

The Role of Solar Deities in Irish Megalithic Monuments

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Abstract: In the great body of Irish myths that became part of an oral tradition and would, much later, be documented and preserved, associations can be found between Sun gods and solar heroes and the great Neolithic monuments of Ireland, including Newgrange, the most well-known monument in the large complex of passage tombs in the valley of the Boyne River that today is known as the World Heritage Site, *Brú na Bóinne*. In all four cycles of Irish mythology, from the *Tuatha De Danaan* of the Mythological Cycle to the kings of *Tara* in the Historical Cycle, repeated mention is made of *Brú na Bóinne*, the home of the Sun gods, Dagda and Lugh, and the place of the conception and birth of the warrior hero, Cú Chulainn. This chapter examines the roles the monuments played in the myths and their strong association with mythological solar figures and asks if the myths can tell us something about the meaning the monuments held for people from different periods of time.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Standish O'Grady noted the frequent connection in Irish mythology between the gods and heroes of all four mythological cycles and the great Neolithic monuments of Ireland. He wrote:

In all the ancient Irish literature we find the connection of the gods...with the raths and cairns perpetually insisted upon. The scene of the destruction of the Firbolg will be found to be a place of tombs, the metropolis of the Fomorians a place of tombs, and a place of tombs the sacred home of the Tuatha

Frances Clynes, 'The Role of Solar Deities in Irish Megalithic Monuments', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 24 no 1 and 2, Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter 2020, pp. 9-25.

www.CultureAndCosmos.org

<https://doi.org/10.46472/CC.1224.0203>

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along the shores of the Boyne... The connection between the great raths and cairns and the gods is never really forgotten.¹

O'Grady's quote covers monuments all over Ireland, but this chapter will focus on the great cairn at Newgrange in the Brú na Bóinne World Heritage Site in the east of Ireland. As Geraldine Stout pointed out:

Brú na Bóinne, in addition to possessing the most imposing megalithic monuments in Ireland, has an equally imposing, if less obvious, concentration of place names associating some of the chief figures in early Irish mythology with a variety of natural and artificial figures.²

While O'Grady commented merely on the frequency with which the monuments appear in the four cycles of Irish mythology, Stout pointed out that Newgrange was built in a part of Ireland central to much of the Mythological and Ulster mythological cycles, a point also made by John Carey.³ In addition to a shared location between Brú na Bóinne and the myths, Carey, along with other twentieth century commentators, has drawn parallels between what archaeology has uncovered about Newgrange and the contents of the mythological literature.⁴

Newgrange was excavated in the 1960s by Michael O'Kelly and, during the excavation, he was struck by how the archaeological findings reflected the mythological role of Newgrange. Referring to Newgrange's winter solstice alignment where the rising Sun lights up an inner chamber, he wrote: 'Was this to enable a once-yearly visitation by the Sun to the gods who dwelt in the Brú, and does it tie in with one of the traditional roles of the Dagda which was that of sun-god?'⁵ As will be discussed below, the

¹ Standish O'Grady, *Early Bardic Literature: Ireland* (A Public Domain Book, 1970), p.59.

² Geraldine T. Stout, *Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), p.52.

³ John Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, Vol 10 (Cambridge, MA: Department of Celtic Languages and Literature, Harvard University, 1990). p.29.

⁴ Michael J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p.47; Martin Brennan, *The Stars and the Stones: Ancient Art and Astronomy in Ireland* (Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 11; John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), p.xiii.

⁵ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.47.

Dagda lived in the Newgrange cairn.⁶ The same point was made by author Martin Brennan: ‘There is a striking connection here between the mythological sun-god dwelling in a supernatural residence and an actual Neolithic archaeological site that was constructed to admit the rays of the rising sun annually’.⁷ Referring to O’Kelly’s quote, John Waddell wrote: ‘Here [Newgrange] archaeology and myth converge’.⁸ Also, noting the comments by O’Kelly and of Brennan, Carey, in 1990, argued that archaeology has, since the excavation of Newgrange, ‘enormously extended our knowledge of the Boyne tombs, but is by its very nature equipped to deal with only half the problem here under consideration’.⁹ He added that our knowledge of the monuments needs to be supplemented by a detailed consideration of the surviving mythological texts.¹⁰ Carey, as stated above, also observed that the specific geographic locations of the myths repeatedly coincide with the locations of the monuments and stated that this ‘cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence’.¹¹

