

# The Dagda, Thor and ATU 1148B: Analogues, Parallels, or Correspondences?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Since ancient times celestial thunder gods have been a familiar feature in mythologies throughout the Indo-European language area. Their Irish counterpart, the Dagda, is a major personage at the centre of the Mythological Cycle, and his possible connections to the Scandinavian god Thor are examined here. Following a brief section dealing with questions of methodology, points of comparison are addressed which include the two gods' common primary role as defenders of their realm; their place in the assembly of gods; their principal weapons and implements (iron club/hammer/harp, cauldron); their associations with cosmology and artisans; and their visits to the abode of their monstrous adversaries, incorporating elements of the burlesque. Both gods appear in versions of the international tale ATU 1148B 'The Thunder Instrument' (Thor in the Old Norse poem *Prymskviða*, and the Dagda's recovery of his harp from the Irish Mythological Cycle), and the nature of the parallels between the two versions is examined. The question of a borrowing during the Viking era, or of an inherited body of tradition possibly from Indo-European times, is discussed: the international tale type also leads to the myth, at a further temporal and geographical remove, of the Greek god Zeus and the theft of his thunderbolts. A proposed sequential account of the development and evolution of both gods from remote antiquity is provided.

Keywords: *Thor, The Dagda, comparative mythology, Celtic mythology*

Thunder gods, with their all-powerful thunderbolts and hammers, have featured prominently in mythological traditions from Scandinavia to India, providing parallels that have suggested a variety of ancient common origins (West 2007, 238–55). A Celtic counterpart, the Dagda, has been less accessible and therefore less well known to students of comparative mythology. He is

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1 My thanks to Mr Frog (Helsinki) and Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík) for their close reading and helpful comments. Any errors of fact or interpretation are entirely my own.

a problematic, complex, and often contradictory character, whose origins have been little investigated. Nevertheless, an examination of the available evidence provides every indication that his relationship with Scandinavian, Indic, Greek, Baltic, and other counterparts is an inherited one extending back as far as Indo-European (IE) times. Within the broader context the purpose of this article is to explore the parallels, and therefore the potential historical relationships, between the Dagda and the Scandinavian god Thor, who in the light of recent research shows signs of a more multifaceted existence and history than was previously understood.

### **Methodology and the evidence**

Whether we choose to identify the following analogues, parallels, or suggested correspondences as revealing cultural history or prehistory, the broader methodological questions underlying the present study, while still fundamental, are hardly new. What are the criteria for a solid correspondence in comparative mythology? How can we measure these against other efforts at reconstruction? What indicates a genetic inheritance in mythological traditions? Good candidates for a common origin should offer parallels so precise as to require an explanation. In terms of establishing shared origins on the level of spoken/written linguistic forms John Colarusso (1998) has provided a probability-based model applied to the phonological and morphological levels of language. Clearly, for comparative mythology things are not so simple: the structural constraints on phonological systems, which are fundamental and low in the hierarchy, may be of a different order and far stricter than the higher level of mythological symbols and ideas. And the question of common origins is further complicated by later 'adstratal' cross-borrowings into one or more mythologies from outside traditions that may or may not be genetically related. Within compared traditions it is often useful to look for corresponding but unexpected singular ('weird') details: particulars that are so incongruous outside the context of the narrative that they provide a strong indication (a 'clincher') of a shared genetic origin, or of cultural contact, in an otherwise inconclusive argument.

### **Defender of the Tuatha Dé**

Let us begin with a brief review of the Dagda as he appears in the Irish Mythological Cycle,<sup>2</sup> with a view to identifying points of comparison to be

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2 Unlike the heroes of the Ulster and Finn Cycles, the Dagda figures little if at all in modern Gaelic folklore (Ó hÓgáin 2006, 147).

revisited later in our discussion of Thor and his place among the Scandinavian gods. The Dagda is regarded by Celticists as having been at some time a principal deity, 'the most prominent of the older chthonic gods' who served for a time as ruler over the Irish gods, the Tuatha Dé (Dillon and Chadwick 1967, 144; Gray 1982, 121; Ó hÓgáin 2006, 153). His most notable appearances in the Irish Mythological Cycle are in the two cosmological battles of Mag Tuired. In the first battle his role is primarily that of a warrior who protects his fellow gods from forces of chaos appearing in the form of their giant enemies the Fir Bolg. In one battle scene he stands protectively over the wounded leader of the gods, Nuadu (Fraser 1916, 46–47). In the Second Battle<sup>3</sup> the Dagda is similarly engaged in fighting off the Fomoiré, monstrous adversaries who are likewise of gigantic size.<sup>4</sup> His weapon is his enormous club, widely likened by comparatists to Thor's hammer or Indra's *vajra*, which he enthusiastically deploys in battle (Gray 1982, 34–35; de Vries 1963, 46):

I will fight for the men of Ireland with mutual smiting and destruction and wizardry. Their bones under my club will soon be as many as hailstones under the feet of herds of horses, where the double enemy meets on the battlefield of Mag Tuired.

In addition to being mounted on a set of wheels for dragging around behind him, the club, described elsewhere as made of iron, has other interesting properties. It can not only destroy life, but restore it, as related in the story of 'How the Dagda got his Magic Staff' (Bergin 1927):

When his oldest son Cermait Milbéil was felled in combat by the god Lug, the Dagda took him on his back and went through the world in search of a cure. In the great Eastern World he encountered three men carrying three treasures with miraculous properties, among them a staff: 'This great staff that thou seest,' said he, 'has a smooth end and a rough end. One end slays the living, and the other end brings the dead to life' [...] 'Put the staff in my hand,' said the Dagda. And they lent him the staff, and he put the staff upon them thrice, and they fell by him, and he pressed (?) the smooth end upon his son, and he arose in strength and health. Cermait

<sup>3</sup> Gray 1982. The MS is sixteenth century, based on an original dated to the ninth century on linguistic grounds.

