

GODS OF THE WEST

A STUDY IN LATIN AND CELTIC RELIGION

Part I

INDIGES

Fabio P. BARBIERI



Bruxelles

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Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness
like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and
frankincense, with all the powders of the mer-
chant ? Behold his bed, which is Solomon's :
threescore valiant men are about it, of the
valiant of Israel. They all hold swords, being
expert in war ; every man hath his sword upon
his thigh because of fear in the night. King
Solomon made himself a chariot out of the wood
of Lebanon... Who is this that looked forth as the
morning, fair as the Sun, clear as the Moon, and
terrible as an army with banners ?

from Solomon's Song, slightly adapted

The truth, I have always thought, is curious and
beautiful

Agatha Christie, Appointment with Death

For want of me the world's course will not fail ;
When all its work is done, the lie shall rot.
The truth is mighty, and it shall prevail
Whether you want it to prevail or not !

This study is dedicated to Richard F. Gombrich and to D.W.*

Bruxelles

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PREFACE

From the moment it was published in defiance of its dead author's wishes, the *Æneid* became the standard for Latin literature. Latin was taught out of it, and Dark Age authors such as Gildas and Gregory of Tours, who knew no other classical Latin author, quoted freely from it. Despite a brief and rather silly period of nineteenth-century disparagement, it has remained so ever since ; the standard for all intellectual-minded writers, the greatest work of art to emerge from the ancient world, and one of the greatest poems of the world. Above all, Virgil's philosophical talents have been fruitful down the ages : every poet who successfully attempted large-scale religious epics - Dante, Tasso, Milton - found his chief inspiration in him, and indeed it is doubtful whether, had he not existed, their work would have been conceivable.

It is in this light that we must regard Virgil's own work. Its nature was intellectual and religious much more than patriotic. He did not, as is sometimes said, exalt the valour of Italian heroes. In fact, the hosts of Italy fare quite badly in the poem, being overcome in no more than three days of bitter warfare. Virgil wasn't Italian - he came from the border between the non-Italian Gaulish and Venetic peoples - and, properly told, his account of *Æneas'* invasion would sound like an Italian Army joke from World War Two.

The task he set himself, at any rate, has less to do with Italy as such than with the broad culture of the Hellenistic world in which he was born. He took on himself to build the past and future of Rome into the epic Homeric cycle. This was a task of enormous significance. Homeric epic was the heart of all Greek culture and religion. Beyond their literary merits, those often singularly brutal poems were an extended account of the origin of the Iron Age, the current age of the world, began with the War of Troy. The Iron Age means nothing else than the world as it is now ; and the Homeric poems tell of its beginning, its foundation. What Virgil was undertaking was no less than to rewrite Greek beliefs in the light of the new situation brought about by the rise of the Roman Empire, and most recently of its transformation into a monarchy under Virgil's patron, Octavian Augustus.

From Virgil's standpoint, the Homeric epics were flawed on two counts : they didn't mention Rome, and they contained no hope that the Iron Age, the last and worst, will ever be reversed. To him, the two things went together. Though the matter is controversial, I feel certain that he saw in Octavian Augustus Plato's philosopher King, in his most messianic light, come to Earth to revenge the degeneration of man and the world and steer them back to the Golden Age. Therefore, Rome's worldwide rule was to him a fact beyond politics, a religious fact. He must have regarded it as inconceivable that the most central part of Hellenic heritage should have nothing to say about it.

Had there been no hint of a Homeric origin for Rome, both the Homeric cycle and Rome would have been, intellectually speaking, in trouble. The new empire, which looked set fair to unify all Greek-speaking lands, was something entirely new and unexpected, that chal-

lenged every Homeric and Classical category. The effect might have been as much of a cultural revolution as the Germanic invasions were later : a matter of Western barbarians simply swarming over and cancelling the older Greek civilization, replacing it with something largely different.

However, Rome had always claimed a Greek identity, and Latin epics on her origins not only existed but claimed to be a forgotten part of the Homeric corpus. Two poets, Nævius and Ennius, had given them written form two hundred years earlier, at the dawn of written Latin ; they were endowed with the chrism of antiquity. This was important to someone like Virgil who stood, generally speaking, in the tradition of Plato. He was too reverent and serious-minded to make up epic myths out of whole cloth ; we will find that he wrote one vast digression (Euryalus and Nysus) just to account for a non-Hellenic oddity in the Latin legend. To Platonic tradition, antiquity was almost a guarantee of superiority, because "the men of ancient times... were better than we are", since "they lived more near to the Gods"¹. Plato clung to this view consistently, following the traditional Hellenic idea that the Gods had progressively withdrawn from the world in past ages, until (as Hesiod says) only Justice and Shame are left to represent them among men, and these too are constantly on the verge of departing.