The issue of whether the oral tradition dates back as far as the construction of the monuments is addressed by O’Kelly, Carey, Waddell, and O’Sullivan. O’Kelly and Carey expressed the view that they probably did. Carey argued in favour of there being stability in the worldview of the Irish throughout the millennia from the building of the tombs to the medieval period, reasoning that knowledge of the past only survives because of its relevance to the present.¹² In O’Kelly’s view, the connections between the myths and the monuments suggest that the oral tradition may have begun with the people who built Newgrange. In his words: ‘Can it be they who planted the first seeds of Irish oral literature and should one begin to think of this not as a window on the Iron Age but as one on the late Neolithic?’¹³ Waddell more cautiously, suggested that the themes in the myths are of great antiquity and that they may be part of a common Indo-European inheritance and may, in fact, be thousands of years old.¹⁴ O’Sullivan, on the other hand, expressed doubt about the possibility of the

⁶ Muireann. Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2009), p.35.

⁷ Brennan, *The Stars and the Stones*, p.11.

⁸ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, xiii.

⁹ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.28.

¹⁰ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.28.

¹¹ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.29.

¹² Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.29.

¹³ O’Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.48.

¹⁴ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, pp.4–5.

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continuity of mythic themes from the fourth millennium BCE, but admitted that it is possible that the relationship between the myths and the monuments existing in the last 1,500 years could suggest a similar relationship in Neolithic times which would help 'inform our efforts to identify sacred locations of the Neolithic world'.¹⁵ Yet, towards the end of the same paper, O'Sullivan appears to have become persuaded of the potential for continuity and considered the argument in favour of it, citing the continued use of the tombs through the Bronze Age and the evidence for continuity at Stonehenge. He wrote:

The timeline from the late fourth millennium BC to the early first millennium AD appears to be too long to accommodate a reliable strand of oral tradition. And yet there are enigmatic suggestions of broad continuity, presumably interrupted and transformed along the way but nevertheless sufficiently consistent to be explored.¹⁶

There are four, sometimes overlapping, cycles in Irish mythology and the great Neolithic passage tombs appear in all of them. All of them have their own solar figures and, in each cycle, it is the Sun gods and their offspring who are connected to the monuments. In each of the four cycles in Irish mythology, references are made to the Neolithic monuments, with a large emphasis on those of Brú na Bóinne, particularly Newgrange. The question therefore, is: can anything be learned about the monuments, specifically Newgrange, from how they are portrayed in the myths and the mythical figures associated with them?

Irish Passage Tombs

There are four main passage tomb sites in Ireland – Carrowmore and Carrowkeel, both in County Sligo and Loughcrew and the Brú na Bóinne complex in County Meath.¹⁷ Brú na Bóinne contains up to forty tombs, the largest being the great tombs at Knowth, Dowth and Newgrange.¹⁸ These three tombs are classified by Hensey as Type 3, meaning they are larger

¹⁵ Muiris O'Sullivan, 'Megalithic Tombs and Storied Landscapes in Neolithic Ireland', *Journal of Neolithic Archaeology* Vol. Iss. (2010): p.2, <http://www.jna.uni-kiel.de/index.php/jna/article/view/31>.

¹⁶ O'Sullivan, 'Megalithic Tombs and Storied Landscapes in Neolithic Ireland', p.14.

¹⁷ Gabriel Cooney, 'The Passage Tomb Phenomenon in Ireland', *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 11, Iss. 3, Supplement: Brú na Bóinne (1997), p.7.

¹⁸ Cooney, 'The Passage Tomb Phenomenon in Ireland', p.8.

and more sophisticated than either the earlier Type 1 tombs, for example, Carrowmore, or the Type 2 tombs such as Carrowkeel and Loughcrew.¹⁹

Newgrange

The tomb at Newgrange is a mound, 13.5 metres high and 85 metres in diameter, built of layers of earth and stones delimited by kerbstones, all of which are still present.²⁰ The kerbstones were numbered 1 to 97 by O'Kelly, the best known of which is the entrance stone at the entrance to the passage. They range from 1.7 to 4.5 metres in length and average 0.94 metres in height; some are decorated. The mound is surrounded by 12 standing stones (out of a possible 35 to 38) which are irregularly spaced apart from three opposite the tomb entrance which are the largest. The circle is not concentric with the mound. Two eighteenth century reports record a standing stone on the top of the mound.²¹ Quartz was found outside the mound.²²