<sup>4</sup> cf. the modern Scottish Gaelic reflex of their name *famhair/fuamhaire* 'giant', often featured in wonder tales.

put his hand on his face, and rose up and looked at the three dead men that were before him.

At his son's urging the Dagda resuscitated the three brothers with the staff, and then appropriated it to slay his enemies, heal his friends, and by means of it gain the kingship of Ireland.

The distinctive property of the weapon is encountered again in the description of the god given in the Mythological Cycle tale *Mesca Ullad* 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen':<sup>5</sup>

In his hand was a terrible iron staff (*lorg...iarnaidi*), on which were a rough end and a smooth end. His play and amusement consisted in laying the rough end on the heads of the nine [companions], whom he would kill in the space of a moment. He would then lay the smooth end on them, so that he would reanimate them in the same time (Watson 1983, 28; Cross and Slover 1981, 229).

If that is not enough, the club alters the landscape as well by creating a ditch after it (Gray 1982, 46f.):

He trailed behind him a wheeled fork which was the work of eight men to move, and its track was enough for the boundary ditch of a province. It is called 'The Track of the Dagda's Club' [*Slicht Loirge in Dagdae*] for that reason.

The Dagda possessed a further remarkable asset: a cauldron (*coire*), one of the four talismans brought to Ireland by the Tuatha Dé, with the magic property that 'no company ever went away from it unsatisfied' (Gray 1982, 24–25).

### **The many talents of the Dagda**

As well as being a warrior defending the realm, the Dagda is also an artificer credited with building the abodes of the gods. In the events preceding the Second Battle of Mag Tuired the Dagda built the fortress Dún mBrese when the youthful Bres attained sovereignty over Ireland; he also constructed the earthen ramparts around the same stronghold under the oppressive rule of the Fomoire. Elsewhere, as king of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda distributed the

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5 There are four manuscript sources: *Lebor na h-Uidre* (c. 1100); *Lebor Laigen* (c. 1160); a manuscript 'originally part of the Yellow Book of Lecan' (c. 1391–1401); Gaelic MS XL, National Library of Scotland (sixteenth century).

*sid* dwellings among them, retaining the foremost, Brug na Bóinne (Newgrange) for his own use (Gray 1982, 28f.; Carey 1990, 24). That concepts of cosmology underlie this most impressive of monuments is evident from archaeology as well as mythological accounts (Lewis-Williams, 2011, Ch. 8),<sup>6</sup> and in the Metrical *Dindsenchas* he is identified as its builder (Gwynn 1906, 18–21). Within the setting of the Brugh, the mythological tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* ('The Wooing of Étaín') reveals his magical powers, and on a cosmic scale. As a tactic in his pursuit of the goddess Bóand, the Dagda sends her husband Elcmar, in some accounts ruler of the Brugh, on an errand, ostensibly over a day and a night. The husband's absence, however, is magically extended to nine months by the Dagda, who halts the passage of the sun, providing ample time for Bóand to bear him a male child, Mac Óc (Carey 1990, 26; Bergin and Best 1938, 142).

The god's wizardry apparently extends to other activities besides the manipulation of time. As the Tuatha Dé were preparing for the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, they met to take stock of their combined resources in magic that could be brought to bear on the Fomoiré. Following an impressive list of powers that include moving mountains, denying the enemy access to water, raining down showers of fire on them, and binding their urine in their bodies, the Dagda declares that the powers described by others will be wielded by him and thus subsumed within his own magical activity. The other gods are in full agreement, conferring on him his name *in Dagdae* ('The Good God'), suspected to be secondary and replacing an older theonym (Gray 1982, 42–45; Ó hÓgáin 2006, 146).

Curiously for a god of his position in the hierarchy and in a central role in the struggles of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda's character contains elements of the burlesque, chiefly expressed by his enormous appetite, bordering on gluttony, as described in his first visit to his monstrous adversaries (Gray 1982, 46f.):

The Fomoiré made porridge for him to mock him, because his love of porridge was great. They filled for him the king's cauldron, which was five fists deep, and poured four score gallons of new milk and the same quantity of meal and fat into it. They put goats and sheep and swine into it, and boiled them all together with the porridge. Then they poured it into a hole in the ground [...] Then the Dagda took his ladle, and it was big enough for a man and a woman to lie in the middle of it [...] Then the Dagda said, 'This is good

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6 An archaeological and historical sequence for the site is provided at location 3527.

food if its broth is equal to its taste.' [...] Then at the end he scraped his bent finger over the bottom of the hole among mould and gravel. He fell asleep then after eating his porridge. His belly was as big as a house cauldron, and the Fomoire laughed at it.<sup>7</sup>

A further portrayal with its burlesque qualities incorporates another important characteristic: that of fertility (Gray 1982, 44f.):

His long penis was uncovered. He had on two shoes of horsehide with the hair outside.

Being thus depicted, it is no surprise that the Dagda had a number of dalliances, one with the goddess Morrígu and, later, one with a younger woman (Gray 1982, 44f., 46–49).

Despite his rustic exterior and coarse manner, the Dagda is no stranger to the refined arts practised by the gods. His poetic ability is displayed near the end of the First Battle of Mag Tuired, in verses composed to relate the losses to both sides incurred during the battle (Fraser 1916, 50–57). His musical skills are expressed through a second implement with magical qualities in his possession: his harp, which he alone can play. In the Second Battle of Mag Tuired he sets out, accompanied by the gods Lug and Ogma, to recover the harp, which has been taken by the Fomoire. When they arrive at the Fomoires' feasting hall (Gray 1982, 70f.), we are told:

Then Lug and the Dagda and Ogma went after the Fomoire, because they had taken the Dagda's harper, Uaithne. Eventually they reached the banqueting hall where Bres mac Elathan and Elatha mac Delbaith were. There was the harp on the wall. That is the harp in which the Dagda had bound the melodies so that they did not make a sound until he summoned them, saying,

'Come Daur Dá Bláo,  
Come Cóir Cetharchair,  
Come summer, come winter,  
Mouths of harps and bags and pipes!  
(Now that harp had two names, Daur Dá Bláo and Cóir  
Cetharchair.)

