Binding the Wolf, Leashing the Hound: Canid Eschatologies in Irish and Norse Myth

Phillip A. Bernhardt-House

Medieval Irish Christian culture had a great interest in eschatology, the study of which has been tremendously aided by University College Cork's *De Finibus* project, and in particular its production, under the editorship of John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh, and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, of the two-volume collection *The End and Beyond*—a major accomplishment indeed, and an invaluable resource to anyone interested in these subjects. Outside of Christian traditions, however, Irish culture does not appear to have definite, surviving creation or eschatological myths.[1] The same is not true of certain other Indo-European cultures, with probably the most notable European instance of eschatological myth being the Norse account of Ragnarök, the "doom of the gods," which will end the current era and usher in a new one. At least four different canids feature prominently in this myth: Sköll, the wolf who will devour the sun goddess Sunna; Hati, the wolf who will devour the moon god Máni; Garmr, the hound who fights the god Týr, each dying as the result of the other; and the Fenrisúlfr, the son of Loki, who will devour Óðinn.[2] Much more will be said of the Fenrisúlfr in particular, but it would be interesting to take a short detour based on that particular canid for a moment.

Some variety of eschatological thinking in pre-Christian Celtic myth may potentially involve wolves, and might have left a few interesting traces in both iconography and in language. The Welsh term *gweilgi*, cognate with the Irish *fáelchú*, does not mean 'wolf' (or, more literally, 'howler-dog') as it does in Irish, but instead is a term used to mean 'the sea'.[3] In 1913's volume of *Revue Celtique*, H. Hubert discussed this term, and how it might relate to several figures in later Insular Celtic narratives who are connected with canids as well as with water or the sea. He likewise pointed towards a panel on the Gundestrup Cauldron showing a two-headed wolf-figure devouring youthful warriors, which in that context might in some way suggest a canid figure connected to the sea, flooding, or drowning.[4] While a great deal more could be said in relation to this on the basis of various

1 Mac Cana 1970, 136-137. Why these might not have survived, or if they existed at all for the pre-Christian Irish, is a matter too large for the present inquiry.
2 Sturluson, *Edda* (Young 1984), 86-88.
3 Bernhardt-House 2010, 347-349.
4 Hubert 1913. On the potential Thracian (or perhaps Thraco-Celtic/Gallo-Thracian) origins of the cauldron, see Mazarov 1991, 50 (where this panel is discussed), 67-68 (where wolf imagery in general is discussed).

Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, Skagit Valley College, phillip.bernhardthouse@gmail.com
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medieval Welsh sources, something intriguing about the entirety is that the finding of the Gundestrup Cauldron in a Danish bog (which is more circumstantial than substantial evidence in the present case, but is nonetheless noteworthy), potential sea- or water-connections and canids, and the Fenrisúlfr's name seems to indicate a fen or marsh-dwelling creature of some sort,[5] all of which may suggest that there is some common background to the elements of flooding, wolves, and a potential eschatological scenario.

It is well to remember that in Strabo's *Geography* 4.4.4, there is a formulation of Gaulish eschatological beliefs which he attributes to the teachings of the druids, wherein fire and water occasionally overcome the eternal world and immortal souls.[6] Such a fiery-and-watery cosmic destruction is part of the Norse Ragnarök,[7] and is likewise indicated in a number of Irish medieval narratives as well, whether separately or together, including in *Immram Snedgusa ˷ Mac Ríagla*.[8]

However, long before any of this in narrative terms, something else involving the monstrous Fenrir occurs, detailed in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* and also alluded to in the *Lokasenna*: because it was seen that the wolf was able to cause a great deal of death and destruction, he is bound by a chain made of improbable materials, and only agrees to be restrained by it via the surety of Týr's hand being placed in his mouth while it is done, which then results in the Fenrisúlfr biting off Týr's hand and devouring it when he learns that he will not be able to break free.[9] While an interesting and indeed under-studied tangent could be inserted here reflecting another binding until Ragnarök of the Fenrisúlfr's father, Loki, by the entrails of his son Narfi who was slain by his other son Váli when the latter had been turned into a wolf after Loki's slaying of Baldr, which is also found in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* and is alluded to in *Lokasenna*.[10] I leave that matter aside for the moment, but hope to return to it in a future study.