A narrow 18.95 metre-long passage lined with orthostats opens in the front or southeast and runs in a northwesterly direction, ending in a cruciform inner chamber within the mound.²³ As the mound follows the slope of the hill on which it stands, the passage runs uphill and there is a difference of two metres between the ground level of the chamber and the entrance. The passage entrance was blocked by a closing slab, the entrance stone, but now it is left open to allow people to enter. The chamber is cruciform, containing three recesses with stone basins. It measures 5.25 metres from its entrance to the back, or north, recess and 6.55 metres from the east recess to the west recess. Two stone basins were found in the east recess, the most profusely ornamented recess, and one in each of the other recesses. The chamber is roofed with a corbelled vault which rises and narrows until it is closed by a single capstone, six metres above the floor.²⁴ Spirals, lozenge, and zigzag artwork are found, with several of these being

¹⁹ Robert Hensey, *First Light: The Origins of Newgrange (Kindle Edition)* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, Limited, 2015), loc 680.

²⁰ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, pp.16–21.

²¹ Edward Lhwyd, 'Two Letters to Dr. T. Molyneux', ed. by Dr. T. Molyneux (Library of Trinity College Dublin, Unpublished, 1700).

²² O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, pp.13–21.

²³ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.21.

²⁴ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.21.

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placed on the backs of the stones where they cannot be seen by visitors to the chamber.²⁵

Over the entrance to the passage is what is called the 'roof box'.²⁶ Rediscovered in 1963, it is an opening 90 centimetres in height, one metre wide and 1.2 metres from front to back. Because the floor of the passage rises along the passage towards the chamber, the roof box is roughly at the same level as the floor of the inner chamber, with a difference of only 15 centimetres.²⁷ On the morning of the winter solstice, and for several days either side, as the Sun rises in the southeast, the rays shine in through the roof box, along the passage and onto the floor of the inner chamber which gradually lights up. As the Sun continues to rise, the chamber darkens again. The whole process, from the entry of the first ray back to total darkness, lasts for 17 minutes.²⁸

O'Kelly reported that he first observed the illumination of the chamber at sunrise on the winter solstice of 1967.²⁹ The phenomenon had been well known in the neighbourhood and had been described to him by many visitors to the site during the excavation, but, until 1967, he had dismissed the idea because direct sunlight would not be able to reach the chamber before the roof box was revealed.³⁰ Jon Patrick, who had extensive research experience in solar, lunar and stellar alignments, was asked to make a survey to determine if this alignment with the solstice was in place when Newgrange was built, and he concluded that it was and always will be while Newgrange is standing. He concluded that the monument is located at exactly the right altitude with the roof box being in exactly the right position to catch the rays therefore the passage is at exactly the right angle to allow the inner chamber to light up. The roof box is just big enough to ensure that the rays can enter it. Patrick wrote, 'It therefore seems that the Sun [in theory] has shone [into] the chamber ever since the date of its construction and will probably continue to do so for ever, regardless of

²⁵ Claire O'Kelly, 'Corpus of Newgrange Art', in *Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp.146-85, pp. 146-48.

²⁶ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.21.

²⁷ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.21.

²⁸ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, pp.123-24.

²⁹ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.123.

³⁰ O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, pp.123-24.

secular changes in the obliquity of the ecliptic'.³¹ From this, he concluded that the alignment was deliberate.³²

Irish Mythology

Waddell described early Irish literature as 'by far the most substantial body of written material in a vernacular tongue in western Europe'.³³ A huge body of knowledge was preserved before the Christianisation of Ireland and, when writing came to Ireland with Christianity, the scribes in the early monastic settlements wrote down, not only the sacred texts in Latin, but also the stories with which they were familiar in their Irish vernacular.³⁴ However, many of the original documents have been lost through the centuries and, of those which survived, many lost their original meaning over time. Ciaran Carson and Carey both believed that time and cultural changes greatly impacted the content and meaning of the myths. Carson wrote:

But we cannot know to what extent [the myths] were based on oral accounts which would themselves have been transmitted in several versions, changed, improved, or corrupted, as they were recounted by different storytellers with different historical, cultural and artistic agendas.³⁵

A similar view is expressed by Carey:

Even if we posit extremely early written sources for all of the versions, however, we are still left with an oral tradition spanning approximately four thousand years. Besides the sheer duration of this interval, we must reckon with the momentous cultural developments it included: the conversion of the Irish to Christianity and also, almost certainly, the arrival of Celtic language in Ireland.³⁶

³¹ Jon Patrick, 'Midwinter Sunrise at Newgrange', *Nature*, Vol. 249, Iss. (1974), pp. 517–19, p.19

³² O'Kelly, *Newgrange*, p.124.

³³ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.5.

³⁴ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p. 1.