The past, then, is the repository of wisdom, because what it knew it knew from the Gods, and from those who had had the unconceivable privilege of walking with them. From this follows a conclusion that must seem, to our modern ideas, perverse, but that we must see as inevitable (given the premises) if we want to make any sense of Classical literature : that is, that a story with a merely human author was automatically a fiction, a frankly base kind of literary work that Plato and his successors consistently condemned ; but a story with no known origin was a story with its roots in divine truth.

The imperial periphery to which Virgil belonged viewed Greco-Roman culture as a whole, and felt the difference between Latium and Hellas less keenly than true-born Greeks and Latins would. He had no feelings for Latium as a country : the poem has little worthwhile description, and less still that is identifiable. When the Trojans meet the unknown river Tiber², the poet is less exercised by the Tiber as a place than by the abstract idea of reaching a new, unknown land. As far as detail goes, the exiles might as well be sailing up the Amazon ; there are, in fact, some glaring impossibilities. And, as I said, he is not too impressed with the Latin character either. Except for king Latinus alone, the Italics are on the wrong side, and the smaller army of Æneas *fries* them in three days. Significantly, Æneas' son Iulus more or less executes one Remulus Numanus on the battlefield for braggadocio and impiety, under the eye and with the loud approval of Apollo, god of truth and religious ritual³. Numanus affected to despise the Trojans' religious fervour as effeminate, preferring to it the life of a cattle-robbing bandit ; his reward for which was a well-shot arrow. Remu-

¹ *Philebus* 16c.

² Virgil, *Æneid* VII 25-36, VIII 86-101.

³ Virgil, *Æneid* IX 590-644.

lus Numanus stands for Italy. Virgil could not have made his name more national : it hints at Rome's first two kings, Romulus (whose brother Remus was) and Numa Pompilius. This, Virgil seems to say, is the Latin spirit without the leaven of Greek (Trojan) wisdom : vulgar, thieving, brutal, blasphemous, big-mouthed and self-satisfied. And not terribly impressive in battle either.

But the marriage of Latium and Hellas, now ! That is a different matter. The marriage of Æneas, the rightful heir of Troy, and Lavinia, sole heir of king Latinus, is the essential condition through which the stream of historical destiny, defined by God's *fata* or words of doom, must pass ; it will lead to Augustus' reign, the Golden Age and universal peace.

Virgil's success can be measured by the fact that Greek Quintus of Smyrna, reworking the end of the Homeric cycle four centuries later, took Æneas' journey to Latium as established fact. In Virgil's time, Dionysios of Halikarnassos had to defend it, in a tone that shows that his fellow educated Greeks had not the least belief in it.

Having established, then, how Virgil saw epic poetry, we must ask how he treated his material. The question would be easier to answer if we had his sources Nævius and Ennius ; but we do not. Immediately recongnized as a classic, his poem obliterated theirs. Nobody wanted to read crude, primitive Nævius and stumbling Ennius when they had classical Virgil to hand, just as nobody today is very interested in reading the chronicles of Holinshed when they have Shakespeare. Save for a few fragments quoted by commentators or grammarians, we have nothing left of them. Our main sources for these epic myths are Virgil's work and the extensive account by his contemporary, the Greek rhetorician Dionysios of Halikarnassos, included in his huge if rather pedestrian *Roman Antiquities*.

There is another source, the Roman history of Cato the Elder, itself lost but with enough surviving fragments to give an almost continuous narration ; it is roughly contemporaneous with Ennius and Nævius, and therefore seems, on the surface, very promising. You may then imagine my frustration when a collected edition of these fragments quickly showed me that Cato is, to say the least, a most unreliable witness ! He had the nerve to invent a quite artificial town *Laurolavinium*, joining together two different place-names, despite the fact that not only did Lavinium exist in Cato's own days and was known to be different from Laurentum, but also that the two places have absolutely opposite roles in the story. He is also the only authority to deny that Æneas' son, Ascanius/Iulus, was the ancestor of a line of priests ; he claims Iulus had no children. And these are by no means the only freaks in his narrative. In other words, Cato seems willing to treat the story in a cavalier, self-willed manner, making changes - and none too convincing changes at that - where and how he pleased.