It was suggested by Mary Gerstein that Óðinn, Loki, and the Fenrisúlfr are all different aspects of a proto-Germanic 'binder wolf god',[11] which is an interesting idea, since Óðinn has wolves (Geri and Freki) and is associated with them as well as with magical bindings (including in his hanging from Yggdrasill in obtaining the knowledge of the runes). Loki also is a father of a wolf (the Fenrisúlfr) and of another son who becomes a wolf (Váli), and is also bound for his crime of the slaying of Baldr; the Fenrisúlfr is a wolf that ends up being bound in advance

5 Jacoby 1974, 69-77; Simek 1993, 81.
6 Str. 4.4.4. Fortson 2003, 18.
7 Caution might be warranted here on placing too much emphasis on this similarity, or on positing influences of one culture on the other—see Egeler 2013, 50-53, especially 52.
8 Murray 2014.
9 Sturluson, *Edda* (Young 1984), 56-59; Hollander 1962, 98 §39.
10 Sturluson, *Edda* (Young 1984), 85; Hollander 1962, 100 §49, 103.
11 Gerstein 1974, 144.

of Ragnarök. The relationship of Óðinn (as a figure associated with wisdom, writing, and being a psychopomp) to the 'Gaulish Mercury,' and possibly being related to or synonymous with the Gaulish god Lugus as described by Julius Caesar, as well as the relationship of the Gaulish Lugus to the Irish god Lug and his son Cú Chulainn (amongst several others) has also been suggested.[12] A complex of canid associations, with dogs and wolves generally falling on the Irish and Norse sides, respectively, can be found throughout these characters and their relationships, possibly connecting them to a broader canid complex in Indo-European mythology.[13] While Lug will come into the present discussion later, our investigation now moves to the specifically Irish context, focusing on Cú Chulainn. Just as the Fenrisúlfr is more often simply called 'the wolf' in Norse sources, so too could we say that Cú Chulainn would be easily recognizable if one were to refer to 'the hound' in an Irish heroic context.

There are many stories in Ireland having to do with the existence or slaying of a monstrous canid, including some which closely resemble what is foretold of the death of the Fenrisúlfr at Ragnarök, with the latter's jaws being wrenched apart—two such potential parallels being the tale of *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* when Celtchar slays the Luchdonn (whose name may mean 'brown wolf'),[14] and Cú Chulainn slaying the hound Conbél in *Aided Guill maic Carbada ocus Garb Glinne Rige.*[15] However, it is not the death of the Fenrisúlfr which is of interest in comparison to Irish tales, it is the story of his binding. Comparanda associated with the details of Cú Chulainn's birth have been outlined in earlier studies,[16] but the situation which I think most closely parallels the story of the binding of the Fenrisúlfr in the Irish context is a further death-tale than the ones involving the two monstrous canids from the Ulster Cycle previously mentioned: namely, *Brislech Mor Maige Muirthemne*, the earliest version of Cú Chulainn's own death from the 12th century Book of Leinster.

The tale has many intriguing elements, including the multiple portents (including an appearance of the Morrígan) foretelling the hero's death, the background of Medb and the children of Calatín Dána conspiring against him to bring it about, the

12 Bernhardt-House 2009b.

13 Though it should also be noted that specifically Gaelic (both Irish and Scottish) influence on Icelandic literature (including Snorri Sturluson's 13th century writings, which postdate the 12th century manuscript text to be discussed in relation to Cú Chulainn) via the Viking populations of both areas traveling to Iceland is highly likely, and would provide an easier, more direct vector for common mythic motifs than a common Indo-European background; see Sigurðsson 2000. The motif discussed herein is not mentioned in Sigurðsson, however.

14 *Aided Cheltchair maic Uthechair* §10 (Meyer 1906, 28-29); McCone 1985, 175-176; McCone 1986, 16.

15 *Aided Guill Meic Carbada ocus Aided Gairb Glinne Rige* §41 (Stokes 1904, 422-423).