³⁵ Ciaran Carson, *The Táin (Kindle Edition)* (Penguin Books Limited, 2008), loc 99.

³⁶ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.29.

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Different translations and different interpretations of the individual myths vary in terms of reliability. This has resulted in different versions of even the most well-known myths.³⁷ According to Waddell, while the survival in the myths of archaic themes and pagan concepts is not in doubt, it is not always easy to separate them from medieval inventions where ‘those [mythic themes] that conflicted with contemporary Christian mythology were either deliberately assigned to a pagan past or subjected to a process of amendment or selection’.³⁸ The immortal gods became mere mortals, albeit with superhuman powers and life spans of centuries, and later versions of the myths recorded their deaths. Christian characters such as St. Patrick were added.³⁹

Mythological Cycle

In chronological order, the earliest of the four cycles is the Mythological Cycle, the story of the immortal gods called the *Tuatha Dé Danann* or the ‘people of the goddess Danu’.⁴⁰ The myths tell of their arrival from four cities in the North, landing on the Irish coast, where they burned their boats to ensure they could not go back. The smoke from the fire filled the surrounding area and gave rise to the belief that they had travelled to Ireland on a dark cloud. From the four cities from where they came, they brought four treasures. From the city of Murias, they brought the ‘Dagda’s Cauldron’.⁴¹ The ‘Spear of Lugh’ came from the city of Gorias and the *Lia Fáil*, or Stone of Destiny, came from Falias. From Findias, they brought the ‘Sword of Nuada’.⁴² The *Tuatha* fought the ‘First Battle of Magh Tuireach’ to take Ireland away from the native *Fir Bolg*.⁴³ After a long battle, they defeated the *Fir Bolg*, who were all slaughtered, save a few. Those who survived fled to the outermost islands off the coast of Ireland and dwelt there afterwards.⁴⁴ In the ‘Second Battle of Magh Tuireach’, the *Tuatha Dé Danann* defeated the demon-like Formorians. Balor, the one-eyed Formorian king, was killed by Lugh who became king of the *Tuatha*

³⁷ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.5.

³⁸ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.6.

³⁹ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.13.

⁴⁰ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.18.

⁴¹ Tom Peete Cross, Clark Harris Slover, and Charles W. Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales* (Dublin: Figgis, 1969), pp.9–11.

⁴² Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp.9–11.

⁴³ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.14.

⁴⁴ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.14.

Dé Danann.⁴⁵ Lugh, a solar figure from whose face brilliant rays were said to shine, was Balor's grandson, being the son of Balor's daughter, Eithlinn, and Cian of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and so is half Formorian and half *Tuatha Dé Danann*.⁴⁶ In a third battle, they were defeated by the Milesians who arrived in Ireland on the Beara peninsula.⁴⁷ The three goddesses of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, daughters of the Dagda, asked that Ireland be named after them, Eiru, Fodla, and Banba. In this way, the *Tuatha Dé Danann* succeeded in having Ireland named after them.⁴⁸ They went to live in the enchanted world of the *sidhe*, the fairy Otherworld, where no one could see them, although they could break through the enchantment and walk amongst the people.⁴⁹

Newgrange in the Mythological Cycle

The *sidhes* where the *Tuatha Dé Danann* went to live were the Neolithic mounds that covered Ireland.⁵⁰ In the Mythological Cycle, they are seen as inhabiting the Otherworld, or *Tír na nÓg*, the 'land of eternal youth'. Newgrange, in the Mythological Cycle, was the home of the gods of the *Tuatha de Danaan*.⁵¹ The meaning of the word *Brú* is 'an otherworld mansion'.⁵² Elcmar was the first inhabitant of the Brú and is married to Boann, the divine personification of the Boyne river.⁵³ In this, the earliest cycle, the monument was portrayed as a place of immortality, intimately connected to the River Boyne. As Waddell wrote: 'It is surely here [the Boyne] that the Newgrange story begins'.⁵⁴

The next inhabitant was the all-powerful and omniscient Dagda, the most prominent of the ancient Irish gods, a god of wisdom and of the Sun. The Dagda gained possession of the mound and sent Elcmar on an errand for a day. While Elcmar was gone, the Dagda impregnated Boann and their son, Óengus, was born. The Dagda stopped the Sun in the sky and the day lasted the nine months of Boann's pregnancy.⁵⁵ Óengus' conception and birth took place at a magical lengthening of the day at Newgrange and he

⁴⁵ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.44.

⁴⁶ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.35.

⁴⁷ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.26.

⁴⁸ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp.17–18.

⁴⁹ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.26.

⁵⁰ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.26.