Dionysios of Halikarnassos agrees with all the basic elements of Virgil's plot from Acesta onwards ; but he includes several interesting differences in detail. He rejects the Dido episode ; his Turnus goes to war *against* Latinus, *after* Æneas married Lavinia ; his Mezentius is the enemy not of Æneas but of his son Ascanius ; etc. These differences will

receive their due share of attention, and help us ; but they do little to help assess Virgil's attitude to his sources. Without once giving a divergent account or name, Dionysios follows a clear narrative tradition of his own, generally taken to come from the learned Roman writer Varro. Also, unlike Virgil, he had time to finish his work, putting a gloss on it, ironing contradictions out ; for instance, he gives no mention at all to Cato's bizarre version, though he was familiar with the old brute's writings and quoted them respectfully in other places.

Only from Virgil himself can we draw any conclusions as to how Virgil treated his sources. He probably liked at least Ennius, if not perhaps Nævius, as a poet ; the commentator Servius averred that the extraordinarily beautiful image of VII 698-705, where the troops of king Messapus are likened to singing swans flying dazzling white against a backdrop of floating clouds - even by Virgil's standards, a splendid moment - was a compliment to the older author, who was proud of his Messapic (Apulian) origin.

But his view of Ennius and Nævius as historical sources is quite another matter. Virgil prayed to the Muses, not for poetic power, but to be able to relate facts that his predecessors had almost lost altogether :

Et meministis enim, diuæ, et memorare potestis ;

At nos uix tenuis fama perlabitur aura.

For you, Goddesses, you may both remember and tell ;

But we hardly are left with the thin air of hearsay.

He appeals to divine memory because he feels that human memory has failed him.

This is not Greek imitation. Though the special appeal to the Muses is standard epic convention, no other epic poet declares such distrust of his sources as far as I'm aware. This is Virgil's reaction to his material : Nævius, Ennius, annalistic traditions such as Varro and Dionysios reported, all this really large mass of material amounts to in his view *tenuis fama aura*, the thin air of hearsay.

His reason to distrust the shape in which these ancient tales had reached him can have little to do with historical improbability in the modern sense. No age is utterly credulous ; but areas of skepticism vary according to the accepted ideologies of the day. Livy, the historian Titus Livius, was as skeptical about miracle stories as any modern, but believed in omens without question. We tend to overestimate those areas in which the ancients sound and feel much like us, because we have inherited some of their mannerisms ; the rationalistic element in Greek thought, therefore, tends to be overrated. Virgil believed in the primacy of immemorial tradition, and would have wanted to recover the essentials of those ancient events not only for the sake of knowledge but above all because Homeric epic had a special religious significance. It established the world as he knew it ; and he went back to Ennius and Nævius with a solemn and intensely-felt burden of ideas that included Greek traditions, Platonic philosophy, the world-changing events of Virgil's own lifetime, and his fervent partisanship of Augustus.

Seen from this Hellenistic and messianic prospect, Nævius and Ennius must surely have fallen short ; and fallen short, at that, of a world of ideas to which they themselves subscri-

bed. Ennius was a Hellenist, and even Nævius (who wrote in the older Latin epic metre, otherwise almost unknown to us) accepted without hesitation the Greek interpretation of the legend ; it never occurred to any of them that Latin religion might not be a sub-case of Greek paganism, but a separate thing with its own ideology and value system. The ancient world did not think like that ; even the Egyptian gods, different as they were from anything recognizable among the Greeks, were nevertheless the object of robust and constant efforts to tie them up with them. That all the religions of the world could be understood in terms of each other, and that each god or object of cult could be either paralleled with a Greek god or hero or else fitted into the Greek pantheon, was an unchallenged article of faith. Virgil was therefore bound to find much amiss with Latin - purely Latin - epic tradition ; believing as he did that it came out of a Greek stem, any sign of an alien ideology was bound to seem to him not a local peculiarity but a barbarous error.