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<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that such portrayals may be connected with representations of copiousness (Ó hÓgáin 2006, 146) or may have been a later development driven by Christian doctrine (de Vries 1963, 48).

Then the harp came away from the wall, and it killed nine men and came to the Dagda; and he played for them the three things by which a harper is known: sleep music, joyful music, and sorrowful music. He played sorrowful music for them so that their tearful women wept. He played joyful music for them so that their women and boys laughed. He played sleep music for them so that the hosts slept. So the three of them escaped from them unharmed – although they wanted to kill them.

The Dagda brought with him the cattle taken by the Fomoiré through the lowing of the heifer which had been given him for his work; because when she called her calf, all the cattle of Ireland which the Fomoiré had taken as their tribute began to graze.

Thus, with the incapacitation of the Fomoiré, the escape of the three gods, and the recovery of the cattle taken as tribute the forces of order are re-established for the Tuatha Dé, in much the same way as they were by the return of the waters/cattle in Indic tradition (West 2007, 259–62).

Finally, appellatives applied to the Dagda (twenty-two in all) reveal more regarding his origins and functions (Gray 1982, 48f.; Shaw 2018, 154f.). His name, 'The Good God', may be a sobriquet, as the passage above from the Second Battle of Moytura suggests (Sayers 1985, 342; Gray 1982, 48f.). The epithet *Eochu Ollathair* is of particular interest. The personal name *Eochu* is derived from IE *\*ekwo-* 'horse' and may be reconstructed as IE *\*ekwo-poti-* 'horse lord', drawing on an old and widely extended heritage of Indo-European belief and institutions. *Ollathair* 'great father' finds its formal equivalent in Old Norse *Alfǫðr* 'all-father, progenitor of all', which is applied to Odin in pre-Christian Scandinavian mythology. *Ruad Rofhessa* is rendered by my late colleague Alan Bruford 'The red-haired<sup>8</sup> (/mighty) one of great knowledge', where *Rofhessa* signals omniscience. What is arguably the most intriguing appellative of all is found in the list from the Second Battle of Moytura: *Athgen mBethae* 'regeneration of the world', which has elicited little comment, but in the context of the Dagda's position and attributes may well refer to a central cosmological function.

From the description above the Irish god is undoubtedly many-faceted and complex, yet our summary has served to bring out the main strands in his story to keep in mind as we turn to Thor. The Dagda is described as a staunch warrior, a protector by means of his mighty club against the sinister

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8 cf. the various references to Thor as being red-haired/bearded.

and chaotic forces personified by the Fir Bolg/Fomoiré. His club or staff is of a size to alter the landscape, and among the weapons of the Irish gods has the unique quality of being able to restore life as well as terminate it. His other power implement is a musical instrument. He is closely associated with the construction as well as the defence of the gods' central dwellings, placing him in the role of a cosmic artificer; he is skilled in magic, poetry and music; he makes multiple visits to the halls of the Tuatha Dé's adversaries, where he demonstrates his gluttony, and recovers valuable objects and wealth. He has a burlesque side with associations with sexual activity. In this connection also, as his appellative *Ollathair* would indicate, he is the great progenitor with close connections to concepts of fertility.

### Thor in the Assembly of the Gods

Among the Norse gods Thor's primary and continuing mission is to defend the territory and abodes of gods and men against the constant and chaotic threat of the giants (*jǫtnar*), whom he routinely destroys, thereby maintaining the cosmic order. In this and his other deeds he has been described by Dumézil (1977, 66) as 'the rampart of divine society': a role equivalent to that of the Dagda that we have seen in the two mythological battles against monstrous adversaries. Thor, the son of Odin and Jörd ('Earth'), is a mighty warrior god, possessing great physical strength. His weapon is his hammer, Mjöllnir, which in addition to being capable of delivering a devastating blow was created with magical qualities, though he himself is no practitioner of magic. Thor is an adventurous sort who journeys frequently, sometimes in a chariot drawn by his two goats. He is not distinguished by his verbal abilities – Odin is far superior in that department – but on one occasion his knowledge of poetic terms comes to the fore in an all-night verbal contest with a dwarf who is intent on courting his daughter (Lindow 2001, 56–57; 288). In similar verbal duels, however, he does not emerge the victor.<sup>9</sup> His prodigious appetite for food and drink is dramatically portrayed when he visits the dwellings of his adversaries the giants, resulting in scenes that occasionally descend into caricature (*Drymskviða* 24; *Hymiskviða* 15; *Gylfaginning* 31). A closer look at the details suggests that Thor is an 'all-purpose god' (Gunnell 2015, 64). His character is more complex than it would initially

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<sup>9</sup> The account of the verbal exchange is preserved in a single source, *Alvíssmál* (The Words of the All-wise) within the *Codex Regius* (c. 1280) and is summarised by Lindow (2001, 56–57), who notes there that 'neither Thor nor dwarfs are ordinarily known for skill at verbal dueling'.



appear, revealing further aspects that do not seem entirely consistent with his role as a warrior. One is an implied association with the artisan activity of blacksmithing; a further association in folk belief is with fertility (Turville-Petre 1975, 81; Lindow 1994, 489–90; cf. Dumézil 1977, 72).