16 Bernhardt-House 2009a.

violation of the Hound of Ulster's *geis* not to eat hounds being violated simply by association, and the slaying of his charioteer Lóeg mac Riangabra, the wounding of his horse the Liath Macha, and the hero's own mortal wound coming from a spear-cast made by Lugaid son of Cú Roí. After Cú Chulainn makes light of his own death in various ways, and at last binds himself to a pillar-stone so that he might face his enemies even in death, and the Liath Macha comes and defends him for a time, it is at last revealed that the hero is dead when a scald-crow alights on his shoulder. What happens immediately after this is the detail of note: Lugaid mac Con Roí arranges Cú Chulainn's hair, and then cuts off his head, but as a result of doing so, Cú Chulainn drops his sword, which cuts of Lugaid's arm. In recompense, the heroic hound's arm, then, is cut off as well.[17]

There have been a variety of Indo-European comparative mythology studies which have examined the motif of '*Le Borgne et Le Manchot*', the 'One-Eye and One-Hand' mytheme and its various associations and potential meanings, most studies of which take into account the story of the binding of the Fenrisúlfr and likewise at least a few Irish examples of the motif,[18] but I know of none at present which look at this particular incident from Cú Chulainn's death-tale. Further, the death of Cú Chulainn's similarities to the crucifixion of Jesus have been suggested by John V. Kelleher[19] and Kim McCone,[20] and as an event which is an eschatological forerunner, this is an important parallel which may suggest why this story's details were preserved in the form currently known as something of continued relevance and allegorical import for the medieval Christian Irish readership of the tale. But that may not be the only reason that these details as preserved in medieval tradition occurred in this form, nor do I think it likely that such comparisons are the source of their existence. It is important to note that both Cú Chulainn's binding to the standing stone and Jesus' crucifixion are intentional actions which each undergoes,[21] which makes these quite different from the situation of the Fenrisúlfr's non-consensual binding through trickery. Such a potentially-upright facing of death for an Irish pre-Christian warrior is paralleled in Tírechán's *Collectanea* §12, in which Loíguire son of Níall asks to be buried on the ridge of Tara armed for war, 'until the day of *erdathe*',[22] which seems to be a form of the term *airtach*, 'act of restoring/refreshing' or 'act of celebrating/festival/

17 Brislech Mor Maige Muirthemne lines 14051-14061 (Best and O'Brien 1956, 450; Carey 2003, 140-141).
18 E.g. Dumézil 1974.
19 Kelleher 1971, 121-122.
20 McCone 1990, 197-198.
21 To an extent, Cú Chulainn's death in general, both in the *Brislech Mor* text and in his earliest boyhood deeds (O'Rahilly 1976, 19-20, 142-143), were things that he freely chose to embrace.
22 Bieler 1979, 132-133.

ceremony',[23] which might be an interesting indication of a future eschatological hope, if Tírechán's words can be trusted.

In both the narratives of the binding of the Fenrisúlfr and the death of Cú Chulainn, we have a superlatively canid or canid-identified character who, through trickery and subterfuge of various sorts (in Cú Chulainn's case, the situation of his weakening leading to his death comes about through his forced breaking of *gessi*, which is manipulative), is ultimately bound. This is the primary purpose of the subterfuge in the story of the Fenrisúlfr, but it is a secondary and in fact self-imposed detail in the story of Cú Chulainn when he fastens himself to the pillar-stone. A primary difference between the two tales is that the entire situation of the Irish hero's story is aimed toward bringing about Cú Chulainn's death rather than his simple restraint from further destruction. What follows in both tales, however, is that one of those directly responsible for the plot against the canid character loses a hand or an arm as a result. While the possibility that the entire story of Ragnarök and thus the Fenrisúlfr's involvement in it might have been developed under Christian influence[24] or Norse-Christian syncretism,[25] we are on more secure ground with the story of the Fenrisúlfr's binding, which seems to be shown in a c. 6th century CE bracteate that is certainly of pre-Christian provenance.[26] It is possible, according to Paul-Marie Duval, that a Gaulish coin of the 3rd or 2nd century BCE might likewise show a wolf-related motif that may be eschatological in its implications.[27]