No great artist has ever had so hard a time with his masterpiece as Virgil had with the *Æneid*. Ancient report makes him a fast worker, yet he worked on the poem for ten years and died leaving it unfinished. According to the best ancient biographies, long before his final illness he tried to make his friends Varius and Tucca promise to burn his unfinished manuscripts if anything happened to him. This was not the depressed babble of a dying man, but a decision reached well ahead, contemplating the possibility - even likelihood - that he might fail in his goals. He would have the poem perfect or not at all. His friends refused, and, seeing he could not shake them, his will ordered that nothing more of it should be released other than the extracts already published. It took a decree from Augustus to overturn this.

This forms a coherent picture. Virgil believed as a matter not of despair but of calm and reasoned decision that to publish a less than perfect account of the origins of Rome would be worse than useless. I doubt that artistic conscience alone can account for it. Virgil must have known that he was writing the greatest Latin verse ever made, in the service of a narrative sweep that had little comparison outside of "Homer" and Æschilus at their greatest. I believe his long, painful, and finally unresolved labour is due to the fact that, on many levels, he could not make his story fit. It claimed to belong to the Homeric canon ; it had to fit a Greek frame of reference ; it was the accepted, indeed honoured, account of the origin of a nation, Rome, which not only believed itself to be of Greek origin, but whose empire had become one with the Greek world. And yet those darn impossibilities, those Latin accretions that made so little Greek sense, kept cropping up. They could not help but. They were not details, they were the whole : an independent epic tradition that owed nothing to Homer.

When Nævius wrote his epic poem - a structure, we need not doubt, of respectable proportions -, he used, not an adopted Homeric metre, but a native Latin one ; and he wrote thousands of verses in it. That means that he had at his disposal a narrative verse-form which he felt could deal adequately with a vast and very important narrative subject. Otherwise he would, like all later Latin poets, have adapted Homeric verse. No doubt that he was wrong ; what we have left of his verses does little to convince us that this so-called

"Saturnian" metre was a match for it. But if he used such a verse rather than the prestigious Greek equivalent, that means that such a verse was there to be used. There was a native Latin epic poetic form. Nævius was not the first of a new tradition of epic poetry received, basically, from Greece, but the last of a lost line of *native* poets telling large-scale stories in a *native* epic form : the first, probably, to write his verse down. Now, we simply can't suppose that a Latin epic form existed and a Latin epic tradition did not. There were Latin epics before Hellenization.

We must go back to my original statement : the work Virgil had undertaken was not merely that of an artist. It was a religious work. The best modern term for it would be "prophet" : he tried to use his extraordinary poetic skills to *reconstruct the truth* that lay at the bottom of all the Homeric corpus, both Greek and Latin, to harmonize it all and bring it into the service of the new universal empire of man, from which he hoped for peace for the whole human race. When he prayed to the Muses, it was not just a convention : he really was praying for divine help in reconstructing "what really happened", using poetic insight, Greek religious categories, and a methodical mind. If he had lived his threescore and ten instead of dying at the wretchedly early age of fifty-one, he might have achieved his purpose ; but it is clear that, from a religious point of view, it did not matter how fine the unfinished work might be, if it did not bring into being that truth in which Virgil so deeply believed. It would indeed have been worse than useless. A prophet cannot promote heresy, even the most melodious heresy conceivable : melody isn't the point, truth is.

I am travelling in the opposite direction. Taking the Mantuan's work as a point of departure, I try to reconstruct the content and meaning of those earlier - and from Virgil's point of view fatally flawed - accounts of the origins of Rome. We shall reach areas which the great poet never suspected could ever help explain the story he was telling ; in particular, the fragmented tradition of the Celtic lands, so far from the spirit of Rome, yet so close in so many surprising ways. And yet, as we go on, we shall meet, again and again, with his immense questing mind and with his unforgettable verse ; and it will not be the least of the results of this study, if we gain even a little more understanding of this great genius.

This book is the record of a long, exciting adventure, started years ago in Victoria tube station ; when, reading a freshly-purchased translation of the *Æneid*, I was struck by the similarity between the visual images used by Virgil to describe the burning ships of Æneas in Sicily and the billows of smoke from the burning ships of the gods, described in an Irish legend.