In Snorri Sturluson's well-known ranking of the Nordic gods in the *Prose Edda*, the primacy belongs to the *Alfǫðr* 'All-Father', Odin, the highest of the gods, who in addition to having created heaven, earth, the skies, and mankind lives through all ages, rules everything in his realm, and decides all matters great and small (Faulkes 2005, 8). It is certainly an impressive list, but since the time of the Grimms Odin's pre-eminence in the 'pantheon' has been questioned, particularly in relation to the position of Thor (Dumézil 1977, xxiii; cf. Puhvel 1987, 201). An impressive set of arguments has been assembled by Turville-Petre (1975, 75–103) to support the primacy of Thor in the hierarchy, describing him as 'the noblest and most powerful of gods, and he seems to grow in stature as the Heathen Age comes to its close' (75), and observing that the eleventh-century chronicler Adam of Bremen, describing the idols of the gods in the pagan temple at Uppsala, notes that Thor's place was the central one, flanked by Wodan and Fricco. This is a view supported more recently by John Lindow (2001, 290), who sees Thor in Scandinavia as 'probably the most important god of late paganism'. Indeed, there are traces of a tradition in Iceland, supported elsewhere in the Germanic world, of 'one Þórr and another VingeÞórr who were forefathers of Óðinn' (Gunnell 2015, 66). Terry Gunnell's survey covering a wide range of sources reveals that Odin's position in Iceland until the time of conversion was not of great importance, and that primacy was generally accorded to Thor not only in Iceland, but elsewhere in Scandinavian tradition, in the wider Germanic world, and, incidentally, in (Viking) Ireland (Gunnell 2017, 105, 113, 117, 118, 122). If, as Gunnell suggests, the 'recent' ascent of Odin was the limited product of a warrior aristocracy outside Iceland, on the popular level at least such an approach within Germanic mythology places Thor and the Dagda on a more equivalent footing within their hierarchies.

### **Thor's hammer and kettle and their properties**

With the above points to consider I would like to undertake a closer examination of what have appeared to be shared characteristics between the Irish and the Nordic gods, beginning with Thor's hammer.

Comparative mythologists within the area of Indo-European studies have often drawn attention to the parallels between Thor's hammer, the *vajra*

weapon used by Indra of the Vedas, and the thunderbolts of Zeus (West 2007, 251–55). According to Snorri, the hammer was the best of six objects created by the dwarfs as described in his *Prose Edda* (tr. Lindow 1994, 486):

Then he gave the hammer to Thor and said that he could hit as hard as he wanted with it, whatever might be before him, and the hammer would not fail; and if he threw it at something, then he would never lose it, or throw it so far that it would not come back to his hand; [...] It was the judgment of the gods that the hammer was the best of all the precious objects and the greatest defence was in it against the frost giants.

The hammer's name is Mjöllnir, whose etymology probably indicates something to do with lightning, with obvious parallels in other Indo-European traditions (West 2007, 253f.; Lindow 1994, 489; Puhvel 1987, 201).

Thor's hammer, which in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* III, 73 also appears as a club (Turville-Petre 1975, 81), has distinctive properties shared with the Dagda's weapon. The first is the ability to alter the landscape. On his visit accompanied by three companions to the outlandish domain of Útgarda-Loki, as recounted in the *Gylfaginning* 45–47 of Snorri's *Edda*, Thor is magically tricked in a series of shows of strength by the giant Skrímir. In his first attempt, Thor delivers three mighty blows with his hammer to Skrímir's head while he sleeps, which the giant casually ignores. Once in Útgard, Thor and his companions fail in all the assigned tasks of strength and prowess. Later, in the course of the dénouement, the giant explains that the blows were deflected onto the landscape. The tracks of the hammer (*hamarspor*) from each blow created three valleys, similar in their layout and origins to the ditch (*Slicht Loirge in Dagdae*) left in the wake of the Dagda's club.

A still more striking comparison is Thor's and the Dagda's chief weapon's capacity to restore life as well as destroy it (cf. Gunnell 2015, 65). According to the standard reference sources it is a rare motif: Stith Thompson's *Motif Index* (1955–1958) – admittedly by no means exhaustive – gives only Irish sources for the motif (D1663.1.1 'Magic club kills and revives'). Earlier in the *Prose Edda* Snorri relates how Thor and the god Loki set out for Útgard on his chariot drawn by two goats. In the evening they took lodging with a farmer. Thor slaughtered, flayed, and cooked the goats, which were eaten by the gods and the farmer's family. The bones were placed on the hide, following Thor's instructions, with one of them having been broken by the farmer's son. In the morning Thor consecrated the hides and the bones

with his hammer, which had the effect of restoring them to life. The episode does not provide a perfect instance of reversibility, since the hammer is not used in the killing: the verb used for the slaughter of the goats is *skar* (<*skera* 'to cut, slaughter'), but that used to describe the life-restoring hallowing process is the usual *vigði* < *vígja* 'to hallow, consecrate'. *Hymiskviða* 38, where Thor's role is central, alludes to what appears to be a variant of the same story (Turville-Petre 1975, 82). The parodic aspects of Thor's visits to Útgard and to the abode of the giant Þrym (see below) are closely paralleled by those of the Dagda to the abode of the Fomoir. Tolley (2012), in his wide-ranging study of the motif, comes to no definite conclusion as to whether it was borrowed or if so, in which direction. He does, however, offer the useful suggestion concerning the evolution of an older version in Norse mythology that

'[I]t seems likely that a coincidence of a guardian god, armed with a cudgel, a cauldron of plenty, a visit to some sort of otherworld, and lameness may lie behind both Norse and Irish/Welsh traditions. Yet, if such an ancient (perhaps Indo-European) motif-complex did exist, it has been drastically recast in the Norse version [...] which [...] again suggests a recasting of tradition, most probably as a result of outside influences'.