⁵¹ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.35.

⁵² Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.18.

⁵³ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.18.

⁵⁴ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.19.

⁵⁵ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.35.

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was considered a personification of the day so, in the myth, the day was a product of a union between a Sun god and the river. Óengus tricked the Dagda into giving him the Brú by allowing him to think he is giving it to Óengus for a day and a night. When the Dagda asked for it back, Óengus pointed out that all of time is day or night, so the Dagda had given Óengus the Brú for all eternity.⁵⁶

Carey noted that there are three versions of this myth but, in all of them, Óengus won the Brú from its former owner through verbal dexterity and the manipulation of time, just as it was manipulation of time that brought about his birth. Carey believed this manipulation of time to be unique in Irish mythology to the monuments at Brú na Bóinne and marked them as part of the *sidhe* or fairy world where temporal anomalies are commonplace.⁵⁷ He speculated that the solstice alignment at Newgrange was connected to this. In his words: ‘The analogy between this evidence and that of the medieval legends, where the right to occupy the Bruig [Newgrange] is contingent upon control of the day's relationship to time as a whole, is a striking one – but what are we to make of it?’⁵⁸ In this story, we can see an allusion to the winter solstice when the Sun stands still and which marks the beginning of the days becoming longer. Óengus' birth in the mound and his emergence from Brú na Bóinne to be seen upon the Earth portrays Newgrange as the home of the Sun and the place where the day, symbolised by Óengus, is produced and sent out to the world.

Robert Hensey commented on how all the Irish monuments appear to be associated with water and Newgrange is particularly associated with the Boyne. Brú na Bóinne is surrounded by the Boyne and Mattock rivers giving it an island-like appearance.⁵⁹ Stout and Stout reported that Newgrange is situated just above the top of the tide of the Boyne – where the river meets the sea. The apparently deliberate placement of the monuments near water may have been to reinforce the link between the monuments and the Otherworld. In Irish mythology, streams and rivers are liminal zones between the mortal world and the Otherworld.⁶⁰ It also reinforces the idea of Newgrange as being somehow connected with wisdom and knowledge. The river itself was magical and mystical. Its source was described as the ‘Well of *Segais*’, an Otherworld well which is the source of all wisdom and occult knowledge. The well is surrounded by

⁵⁶ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.23.

⁵⁷ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.26.

⁵⁸ Carey, *Time, Memory and the Boyne Necropolis*, p.28.

⁵⁹ Hensey, *First Light*, loc 685.

⁶⁰ Carson, *The TáiIn*, loc 170.

hazel trees. Hazelnuts, in the myths, were associated with wisdom and knowledge and it was the hazelnuts that fell into the Well that made it the source of wisdom.⁶¹

Ulster Cycle

The Ulster Cycle, with its great epic of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the Cattle Raid of Cooley, tells of heroic men, such as Conchobar Mac Nessa and Cú Chulainn, and supernatural women, such as Queen Maeve, Aoife, the Morrigan and the Scathach.⁶² However, there is a large emphasis on male heroes and their military prowess and it is they who appear most associated with Newgrange. The stories are told from a mortal point of view as the main characters, although heroes, are human beings. The *Tuatha Dé Danann* appear in this cycle as well. They are the gods who were now the *sí* and who interfered in human affairs but had a separate existence. The Ulster cycle was linked to Christianity by the Christian clerics. For example, Conchobar Mac Nessa, the king of Ulster, was said to have died the same day as Christ.⁶³ Attempts were made to situate the myths in the time of Christ although, as already discussed, the themes they incorporated are much older.⁶⁴

The main hero of the Ulster Cycle is Cú Chulainn who, like Óengus before him, in some versions of the myths, was the son of a Sun god and was born at Brú na Bóinne. The figure of Cú Chulainn, Waddell believed, may have its origin in older Indo-European myths, with many of his deeds reminiscent of those of the Greek Achilles, and his life echoing that of Christ.⁶⁵ Cú Chulainn's mother was Dechtire, the sister of Conchubar Mac Nessa, the king of Ulster. The land around *Emain Macha*, Conchubar's court, had been laid waste by a flock of birds. Dechtire and Conchubar followed the birds south until they came to a Brú. Here, Dechtire gave birth to a child who is taken to *Emain Macha* where he fell ill and died. In her sleep, Dechtire is addressed by Lugh, who told her that he was the father of her child and that she is pregnant by him again. She gave birth to a second child, called Setanta until his 6th year, when he took the name Cú Chulainn.⁶⁶ Cú Chulainn grew up to be a mighty warrior who could not be

⁶¹ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.21.