I started work as soon as my ideas began to come together, and wrote as my research went on. As a result, though the first draft was much the easiest, a good deal of rewriting was needed to turn the record of many stumbling intuitions, blind alleys and sudden, stunning rays of light, into a coherent and comprehensible argument. I believed that what I have been uncovering is nothing less than the record of a prehistoric yet profound system of theology and philosophy, as it underlay the narratives of the earliest Latin sages and those of

related peoples. I am no academic, and though I have tried to make my work honest and respectable by academic standards (as with proper indications of all sources, clear and copious footnotes, etc.), I would not insult any readers, academic or not, by pretending to be one. If specialists find all the explanation grating, I beg their pardon. The argument is aimed mainly at them, because I am confident that this work opens new perspectives in Latin pre-history and related areas ; and I hope it meets with their approval. For the general reader, I hope you enjoy it. The only thing it assumes is a knowledge of the *Æneid* ; for which I don't apologize. If this book drives you to read the great poem, you'll be the better for it. You are far more likely to enjoy that than this ; if you enjoy my work, it's because of the subject ; if you don't, it's because of my writing. Virgil is good enough for anyone.

CHAPTER I : THE IDENTITY OF THE HERO

I.1 The Trojan *Männerbund*

The *Æneid* - P. Virgili Maronis *Aeneidos libri XII* - is the the story of the long search of Æneas, royal heir of the foundered city of Troy, for a new land in which to establish the new nation that the gods promised him, of his finding of Italy, and of the wars he fought there before he could establish his kingdom. A devoted and conscious instrument of the gods' will, and especially of the will of Jupiter, Æneas, in the course of the poem, grows increasingly aware that what he is to establish is not only a single town, but something that has relevance for the whole future of mankind ; he is in fact the first forefather of the universal empire of Rome. God Himself, Jupiter, promises Æneas' mother, the goddess Venus,

His ego nec metas rerum, nec tempora pono ;

Imperium sine limite dedi...

To them I place no end in space, in time ;

To them I gave empire without end...¹

As in the war of Troy is involved the whole future of Greece, so in the journey and war of Æneas is implicit all the great history of Rome, to which Virgil never saw an end.

The commonplace scholarly view is that the Latins borrowed Æneas from the vast complex of Homeric legend and built their own epic mythology around him in stages. I read studies in which the characters of Æneas in the *Æneid* and the Aineias of Greek² epic are treated as exactly alike, especially in their *pietas* or religious excellence. But in terms of who they are and what they do in the two stories, that cannot be right ; the Æneas of Latin legend - even of our great Hellenist Virgil, soaked as he was with Hellenic poetry - is by no means the parallel of the Hellenic figure. He shows fundamental differences, and shows them exactly in those features which are the core of the Trojan hero : his position in the story and his role as the preserver of the dynasty.

Aineias is the preserver of the dynasty, and because of that, also the preserver of the city. Troy's future in the *Iliad* cannot be separated from the fact that *his descendants* are going to rule over it, by the word of Zeus himself, interpreted by his brother Poseidon³. It's because he has a family, because he has children and a descent, that he will insure the fallen city's rebirth. His absolutely standard image in Greek art is that of the hero who carries away the old father on his shoulders, while the wife walks along at his side with his young heir's hand in hers : clearly a dynamic vision of the family, in all its generations, being preserved, especially if we remember the ever-young grandmother, the goddess who looks

¹ Virgil, *Aen.* I 278-279.

² I shall be spelling them differently for convenience.

³ Homer, *Il.* XX 307-308.

CHAPTER II : ÆNEAS AND TALIESIN

II.1 Taliesin and Lleu

Alwyn and Brinley Rees' superlative study of Celtic traditions has this to say about Taliesin

While individual beings in some of these stories retain their identity through diverse incarnations, the child Taliesin... envisages himself as a ubiquitous presence which has witnessed the history of the world and will endure to the end. The blessed drops [that made him supremely wise] did no more than to make him aware that he was there when it all happened. The poem, like several others in the same strain preserved in the medieval Book of Taliesin, exalts him to a plane which transcends that of finite human beings :

I have been teacher to all Christendom,
I shall be on the face of the Earth until Doom,
And it is not known what my flesh is, whether flesh or fish.