This parallel is intriguing enough to note, however I think we might be able to go further with it if we consider the ways in which the two canid characters differ. Loki and two of his children by Angrboda—the Fenrisúlfr and Jormungandr, the Midgard Serpent, who is called a 'sea-wolf' in an Eddic poem[28]—are all generally considered antagonistic figures, and all will be involved in bringing about the destruction of the world and of the gods at Ragnarök. Until that time, the gods had to take stern measures to ensure the Fenrisúlfr's ravagings would be limited through his binding. Cú Chulainn, on the other hand, is considered the very paradigm of heroism in medieval Irish narrative, though he is far from perfect. His fury in battle—not unlike that of the Norse *úlfhéðnar*[29]—is even occasionally compared to eschatological imagery, as examined by Joan Radner and William Sayers.[30] In the

23 Bieler 1979, 218.
24 Nielsen 2002.
25 Pluskowski 2001.
26 Hauck 1978, 210.
27 Duval 1989, 349-361.
28 Pluskowski 2001, 114 notes the translation of Larrington 1996, 81; Hollander 1962, 87 has a different rendering.
29 Van Zanten 2007.
30 Radner 1982; Sayers 1986, 101.

Norse case, the wolf is bound; in the Irish instance, the hound 'leashes' himself, as it were, to be perhaps unleashed in the future. Canid imagery—with dogs, but most particularly with wolves—is generally ambivalent, and can be given a positive or a negative valence in both Irish[31] and Norse[32] sources, where they are often found as synonymous with 'warriors' (like Cú Chulainn) as often as they are with 'outlaws' (like the Fenrisúlfr).

The eschatological imagery associated with certain expressions in Irish may have its earliest counterparts in Continental Celtic formulations like that of Strabo already discussed, but also in its specific watery dimensions may have earlier echoes potentially in incidents reported by Aristotle and Strabo regarding *Keltoi* fighting the waves of the sea.[33] With these details considered, we might return to Hubert's study mentioned earlier, and the possible connections of it to various divine figures in Ireland, including Núada. One of the Welsh cognates of Núada is the Welsh Nudd, best known as the patronym of Gwyn ap Nudd, of whom it is said in *Culhwch ac Olwen*'s list of thirty-nine *anoetheu* in a mixed statement showing Cambro-Christian syncretistic imagery: 'Twrch Trwyth will not be hunted until you get Gwyn son of Nudd in whom God has put the ferocity of the fiends of Annwfn lest the world be destroyed; he will not be spared thence'.[34] Further, Gwyn is said to take part in an eternal battle for Creiddylad every *Kalan Mai* that will not be concluded until doomsday.[35]

John Carey examines the figures of Núada, Nudd, and Nodons in their various Insular Celtic contexts and suggests that all of them may derive from a water-connected earth-shaker figure, not unlike the Roman Neptune or the Greek Poseidon.[36] Jumping to the Greek milieu for a moment, something else which is an interesting parallel in the present context is the little-known story of Poseidon, who in collaboration with Hera and Athena attempts a coup against Zeus, who is only freed via the intervention of the sea-goddess Thetis, which is outlined briefly in Homer's *Iliad* and is also alluded to in Ion of Chios, Statius, Quintus of Smyrna and Nonnos.[37] There, a potential overthrow of Zeus, and thus a potential eschatological situation, involving one sea-deity and earth-shaker is averted by another sea-deity. As eschatological imagery often involves the surging of the sea and the shaking of the earth, a deity connected to such natural forces seems obvious to include

31 McCone 1986; Bernhardt-House 2010, 344-345, 356, and passim.
32 Gerstein 1974; Jacoby 1974; Guðmundsson 2007, 284-288 (discussing the 13th c. *Völsunga saga* and its multiple wolf-related and werewolf characters, including one who is a son of Óðinn); Riisøy 2010, 20-22; Schjødt 2012, 198-201 (also on *Völsunga saga*).
33 Sayers 1986, 99.
34 Ford 1977, 142-143.
35 Ford 1977, 151.
36 Carey 1984.
37 Kerényi 1980, 24.

in any potential apocalyptic narrative. The sea-wolf Jormungandr, the Fenrisúlfr, and Loki struggling under his own binding are each connected to flooding, water, and earthquakes respectively as well. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Sualtaim mac Roích wonders at one point if it is the sky cracking, the sea overflowing, or the earth splitting if it is not his son, Cú Chulainn, fighting against fierce odds.[38] Even if Cú Chulainn is never said to bring about an apocalyptic situation, it is at least implied that his own powers are like such a scenario, and thus perhaps the potential is in him as much as it was in the state of Gwyn ap Nudd.