⁶² Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (Colin Smythe, 1991), p.11.

⁶³ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.17.

⁶⁴ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.6.

⁶⁵ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.10.

⁶⁶ Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.13.

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conquered. Even in the Christianised versions of the myths, where Cú Chulainn was considered mortal despite being the son of a god, he was capable of superhuman feats. When he was six years old, he could lift a couch with thirty men on it and, as an adult, he could defeat entire armies single-handedly.⁶⁷

Cú Chulainn's strongest tie was with his foster brother, Ferdia.⁶⁸ In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, he was the only warrior not cursed and so had to defend Ulster single-handedly against Queen Maeve's army, which he did for three months. Maeve's side decided that the only warrior who had a chance against him was Ferdia, as Scáthach, an Otherworldly warrior woman based in Scotland, had trained them both. Thus Maeve tricked Ferdia into fighting Cú Chulainn. After several days of fighting, Cú Chulainn won. He carried Ferdia across the ford dividing Leinster from Ulster, so that Ferdia could die on Ulster land.⁶⁹

Cú Chulainn could not be conquered. He had the gift of foresight and was subject to battle frenzy which so inflamed him it took three vats of water to cool him down. He had Formorian and *Tuatha* blood, being the grandson of both Balor of the Formerians and Cian of *Tuatha Dé Danann* through his father, Lugh. When he fought Ferdia, the war demons of the *Tuatha* filled the air around him, shrieking their support.⁷⁰

Cú Chulainn is associated with the Otherworld which he was capable of entering. In early Irish literature, the Otherworld was not as separate from the physical world as it is in later literature. In the early literature, the gods were not remote, but rather walked on earth and interacted with the people.⁷¹ While in the Otherworld, Cú Chulainn had a son, Connla, with an Otherworld woman, Aoife. At the age of seven, Connla arrived in Ireland from Scotland in a bronze boat with golden oars – a symbol of the Otherworld. He carried the gold ring given to his mother for him by Cú Chulainn.⁷² Connla was as hotheaded as his father and became involved in a fight. Unaware of who Connla was, Cú Chulainn killed him. When Cú Chulainn realised what he had done, he fell into a terrible despair for three days.⁷³ Although Cú Chulainn was the son of a god, the

⁶⁷ Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (London: Faber, 1994), pp.73–76.

⁶⁸ Carson, *The Táin*, p.123.

⁶⁹ Carson, *The Táin*, p.152.

⁷⁰ Carson, *The Táin*, p.150.

⁷¹ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.78.

⁷² Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.172.

⁷³ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.175.

later versions of the myths tell of his death by witchcraft at the age of twenty-seven.⁷⁴ However, these stories were continually added to and changed, so this could have been a later addition.

Newgrange in the Ulster Cycle

Newgrange is mentioned frequently in the Ulster Cycle, but its main role in this cycle is as the birthplace of Cú Chulainn, who was continuously associated with the Sun. His room in *Emain Macha*, the court of Conchobar Mac Nessa, was the *grianan* – the Sun room. Emer, his wife, promised to marry him only if he could stay awake between February and November, the period of the year when the Sun moves between the cross-quarter dates of the agricultural year.⁷⁵ As with the Mythological Cycle, Newgrange is portrayed in the Ulster Cycle as the birthplace of the Sun. Like the Dagada before him, Cú Chulainn also had the gift of foresight, a gift from the source of the River Boyne and could visit the Otherworld. However, unlike his golden father, Lugh, he was described in a rather un-solar fashion as ‘a dark sad man’.⁷⁶

Fenian Cycle

The Fenian Cycle tells the stories of the *Fianna*, a group of warriors who roamed Ireland, led by Fionn mac Cumhal, a huntsman, hurler, wanderer and poet. In a single day’s hunting, they would go from Killarney in the southwest to Howth on the east coast.⁷⁷ Fionn, or sometimes Finn, had a lot in common with Cú Chulainn. He was a long-living mortal who, like Cú Chulainn, was capable of superhuman feats. He became skilled in hunting and surviving in nature. His superhuman and precocious feats composed of hunting successes. Like Cú Chulainn, he was a supreme hurler and could beat an entire team single-handedly. He was also a skilled chess player. When Fionn led the *Fianna*, he only accepted the most honourable and bravest men who first had to pass a series of near-impossible tests. During the winter, they were paid by the king and guarded the coasts and, during the summer, they lived off the land.⁷⁸ Also, like Cú Chulainn, he had *Tuatha Dé Danann* blood and, while in some versions he

⁷⁴ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.43.