... He claims to have seen the fall of Lucifer, the Flood, and the birth and crucifixion of Christ... He says that he was created by Gwydion [but also] that he was in the court of Dôn¹ before Gwydion was born... Some of the poems... are replete with utterances beginning 'I have been' and the things he has been include inanimate objects - stock, axe, chisel, coracle, sword, shield, harp-string, raindrop, foam -, animals such as bull, stallion, stag, dog, cock, salmon, snake, eagle, and a grain which grew on a hill... He was not made of father and mother but was created of nine things : fruits and various flowers, earth and water from the ninth wave... Taliesin is everything...²

It is hard not to see in this character a supreme and not human figure. The Reeses have not, in fact, mentioned a few important facts that virtually identify Taliesin with Jesus Christ : he claims to have been in Caer Gwydion (i.e. the Milky Way, the sky) with the Tetragrammaton, that is with YHWH, God himself³, to have been with Him in Heaven when Lucifer fell, to have been on the Cross with the Son of God ; and to have been with Him when He contended with the Jews. The last two claims, riddling as they are, can only have one meaning : when Jesus "contended with the Jews" in the court of the Sanhedrin, and again in front of Pilate, he was totally alone. Even Peter had failed, skulking around a fire outside the palace where his Master was being tried for His life, and denying Him. And certainly there was nobody with Him on His Cross. We are talking about the most famous story in all Christianity : there is absolutely no possibility of misunderstanding. "Taliesin"

¹ A mysterious character, probably the mother of the gods, equivalent of Irish Danu and certainly the mother of Gwydion himself in the *Mabinogi*.

² A.D. REES - B. REES, *cit.*, p.230.

³ According to P.K. FORD, *Ystoria Taliesin*, Cardiff, 1992, the passage might actually mean that Taliesin was one of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton : part of the divine substance himself ! But even if the reference is to the letters as letters rather than to the divine hypostasis, this is still very significant since we will discover that Jupiter Indiges can himself have the form of letters and words.

CHAPTER III : THE COSMIC SON

III.1 Lug, Æneas, Jupiter Indiges and the Sun

So far we have established that Æneas has so many similarities with the Celtic figures of Lug/Lleu and Taliesin that it is impossible to dissociate them. Now Lug is, throughout the Celtic world, a god of many death-legends. Even in the Irish *Book of Conquests*, where the gods are quite pedantically assigned one death story each¹, his is the most widely mentioned, the one with most variants, and the most impressive. Lleu dies and is resurrected in the *Mabinogi* of *Math ap Mathonwy*. His son or incarnation Cúchulainn has one of the most baroque and beautiful death-scenes in heroic literature. Taliesin has no known death-scene, but his son Afaon had a famous one².

Despite the popularity of his death legend, Lug was, throughout the Celtic world, worshipped as the chief god, a living and everlasting cosmic power. This is not at all unlike the fact that Æneas, whose death in battle was well known, was nevertheless worshipped as a god in the holiest of places, the ritual centre of ancient Latium, Lavinium. But that is not all : the divine name under which he was worshipped was none other than that of Jupiter : Jupiter Indiges³, the Latin supreme god.

An innocent observer would immediately conclude that this is the most important parallel yet found ; which is indeed my own opinion. But things are by no means so easy. Greece knew demi-gods, children of immortals, but not one hero who relates to a god as Kṛiṣṇa does to Viṣṇu ; and Roman culture as we know is entirely under the shadow of Hellenism. If we are proposing to show that prehistoric Roman religion included ideas of divine incarnation, let alone that Æneas himself was an incarnate deity, the onus of proof lies on us : we are going against the whole stream of Classical thought.

The first point that springs to mind is the evident, though often doubted, identification of Romulus with Quirinus, third member of the divine triad of archaic Rome : Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus⁴. Classical culture had no trouble with this god, because his career, from his birth from a god and a mortal to his final apotheosis, is not unlike that of the great demigods of Greece : Herakles, Dionysos. We have already seen that the legend of Romulus is closely connected with that of Æneas, answering to it at every point, and certainly his final mysterious apotheosis (which, like that of Romulus, has two contradictory accounts) corresponds to that of his forefather.

¹ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (henceforth LGE), poem LXI.

² R. BROMWICH, *op.cit.*, triads 25 and 33. These are two of only three triads in this important collection that mention the son of Taliesin, so that we may be reasonably certain that his death-legend was the most important part of his legend. In one version of triad 25 he is said to have avenged his murder from beyond the grave, not unlike the Lleu of *Math*, who avenges himself on Gronw after his own death.

³ Livy, I 2 6. As we have already found some parallels between Lug, Æneas and the *Mahābhārata*'s god Kṛiṣṇa, readers won't be surprised to be told that a whole book of the Indian epic (*MausalaParvan*) is dedicated to the death legend of this everlasting and eternally adored figure.

⁴ G. DUMEZIL, *Religion romaine, passim*.

