the milk and she grants his request. In gratitude, Cú Chulainn heals the Mórrígan's injuries with a prayer. Both the Egyptian and Irish myths take place in a watery location and feature a damaged head as well as the loss and subsequent retrieval of eyesight through milk, although the precise configuration of these variables differs between the two accounts. The significance of the Irish myth as it has been rendered in the *Táin* is no longer evident, but the myth of Bóand suggests that the conflict between Cú Chulainn and the Mórrígan concerns a struggle for what Dumézil calls the *gloire lumineuse*, a substance found in various manifestations throughout Indo-European mythology which, among other benefits, bestows wisdom upon the one who attains it. The Irish reflex of the *gloire lumineuse* is the *imbas forosnai* "wisdom that illuminates." The goddess Bóand is injured at the well of Nechtan, the waters of which are said to contain *imus* 'magical poetic quality.' The waters of the well rise up against her in three successive waves, maiming her foot, her eye and her hand. This myth appears to be an analogue to the scene in the *Táin* in which Cú Chulainn inflicts three very similar wounds on the Mórrígan.

Norse mythology provides a *tertium comparationis*. According to the *Ynglingasaga*, the Æsir decapitate Mímir and Óðinn gains knowledge by consulting with his severed head, while in Eddic poetry, the source of Mímir's sagacity is his well, which is said to contain the mead of wisdom, and Óðinn must sacrifice his eye and deposit it into the well in order that he may drink from it. There is another well located next to Mímir's, Urðr's well, the waters of which run white, implying, perhaps, that they are of a lactiferous constitution. The well of Mímir and the well of Urðr appear to be reflexes of one another, and the myth of Óðinn gaining wisdom from Mímir by taking counsel with his head as well as that of Óðinn achieving the same end placing his eye in Mímir's well both appear to be fragments of a compound myth. By uniting the two Óðinn-Mímir

accounts and by transposing the white waters of Urðr's well into Mímir's, a proto-myth may be reconstructed which exhibits the same elements exhibited by the Irish and Egyptian myths, that is, an aqueous milieu, a damaged head, an eviscerated eye and a white liquid which, arguably, might suggest milk.

Decapitation features as method of achieving of wisdom and power in these three myths. Mímir's head is a repository of wisdom, continuing to advise Óðinn after having been truncated. Horos beheads Isis, thus annihilating the threat she poses to the contest for the kingship, and Cú Chulainn, in what appears to be a combat for the *imbas forosnai*, strikes the Mórrígan a blow to the head. The eye also figures as an index of wisdom and power in these myths. In the Norse myth, is the loss of one's own eye which, paradoxically, is a means to acquire wisdom, for Óðinn's vision must be impaired in exchange for the insight he gains. Horos, on the other hand, is able to defeat Set only through the recovery of his eyes, but although the retrieval of the eyes is ultimately responsible for Horos' victory, the temporary loss of eyesight appears to be a necessary interim, for Horos is not able to defeat Set before having been momentarily blinded. The act of decapitation and the removal of an eye are both iconographic expressions for the acquisition of wisdom and power. The coincidence of decapitation and impaired vision in these myths is a binary articulation of this expression. The passage from the *Táin* exhibits a permutation of the pattern in which both decapitation and the removal of an eye occur but in which both mutilations are experienced by the opponent (the Mórrígan).

The *gloire lumineuse* often has a lacteal epiphany. The Indic Soma is associated with cows and milk. In Greek the Bacchants, while in their frenzied state draw forth honey (i.e. ambroisa) as well as milk from rivers, a collocation much like that of Mímir's and Urðr's well, the one containing white waters and the other the mellifluous mead. The *imbas forosnai* is associated especially with the river Boyne, which is named for the cow goddess Bóand. The milk which features in the Irish and Norse myths is thus an epiphany of the wisdom which the hero attains. Unlike its Indo-European analogues, the conflict of Horos and Set concerns a struggle for the kingship, not the acquisition of wisdom. The Indo-European *gloire lumineuse*, however, is also associated with sovereignty, e.g. the Persian *farr*. In the *Book of Kings*, Rostam fights Asfandiyar, who possesses the *farr* and threatens the kingship. The battle takes place next to a river. Rostam is injured but healed with milk. He then proceeds to defeat Asfandiyar by piercing his eyes with arrows. The consonance in both structure and content between the Egyptian and Persian myths suggests that the iconographic pattern and the myth in which it figures is not exclusive to Indo-European but rather trans-Eurasian, and that both Indo-European and Egyptian ascribe milk similar iconographic value.