Like the Dagda, Thor also avails himself of a cauldron-like vessel (*hver*) to provide for the company. In the opening stanzas of *Hymiskviða* Thor and Týr are sent at the bidding of a giant to fetch a kettle for the brewing of beer, which they finally locate at the dwelling of Týr's father Hymni. The kettle is enormous, and the two acquire it by guile, much to the anger of their host Hymni. Thor then goes in to consume two of his host's oxen.

### **Thor's hidden talents**

There are further less apparent sides to Thor worth examining. Although he is no artisan, his associations with blacksmithing, or those performing it, are often alluded to directly or indirectly. The best-known reference is to his three most prized treasures. In addition to the hammer *Mjöllnir*, 'a tool used as a weapon' (Lindow 1994, 491) forged by the dwarf *Sindri*, he possesses a girdle which he must wear for strength, and better yet a pair of iron gloves to be worn when he wields his hammer ('he cannot be without when he grips the hammer shaft'), thus further affirming his ties to and dependency on the blacksmith's art. During a visit to the abode

of the giant Geirröd, Thor, this time without his forged weapon and kit, is challenged by his host, who takes up a piece of red-hot iron in tongs and throws it at him. Thor, equipped with an iron glove and girdle lent to him by a friendly female giant, succeeds in catching the missile and returning it with such force that it passes through the giant host (*Skáldskaparmál* 4). Lindow observes that his relationship with artisans can be taken one step further to incorporate acts of creation, including that of the cosmos. The beginnings of the cosmos arose from the slaying of the first giant Ymir, and we have seen that the slaying of giants continued through time as Thor's main activity: 'Whenever, then, a giant is slain, the universe is mythologically recreated, and the portion marked off as safe from the powers of chaos is reaffirmed' (Lindow 1994, 502). Both Thor and Odin play a part in shaping the landscape (2000, 181f.). During his encounter with Skrymir his further exploits of creating low tide and altering the surrounding land with his hammer are cosmos-transforming acts along the lines of those found in neighbouring mythologies, and recall the accounts of the Dagda and other gods from Irish traditions (Sayers 1985, 41ff.).

Similarly, while Thor is not featured as the builder of any of the gods' abodes, his connection with the activity in a protective role is undeniable. The *Prose Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 42) relates that after Midgard was established and Valhalla built, the gods were approached by a smith who offered to build them a secure fortress in exchange for the goddess Freyja, the sun, and the moon. The gods agreed on condition that the work be completed in a single winter without the help of any other man; otherwise the payment would be forfeit. The smith, with his horse Svadilfari, proceeded at such a pace that the gods took counsel to prevent him, with the eventual result that the smith, in his anger at being thwarted in his designs, was exposed as a giant. Thor was called upon and swiftly resolved the situation, bringing the process of construction to a fruitful close.

### **The case of ATU 1148B: the Dagda and Thor recover their magic implements**

An important parallel in Norse mythology to the Irish episode of the Dagda's harp was briefly noted in the mid-twentieth century by Gustav Lehmann (1953, 823–24) in his study of the Dagda but has received little attention since. It is the story of Thor's recovery of his hammer, recounted in the older *Edda* poem *Þrymskviða*, itself a version of the international tale type ATU 1148B

'Thunder's Instruments', concentrated in the Scandinavian-Baltic region. Uther (2004, 49) summarises the international tale thus:

The devil (son of the devil, ogre) steals the thunder god's instruments (bagpipes, whistle, hammer, etc.). The thunder god goes to retrieve the instruments. He catches the thief and releases him in exchange for an invitation to the wedding of the devil's daughter. Many instruments are stored there in a room, but nobody is able to play the biggest one, the bagpipes. The thunder god and his son ask for permission to play, and thunder and lightning come out of the instrument. Many wedding guests die on the spot, and others disappear forever.

The Þrymskviða version featuring Thor and his hammer, recorded in a single source, can be summarised as follows. One morning Thor awakes distressed to find that his hammer is missing. He contacts Loki, who dons the goddess Freyja's feather cloak and flies off to the realm of the giants. There he approaches their leader Þrym, who admits that he has the hammer and for its return demands the goddess Freyja in marriage. Loki returns with the news, and Freyja will have no part in it, but there is a danger that the giants will immediately take Asgard unless Thor regains his hammer. So the gods hold counsel and come up with a scheme to disguise Thor as the bride with Loki as a bridesmaid. The two then journey to the giants' realm. As the feast of the giants begins, the bride eats an entire ox, eight salmon, and all the delicacies intended for the ladies, and 'she' drinks three barrels of mead (Turville-Petre 1975, 81), revealing Thor's gluttonous and burlesque aspects. Þrym is taken aback by the bride's coarse behaviour and fierce aspect behind her veil. Thor then asks that the hammer be brought to consecrate the marriage (a procedure well attested elsewhere in Scandinavian folklore and associated with fertility). Once in his grasp, Thor uses his powers to wreak carnage in the hall, killing Þrym and the entire family of giants present.