CHAPTER IV : THE COSMIC SON AND FORTUNA

IV.1 Jupiter and Fortuna in Præneste

The last chapter brought to our attention the character of Jupiter, not only as god of relationships, but also as son of a mother, or of a foster-mother. Therefore I will now examine one Latin cult in which Jupiter actually appears in the aspect of a child, and a boy, at that, under a mother figure as great and important as the Venus of the epic : the goddess Fortuna Primigenia.

Fortuna Primigenia was worshipped together with Jupiter and Juno, both represented as her children, in a majestic temple that dominated the little hill city of Præneste, and that was one of the greatest holy places of archaic Latium, visited by a constant stream of pilgrims. My discussion is based on the analysis by the archæologist Filippo Coarelli. To summarize his arguments¹ :

1° the enormous temple has two recognizable centres, the sanctuary proper, at the height of the line of ascent², and a covered well found a couple of levels below and to the right of the sanctuary, on the so-called "terrace of hemicycles" ;

2° this covered well corresponds to the place of worship whose origin myth is described in Cicero, *De diuinatione* II 41 85-86 ;

3° this legend says that a leading Prænestine was led by prophetic dreams to dig a well into solid rock - amid general derision - and, digging, found *sortes* written on slivers of oakwood, clearly of supernatural origin ; at the same time an olive tree, that grew at on the site of the central sanctuary, started dripping honey ; the local *haruspices*, fortune-telling priests, ordered a case to be built from its wood and the *sortes* to be preserved in it ; Coarelli identifies the well in question with the well of the "terrace of hemicycles" ; Cicero mentions that a statue of Fortuna breast-feeding a couple of new-born gods, baby Juno and baby Jupiter, was built next to it ;

4° archæologists have excavated the well itself, and found that the most ancient level of its inner stone-work includes a recess, apparently built into the fabric from the beginning, which Coarelli identifies with the spot where the *sortes* were found, according to the legend, and where the olive-wood case must have been historically kept ;

5° from several pieces of evidence, Coarelli reconstructs a divination ritual in which a male child, "led by Fortune", entered the well once a year to open the case and give *sortes* at random for one of the local priesthood to interpret ; a painting believed to depict this ritual shows the child emerging from the well to hand a rectangular object to a sacerdotal figure³.

¹ F. COARELLI, *I santuari del Lazio in età repubblicana*, Rome, 1987.

² The temple is set on a hillside.

³ F. COARELLI, *op.cit.*, p.70-71 thinks the boy in the painting holds a single *sors*, but I think he has misunderstood the detail. The object the child holds is a perfect rectangle, but the *sors* explicitly shown in a coin (*id.*, p.76 fig.24.5) has the famous and typical "winged rectangle" form (*tabula ansata*) in which the Romans wrote important inscriptions (like the motto S.P.Q.R., or see also *id.*, p.176-177). If the *sortes*, that is the images of Sacred Word, were shaped as *tabulae ansatae*, then we can see why this shape was

CHAPTER V : FIRE FROM HEAVEN

V.1 Introductory : burning the boats

After our trip to Præneste, we return to Virgil and the shores of Latium, where the hero and his three hundred young comrades have landed ; and we take a look at the craft that took them there.

Italy's Æneas-legends have a remarkable number of episodes concerned with fire, and more specifically with boats set on fire by women. Dionysios' useful pedantry saved us a few ; some of them pre-date any Latin story we have, proving that the image of women setting fire to ships was present even in that earliest and most confused Greek accounts¹. Hellanikos, a very early historian², has Aineias reach Italy in the company of, believe it or not, Odysseus - Troy's worst enemy ! - and a Trojan woman called Rhome³, who, weary with wandering, sets fire to the ships. One of Aristotle's encyclo-pedic works spoke of some nameless Achæans blown off course by a storm and dropped in "Latinion", where some Trojan women prisoners burnt their ships in the night ; a story so fuddled we would think it much older than Hellanikos', did we not know for a fact that this man came full a century before Aristotle.

This suggests that the theme was not well known among the educated Hellenes ; that it amounted to a set of notices that some of them might have heard, and some not. That Aristotle, the master of learning, is so little familiar with it, proves absolutely that even the most learned men in Greece knew little of it, despite the fact that writing had become common and information flowed freely within Greek world. In fact, it strongly suggests that the legend of burning boats was not a common Greek matter at all, that few Greeks would have heard of them, that they did not belong to the Greek world.