The primary contrast remains, however, in that—to use rather morally simplistic terms—the Fenrisúlfr is almost wholly 'bad,' while Cú Chulainn, though flawed, is 'good.' The Fenrisúlfr is bound in order to forestall the destruction of the gods, but Cú Chulainn is killed to fulfill his expectable heroic destiny as a result of a coordinated effort by his chief enemy Medb and the children of several of his earlier heroic casualties, particularly Calatín Dána and Cú Roí mac Dáire. As neither of these situations is directly eschatological, the question might remain, especially in relation to Cú Chulainn, what or how eschatological themes might have anything to do with his death.

While this is highly conjectural, I suspect that what may be going on with Cú Chulainn's death is that he is not merely being killed, but instead he is being gathered in or recruited, so to speak, at the height of his powers (which are only compromised through treachery to bring about his death) still during his youth, for an apocalyptic battle to come. Such a battle is best understood in parallel with the Norse Ragnarök, in which the best warriors have been gathered from those slain in battle by Óðinn in Valhalla and by Freyja in her hall Sessrúmnir in the field called Fólkvangr.[39] In an 'averted eschatology' parallel in Greek myth, the birth of Achilleus to Thetis by the mortal Peleus is one such situation, which would thus circumvent the prophecy that any offspring born to Thetis fathered by either Zeus or Poseidon would overthrow the ruling order of the Olympian gods.[40] Achilleus has been compared to Cú Chulainn on countless occasions,[41] and perhaps his death, too, in fulfillment of his heroic ethos in a similar manner to that of Cú Chulainn, and his being taken to the Isles of the Blessed in the afterlife,[42] is an analogous situation to what I am conjecturing about Cú Chulainn's in the present instance. Perhaps the greatest warriors of the past heroic ages are cut down in their prime so that they might be at their best in whatever apocalyptic battle is to come in a given culture—Norse, Greek, or Irish.

38 O'Rahilly 1976, 103, 216.
39 Sturluson, *Edda* (Young 1984), 53.
40 Kerényi 1978, 309.
41 E.g. Nutt 1900.
42 Kerényi 1978, 354-355.

One final detail in the Irish situation suggests that this could potentially be the case. The two Irish deities to whom Cú Chulainn is closest and has the most frequent direct contacts—both primarily in the context of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*[43]—are Lug and the Morrígan. Both of them were also prominent in various ways in the narrative of *Cath Maige Tuired*, which Hilda Ellis Davidson has suggested has eschatological overtones in various ways.[44] Perhaps these two Irish deities, like Óðinn and Freyja, are collecting the slain for deployment at a later date. The Morrígan has been discussed as valkyrie-like in certain respects,[45] and likewise Freyja is related to valkyries in various ways, and is one of the *valkyrjar* ('choosers of the slain') in the sense that she does (according to Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, as mentioned above) have a choice of those who are slain.[46] Cú Chulainn, as a son of Lug and therefore favored by that god, or as a worthy adversary of the Morrígan (who, it should be noted, ultimately attempted to forestall his death by sabotaging his chariot the night before his final battle[47]) and thus respected by her, may have been in a situation in which either deity might have been the recipient of his soul in an afterlife in preparation for a final conflict of fire and flood in the cosmos. This is impossible to know with any certainty, as these two deities do not interact much in attested Irish medieval mythic literature. But, perhaps they share the hero in death, and the entire effort of collecting such heroes as recruits in a battle-to-come is a shared effort between both of them and various other deities as well in the Irish context.

To conclude rather simply, then, in the Irish situation, the potential world-destroying force of Cú Chulainn may have been marshaled on what we might consider the side of 'the good' for that culture's future eschatological battle when he (and others) are unleashed, rather than as the situation is with the Fenrisúlfr, who will be one of the chief destroyers at Ragnarök when he breaks his bonds and brings about the death of Óðinn.

43 E.g. O'Rahilly 1976, 57- 67, 176-185.
44 Davidson 1988, 188-195.
45 Epstein 1998, 272.
46 Näsström 1995, 124-177; Motz 1998, 32, 39.
47 *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* (Carey 2003), 136.

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