The story contains many of the features of a parody, yet the underlying mythological narrative has been a source of speculation among comparatists for well over a century. It is known nowhere else in Norse mythology, though it appears in later Scandinavian song tradition; it cannot with certainty be dated before the thirteenth century, but may be considerably older. Whatever its date, the content is 'absolutely consistent with the rest of the mythology' and may well descend from earlier Indo-European sources (Lindow 2001, 294; Puhvel 1987, 217). Comparisons with the account that we have seen of the Dagda's recovery of his harp are easily identified:

1. A defender of the gods' abode is deprived by giant adversaries of a prized object (musical instrument) and/or one essential to his function (forged hammer). It can only be played/wielded by the owner.
2. Accompanied by one or two companions, he travels to the adversaries' hall where they are entertained.
3. During the festivities the object is returned by the host (Thor), or returns of its own accord (Dagda).
4. Once regained, the object is put to proper use to kill or incapacitate the host adversaries, and the visitors return to the gods' abode.
5. Cosmic order is restored: for the Æsir by the removal of the threat to Ásgard; for the Tuatha Dé by the return of the cattle – in all its inherited symbolism – held by the Fomoiré.<sup>10</sup>

There are further points of comparison worth considering within the story that are supported in the Scandinavian and Irish traditions. During the Dagda's visit to the Fomoiré to recover his harp we are told that the music is 'bound' within the instrument and can only be summoned by incantation from him; Thor's hammer, the most powerful weapon in the cosmos, is only seen to be deployed by himself (Thompson 1955–58: D1651.7.1 Magic harp plays only for owner, and D1651. Magic object obeys master alone). In both mythologies the object of the theft was not to appropriate its special properties but only to deprive its owner of them. Thor's hammer, as described above, would return to its owner no matter how far it was thrown; similarly, the Dagda's harp comes off the wall of its own accord and on its way to him kills nine of the Fomoiré. Once in his hands, it exercises a power over the enemy more in keeping with his magic and artistic talents than with warfare.

We have seen that the Dagda's harp on its passage back to its owner behaves as a deadly weapon as well as a musical instrument, and within this context we can deal with the apparent anomaly of equating a hammer, be it a weapon or a tool, with a musical instrument. A review of the larger international context of the Þrymskviða myth reveals that the Nordic story belongs to a type whose distribution is mainly 'Circum-Baltic', comprising traditions where the valuable object is often a musical instrument. Variants of the story in that multilingual region exhibit a high degree of multiformity, featuring a source of thunder, a hammer, or a musical instrument which the adversary is unable to play. Þrymskviða, in addition to being unique

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<sup>10</sup> The myth of the confinement of cattle (/life-giving waters) by a cosmic adversary and their eventual liberation and return following the actions of a hero is an inheritance from IE times. See West 2007, 259–62.

within Norse tradition, is the only version within its wider cultural region in which the stolen item is a hammer instead of a musical instrument, raising the possibility that it was introduced into the narrative as part of a conscious parody of Thor's exploits and character. In some of the Baltic variants the owner's playing of the instrument incapacitates the devil, providing a close equivalent to the Irish story of the harp's sleep-inducing properties (Frog 2011, 78–84, 91).

The tale type is also found in Greek mythology, in the story of Zeus and Typhoeus, potentially extending its history back centuries beyond what the Balto-Germanic evidence alone provides. It is preserved in a Greek poem by Nonnos of Panopolis (fifth century CE), and the comparative context provided by the Greek materials is discussed in detail by William Hansen (2002, 305–13). Briefly, Zeus has his thunderbolts stolen by Typhoeus, who conceals them in a cave. Typhoeus begins to attempt to destroy earth and heaven but cannot get the thunderbolts to work for him. Zeus, whose position as ruler of the cosmos is now threatened by Typhoeus, travels with two companions whose task it is to distract him with music. On hearing the music, the giant proposes a friendly contest with one of the companions, Kadmos, playing the flute while he clashes the thunderbolts. Kadmos offers to play his lyre to celebrate the giant's success but needs to recover sinews for the instrument that are concealed in the cave. Typhoeus fetches the sinews and returns to the music; meanwhile Kadmos enters the cave and recovers Zeus's thunderbolts. What follows is an epic battle between the god and the giant in which Zeus eventually triumphs. Hansen (2002, 310) lists the points of correspondence between the Greek and Scandinavian-Baltic area variants. On the basis of the comparisons he does not regard the northern traditions as having arisen independently or as being derived from classical mythology. Both descend from a 'migratory story', which he cautions against reconstructing in any detail given the paucity of the sources (particularly the ancient ones) available (Hansen 2002, 313).

Encountering what appears to be a variant of ATU 1148B – and an isolate at that – in medieval Ireland is not something we would usually expect. However, a look at the accepted Nordic and Baltic variants of the type, specifically in terms of their multiformity, should lead us to exercise some caution in dismissing an Irish variant out of hand. A close examination of the contents from both traditions reveals that they agree in their larger mythological contexts; the specific roles and missions in the cosmic context assigned to each god; the nature of their power weapon; and the order of events within each episode. The points of correspondence are at least as

precise and plentiful as those between the northern (Scandinavian-Baltic) traditions and those of Greek mythology, effectively ruling out an independent ('polygenetic') origin for the variant attached to the Irish god. We may note that the Irish variant of the tale type agrees with the Zeus story – and not with the Balto-Scandinavian versions reviewed – in featuring both a weapon and a musical instrument in the god's possession. This does lead to a further set of questions. Is this a genetic inheritance shared by Germanic and Celtic traditions from an IE mythological tale? Or is it a subsequent borrowing in one direction or the other, or indeed from an outside tradition? And if borrowing did occur, when could it have happened? The opportunities for exchanges between Norse and Gaels are known to have been legion during the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by the abundant borrowings from Gaelic sources into the Icelandic sagas, explored in detail since the 1980s, and the distribution of migratory legends in the northwest Atlantic region (Gísli Sigurðsson 1988; Ó Héalaí and Almqvist 1991; Almqvist 1996; Shaw 2008).<sup>11</sup> The featuring of a musical instrument as the Dagda's recovered prize possession, however, renders it improbable that ATU 1148B was borrowed into Ireland from a Scandinavian source.