⁷⁵ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.161.

⁷⁶ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.156.

⁷⁷ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.57.

⁷⁸ Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, p.165.

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was of the family of Lugh, other versions depicted them as unrelated. In the view of Ní Bhrolcháin, Fionn had certain parallels with Lugh's son, Cú Chulainn, in that both were the heroes of their respective tribes and both were connected to a canine animal: Cú Chulainn, with the hound, and Fionn, with the wolves that roamed Ireland.⁷⁹

Fionn, like Cú Chulainn, was associated with knowledge and wisdom. There are different versions of how he obtained these gifts and, in the best-known version, he gained his knowledge and wisdom by eating the 'Salmon of Knowledge'.⁸⁰ The Salmon lived in a pool on the River Boyne and gained its wisdom by eating the hazelnuts that fell into the river. According to a prophesy, the first person to taste the Salmon would have all the knowledge in the world, past, present and future. The Salmon was caught by a teacher, Finnegas, who had spent seven years camping by the pool. Fionn arrived at Finnegas' house and was ordered to cook the Salmon but, on no account, to taste even the smallest morsel. However, Fionn burnt his finger on the hot Salmon and then put his finger into his mouth, thus gaining the Salmon's knowledge.⁸¹

Fionn played a role in the tragic love story of Diarmuid and Grainne.⁸² Fionn fell in love with Grainne but she eloped with Diarmuid, the foster son of Óengus of the Brú, having put a *geis* on Diarmuid that forced him to go with her reluctantly. A *geis* is a type of obligation usually placed on men by a woman and misfortune or death can result from breaking it. Fionn followed and found Grainne and Diarmuid. After a long story with numerous characters and twists and turns, they settled in Sligo and lived there happily for years. Eventually, Diarmuid and Fionn started fighting again and this resulted in the death of Diarmuid after which Grainne married Fionn and they stay together until death separated them.

Newgrange in the Fenian Cycle

In the Fenian Cycle, Newgrange is described by Fionn as the 'House of "Óengus of the Brú"'.⁸³ After the death of Diarmuid, Óengus brought his body to Brú na Bóinne to breathe life into him on a daily basis 'so that he may talk to me each day', implying that a resident of Newgrange can be reborn every day with the Sun.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, pp.57–58.

⁸⁰ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.365.

⁸¹ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.365.

⁸² Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp.370–421.

⁸³ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.415.

⁸⁴ Cross, Slover, and Dunn, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.417.

From the beginning of the Mythological Cycle, Newgrange has been associated with the Boyne River, the font of all knowledge. After eating the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’, it is the wisdom of the River Boyne that Fionn acquired. Hensey, who associated Newgrange with the Boyne, considered salmon, in general, to play a role in the story of Newgrange.⁸⁵ The river, which would have been rich in salmon, could be seen from Newgrange. Hensey pointed out that salmon swim up the Boyne to spawn at the bend between the end of November and January, so the arrival of the salmon each year happens just before the solstice which, he suggested, could connect the two in peoples’ minds.⁸⁶ Hensey speculated that some of the artwork found in Newgrange could represent salmon and he mentioned that fish bones were found in the cairn and that radiocarbon dating found them to be contemporary with the monument. Hensey argued that the salmon’s life cycle mirrors the apparent death and rebirth of the Sun: after spawning, the vast majority of salmon die but only after depositing the eggs that ensure the birth of the river’s new salmon population. Every year, the return of the salmon coincides with the return of the Sun; as the Sun is dying, the salmon return, promising fecundity, followed by the return of the Sun. For this reason, Hensey claimed it is likely that the simultaneous occurrence of these two event would be considered significant by the people in the area.⁸⁷

Hensey’s views position the salmon as more central to the meaning of Newgrange for the people at the time. The stories in the Fenian Cycle would appear to support this view as they contain the suggestion that the wisdom of Newgrange came from its association with the Boyne. Both previous cycles closely associated Newgrange with the River Boyne and with knowledge and wisdom so that the residents of Newgrange tended to have wisdom and foresight. In the Fenian Cycle, this knowledge, which comes from the source of the Boyne, can be embodied in a salmon and transferred to a mortal.

Historical Cycle

The Historical Cycle is also called the Cycle of the Kings and is set mainly in *Tara*, the palace of the High King. It relates to the stories of the legendary and historical kings of Ireland and continued into the Christian era up to the Middle Ages.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Hensey, *First Light*, loc 1440–56.

⁸⁶ Hensey, *First Light*, loc 1471.

⁸⁷ Hensey, *First Light*, loc 1471.

⁸⁸ Ní Bhrolcháin, *Early Irish Literature*, p.67.

Newgrange in Historical Cycle

The *Dindshenchas Ereinn* is a group of myths from the Historical Cycle that seeks to explain the origin and background of the most prominent natural and manmade features in Ireland.⁸⁹ Newgrange features in two of the poems from the *Dindshencas*, ‘Brug na Bóinde I’ and ‘Brug na Bóinde I’.⁹⁰ In both of these, Newgrange was a cemetery. The poems seek to celebrate the mythical gods and heroes buried there and both contain lists and positions of the individual graves.

Conclusions

At the time that the Historical Cycle was written, the myths of all other cycles were also written down and were Christianised with Christian figures such as St. Patrick being added, and a Christian slant being put on them. In his *Confessio*, St. Patrick referred to the Irish custom of worshipping the Sun and he gave dire warnings against it:

For the sun we see rises each day for us at [his] command, but it will never reign, neither will its splendour last, but all who worship it will come wretchedly to punishment. We, on the other hand, shall not die, who believe in and worship the true sun, Christ, who will never die, no more shall he die who has done Christ’s will, but will abide for ever just as Christ abides for ever.⁹¹

The Sun god in the *Confession* is Christ. As Brennan argued, if Newgrange heralded the triumphant return of the Sun and the rebirth of the day, it was not in the interest of the Christians to promote this idea. In the Christianised versions, the previously immortal gods died in an attempt to remove the persistent belief that the *Tuatha Dé Danann* were immortal. In these writings, Brú na Bóinne became the burial place of the gods and was referred to as ‘a cemetery of idolators’.⁹² Cormac Mac Airt, as a Christian king, refused to be buried there⁹³. In the earlier cycles, Newgrange was a

⁸⁹ Stout, *Newgrange and the Bend of the Boyne*, pp.63–64.

⁹⁰ Edward John Gwynn, Colm Ó Lochlainn, and Academy Royal Irish, *The Metrical Dindshenchas* Vol 11, (Dublin;London; : Hodges, Figgis, 1924), pp.11–17, 18–25.cited in Stout, *Bend of the Boyne*, p.64.

⁹¹ St. Patrick, *Confession of St. Patrick*, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), p.60, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/patrick/confession> [Accessed 01 August 2017].

⁹² Anon, *Senchus Na Relec*, Trans. Moelmuiri, Trinity College Library, Dublin

⁹³ Brennan, *The Stars and the Stones*, p.14.

place of immortality. The only association with the dead was the bringing of Diarmuid by Óengus to Newgrange in order that he might be reborn every day. Newgrange was the residence of the immortal gods and a place of wisdom, immortality and, in the case of Óengus, rebirth. It is in the Historical Cycle that it became a tomb.

A fundamental part of the Newgrange story is its connection to the River Boyne. The myths show the river as being intimately involved in the creation of the day and the source of the wisdom associated with the residents of Newgrange. As Waddell stated:

The mythology of the River Boyne and Newgrange is especially interesting, because there seems to be some agreement here between myth and archaeology. They each appear to offer complimentary references to the part the river played in the creation of the monument and its role as a source of the esoteric wisdom that was the foundation of the solar rituals there.⁹⁴

Newgrange appears in every one of the cycles of Irish mythology and, in each of them, it is associated with solar deities or solar heroes. It is where they were conceived, born or lived or, in the case of Diarmuid, where they were reborn every day with the Sun. It is the indestructible Otherworld of the *sidhe*, where the day, the light, was born and where people became immortal, and where wisdom was gained. In the Mythological Cycle, it is associated with a magical lengthening of the day in which time can be manipulated. In the Ulster Cycle, it is the birthplace of, arguably, the most prominent figure in Irish mythology. In the Fenian Cycle, it is a place of rebirth. Only with the Christian era is it associated with death. In the Historical Cycle, the once immortal, Brú of Óengus, is reduced to a tomb.

One cannot be certain that the early myths show the mindset of the people who built the monuments although O'Kelly believed this could be the case. However, as argued by Carey, it does show a continuation in how the monuments were viewed and who they were associated with through the millennia, from the earliest myths to the Middle Ages. In the case of Brú na Bóinne, the association is repeatedly with solar gods and figures, such as the Dagda who impregnated Boann, and Óengus, who would give the monument the name by which it is frequently referred to in the mythological literature – the Brú of Óengus.

⁹⁴ John Waddell, *Archaeology and Celtic Myth: An Exploration*, p.166.