### Reconciling three gods

In our pursuit of the parallels between Thor and the Dagda in their primary role of protectors of the divine world within their two religious systems, it should be observed that several of the Dagda's attributes are attached not to Thor but to Odin. In both its components the Dagda's epithet *Eochu Ollathair* is far better suited to Odin than to Thor. The issue of Odin as progenitor of all the gods has been addressed above, but the first component with its equine associations raises a parallel issue, since it is Odin who is associated with horses in Nordic traditions. Thor's conveyance, as is well known, is a chariot drawn by goats. However, an episode involving Thor, a horse, and Odin may be revealing (*Skaldskaparsmál* 25). In his defence of Ásgard Thor is drawn into a duel with the powerful giant Hrungrnir, whom he successfully slays. He finds himself pinned, however, under Hrungrnir's immense foot, which the Æsir are unable to lift, and it remains to his own son Magni, then three nights of age, to perform the feat. Thor praises his son and rewards

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<sup>11</sup> A borrowing into Irish mythological tradition from Baltic oral sources is doubtful, though not impossible. Shaw (2007) examines a close parallel, again concerning music, between the Finnish Kalevala account of the origins of the *kantele* (a stringed instrument) and the legendary arrival of music in the Scottish Hebrides.



him with the horse Goldfax that had belonged to Hrungnir, thus being in control – for the moment at least – of the conferring of the horse (*\*ekwo-poti*), at which point Odin self-assertively opines that Thor should not have given so fine horse to the son of the giantess.<sup>12</sup>

Thor's name, descending from Proto-Germanic *\*Punaraz*, clearly means 'thunder', indicating not only the workings of his thunder instrument, but his likely celestial origins. His name in metathesised form finds its etymological equivalent in the Celtic god Taranis/Taranus, preserved in inscriptions and classical sources scattered over a wide area occupied by Celtic tribes. De Vries (1963, 71) regards Taranis, whose name likewise appears as 'thunder' in Celtic dialects, as having celestial associations (cf. Turville-Petre 1975, 102). If, as seen above, the Dagda's name is indeed secondary as stated in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray 1982, 42–45), Taranis or some variant thereof would be a plausible candidate for his original name. On the other hand, the second element of Dag-da (< Proto-Celtic *\*dago-deiwos* 'good god') is from IE *\*deiwós* 'god', originally an adjectival denominative derived from *\*Dyéus*, the name for the sky god (>Zeus, etc.) and widely attested in the mythologies of the IE world. The theonym itself, one of the few to have been retained into historical times, is based on the verbal root *\*dei-* 'give off light' whose semantic range can be best described as celestial (West 2007, 167). *\*Dyéus* is widely combined in the IE world with the noun for 'father' (e.g. Lat. Iuppiter), suggesting that the Dagda's appellative (*Eochu*) *Ollathair* 'great father' may indicate the extreme antiquity of his common name, as well as of his pedigree among the IE gods. For our purposes the characteristics of IE *\*Dyéus* as given by West (2007, 169–73) and Eliade (1958, 61f.) are instructive. Omniscience is characteristic of sky deities, as is the role of father/progenitor. Both attributes are also found in other Eurasian cultures. Eliade remarks,

The Supreme God of the sky is creator of earth and of man. He is the 'fashioner of all things', and 'Father'. He created all things visible and invisible, and it is he who makes the earth fruitful [...] As creator, knowing and seeing all, guardian of the law, the sky-god is ruler of the cosmos.

In addition to listing primary characteristics present in the actions or appellatives that have devolved wholly or in part to the Dagda and Thor, Eliade

12 At a further remove it has been noted in an earlier publication (Shaw 2018, 159) that the Dagda's Vedic counterpart, Tvaṣṭṛ, also qualifies as a 'horse lord' (*\*ekwo-poti*) in his central participation in the Vedic horse sacrifice ceremony (*aśvamedha*) with its perceived inherited counterparts in the Celtic areas, including Ireland.

(1958, 52–55; cf. West 2007, 183) observes the tendency for sky gods over a wide area to be superseded in divine hierarchies by deities representing more active and concrete religious concepts. In applying Eliade's general observations to the Germanic gods, West (2007, 173) suggests that that Wodan-Odin 'while not being a direct continuation of \*Dyeus took over certain of his features'. More specifically, as Frog (n.d., 121–23) suggests, Odin in his ascendancy had probably taken over the functions of a Proto-Germanic celestial god \**Tīwaz* (<\**deiwós*), the predecessor of a much-reduced Old Norse Týr. An appropriation by the cult of Odin, however gradual or uneven, would account for Snorri's portrayal of his patriarchal/cosmogonic role, his omniscience, command of magic, and possibly his poetic gifts.<sup>13</sup>

If an earlier Celtic god Taranis does not figure in the Dagda's background, the second '\**deiwós* element, rather than being secondary, as recounted in the Second Battle of Mag Tuired against the Fomoiré, may well be inherited from IE times, pointing ultimately to his celestial origins, as illustrated by his interrupting the course of the sun, noted earlier. This would hint at traces of an identity held in common with Thor (e.g. his cosmogonic and fashioner roles, and perhaps an association with horses suggested above) long prior to or independent of the appearance of Taranis and Thor in their respective mythologies. Within such a framework the relatively recent attribution of being 'all-knowing' and 'all-seeing' to Odin from an earlier sky god serves to reconcile Thor's lack of omniscience with the Dagda's appellative *Ruad Rofhessa* 'The red-haired (/mighty) one of great knowledge', which we may see as being inherited from an earlier supreme celestial god. A similar explanation can account for the Irish god's poetic gifts and his attachment to the arts generally, and how they can be explained when compared with the talents of Thor, which include little if any verbal dexterity and no magic. Regarding the last, in addition to his firm ties with the arts of poetry and music, the Dagda was a leading member of the Tuatha Dé, who brought with their four talismans the arts of magic in which 'they surpassed the sages of the pagan arts' (Gray 1982, 24–25), again recalling Odin and an early IE sky god.

### **Evolution, divergence, borrowing**

To establish a useful context for comparisons, I have used as points of departure the shared role of Thor and the Dagda as defenders of the gods'

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13 cf. Turville-Petre's observation with examples (1975, 62) that 'Óðinn took over the names and functions of other gods'.

realm against outside monstrous adversaries representing chaos and a violation of cosmic order, with the roles of the object or weapon that each god wields. It has long been known that a cosmic conflict of this sort has been documented across the older IE linguistic/cultural area, and that the exploits of Thor and the Battles of Mag Tuired are north-western extensions of such a widely extended body of myth. Within the larger cosmic framework the essential roles and functions of the Irish and Scandinavian divine protectors are shared. Within our mythological context, for example, the parallels between the defending gods' visits to their menacing adversaries, featuring huge appetites and the recovery of the precious object, gain in significance and are echoed across the IE realm (e.g. the exploits of Indra in the *Rig Veda*). Details on a smaller scale serve to build a coherent and more convincing picture. Traces of common activities as artificers and creators of the cosmos *inter alia* find more ancient but clear echoes in the comparisons with the cosmic fashioning activities of the Vedic god Tvaṣṭṛ (Shaw 2018).

The use of iron implements by both gods, most notably Thor's hammer and the Dagda's double-ended club, may link accounts of the two protector gods, however approximately, with Western European cultural history. In both cases the iron weapons are imbued with a magical quality, which is attached to iron in wider folk belief. Moreover, an explicit presence of the metal suggests the introduction of iron working as a *terminus post quem* with contacts that resulted in a shared tradition, or parts thereof. By placing the information gleaned from the Irish and Norse sources within the larger framework of reconstructed IE mythology, we may propose a sequence of development for the two gods in broad periods from remote prehistory to the medieval sources examined here. There is the evident difficulty of connecting such posited stages of development to an absolute chronology, yet our proposed sequence will help to clarify their shared origins and relationship over time.

An early stage of IE featured a celestial god, *\*Dyēus*, a progenitor (all-father) whose primary attributes, described earlier, include that of omniscience and fertility. *\*Deiwós*, derived from the same verbal root, came to be applied to the wider semantic domain of '(a) god'. A further deity having a 'distinctive character' was the thunder god, prominent in a variety of IE mythologies, who defends the worlds of gods and men against gigantic and hideous adversaries with his club-like weapon. IE traditions feature a complex of thunder gods distributed between Scandinavia and India, all prominent within their pantheons and wielding highly similar weapons (West 2007, Ch. 6), with the colour red often featuring in their appearance.

The characteristics of both early IE deities have been retained in the Dagda with his progenitor's epithet *Ollathair*, his commend of 'great knowledge', his ability to halt the sun's progress, and his warlike exploits. The second element of his name, *-da* < \**deiwós*, can be seen as further evidence of his ultimately celestial origins. In his principal function of protector of the Tuatha Dé with the use of his club he is well situated within an IE storm god complex that includes Thor and Indra. Thor with his hammer, also a defender of the gods and their territory, is a direct successor to the earlier storm god, as his name (< 'thunder') clearly indicates. Certain survivals indicate that his background is more complex than it would initially appear, but the sources show traces rather than strong evidence of his inheriting clear characteristics of a supreme celestial deity.

The periods of Late IE or early post-IE are marked by changes in names among the gods, and the gain or loss of attributes. Comparisons reveal this tendency to be widespread: West (2007, 239) considers it 'likely that Zeus and Jupiter have appropriated the functions of a separate storm god who has faded from sight'. In the case of the Dagda we can observe the results of a similar process – although at an undefined period – where the Dagda's thunder-god predecessor (perhaps Taranis?) in the Celtic world took over certain of the powers and functions of an earlier celestial deity. Also in prehistory, possibly as late as the Period of Migrations during the opening centuries of our era, the characteristics of a Proto-Germanic celestial god \**Tīwaz* were appropriated by Odin.

The co-occurrence of ATU 1148B in similar Irish and Norse contexts provides few consistent indications as to dates or direction of transmission. The presence of iron implements at the centre of the story in both traditions makes a persuasive case that transmission took place sometime during the Iron Age. The Dagda's harp and its Baltic and Greek parallels indicate that we are dealing with a very old 'wandering folktale' whose origins remain obscure. Since there are no further examples of a hammer appearing in the Baltic versions of the tale type, a close borrowing by the Irish from Norse sources would have to account for the possession stolen from the Dagda being a musical instrument instead of his iron club – yet I have been unable to find any further mention of his harp outside the story of its recovery. Given the surrounding 'macro-dialect of mythology' featuring the stolen musical/thunder instrument, a more likely approach would be to ask whether Thor's hammer was not substituted at some stage in the interests of promoting a parody of the god, since the weapon itself had no associa-

tions with thunder.<sup>14</sup> Turning to Thor's resuscitation of the goats and the life-restoring/death-dealing ends of the Dagda's club, Thor's hammer does not actually kill the goats – the slaughter is presumably done with a cutting instrument, although the resuscitation is performed in a way consistent with associated folklore customs. Important also is the fact that the victims in the Útgardaloki resuscitation are animals butchered for food, while the Dagda's victims are innocent men. In his study of the motif Tolley (2012) is unable to determine its origin, but does not rule out Ireland, noting that the motif does not seem to be securely fixed within the matrix of Norse religion and looks more like a late borrowing.

The shared element between the Dagda and Thor in their respective mythologies that has best persisted through time is the 'frametales' of their exploits as defenders of their fellow gods' welfare and territory. It remains to further identify and interpret shared activities and functions of defenders of the realm in Ireland, Scandinavia, and across related mythologies to better understand their internal meanings and the sequence of their development in prehistory.

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<sup>14</sup> Frog 2011, 88.

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