There is more. Aristotle's attitude, even more than his detail, is revealing. He is clearly not interested, and hardly bothers to give a name to these "Achæans". But Homeric epic lore was always a matter of central importance to Greek savants - and indeed to Greeks of all kinds - who used to discuss each morsel of the central tradition, tear it to pieces, challenge and counter-challenge it with quite liturgical seriousness. Aristotle's note, with the typical

¹ Dionysios of Halicarnassus, I 72 2-4.

² Dating back to the fifth century BC. This not only proves that the idea of Trojan women burning ships was associated with Rome from the very beginning, but also that the state of Rome was important enough for its foundation legend to get the attention of a mainland Greek historian of Perikles' age. Rome, therefore, was already a serious player on the Italian stage by 450 BC or thereabouts, in complete defiance of the picture given by annalistic legend, which shows her fooling around with her immediate neighbours, and doing nothing that could possibly trouble the counsels, or interest the writings, of someone like Hellanikos, who wrote on subjects like Athenian history and the chronology of the priestesses of Hera at Argos. Curiously enough, Dionysios' phrasing suggests that it was in this chronology that the story of Aineias, Odysseus and "Rhome" was found.

³ Greek for "strength", and clearly a pun on Rome.

CHAPTER VI : THE MADNESS OF MEN AND THE SANITY OF THINGS

VI.1 Theophany and madness

A recurring theme in the epic is that of the manifestation of gods to mortals, and its effects. Virgil's account of the first ship-burning in Sicily is different from that of Dionysios in that the epic poet gives a religious explanation. The goddess of the rainbow; Iris, sent by Juno¹, takes advantage of the weariness of the weaker part of the Trojan expedition - the women - and rouses in them a rage against the ships. She achieves this by suddenly shedding a mortal disguise and appearing in her own divine form (a *theophany*), blinding them with light ; the sight destroys the women's reason.

This is not the only time something of this kind happens. Time and again, a divine personage, especially a goddess, has only to appear in her own undisguised aspect to break a mortal's reason. The effect is immediate and overwhelming : Allecto, the Dira, drives both Turnus and Amata/Amita to sudden rage ; then, in his final duel with Æneas, an evil spirit sent by Jupiter; also called a Dira, breaks Turnus' strength and resolve, turning him into a whimpering coward.

This is not Hellenic. The Greek gods can fill a man's soul with rage or terror, but they hardly do it by theophanies. They practically never appear in their own form. When they interact with mortals, they are always in disguise, and the mortals never know it until they are gone ; this is not only a matter of the cunning of the gods, but something in the nature of a precaution. While Greek myth agrees that the view of an undisguised god could be an overwhelming experience, it has a different view of its effect on a man : stories as Semele's and Actæon's suggest that if one of the Greek gods ever appeared to a mortal in his or her form, that mortal would simply die.

What is more, the fall of Turnus under the crow-shaped Dira's gaze matches in detail an indubitably Roman legend of the Valerii clan², whose excuse is the supposed change of their *cognomen* (hereditary nickname) from Publicola "Mindful of the Public Good" to Corvus or Corvinus "Raven" or "of the Raven".

One of the many succeeding Publicolæ, with the approval of his commander, accepted a challenge to single combat by a Gaulish warrior. These challenges, part of normal warrior ethics among Celts and Germans, were regarded by the orderly Romans as act of *outrecuidance* by unruly Barbarians³ ; the issuer of one was regarded as a vain boaster to be punished. So, we are not surprised when we see a raven (*coruus*), perched on Valerius'

¹ In the *Æneid*, Iris is always at her service.

² Livy, VIII 26 3-6.

³ I am not saying that what we have here is anything but a legend ; but it is a legend that reflects actual Roman military thinking. The fabulously distant episode of the Horatii and Curatii, coming as it does straight from immemorial Indo-European past, does not count, and it was carried out under the auspices of Tullus Hostilius, a king whose moral status is very doubtful, and of the scoundrelly Mettius Fufetius. Cf. G. DUMEZIL, *Heur et malheur, passim*.

APPENDIX I : CIRCE AND LATIUM

One Latin legend does include a woman whose name is given as Circe. The story goes that Picus, hunting, horse-rearing son of the god Saturnus, and faithful husband of the Nymph Venilia¹, was lusted after by "Circe". When he turned her down, she transformed him into a woodpecker. Virgil alludes to it, and Ovid, a few years later, gives a full account ; both give the name of the vaillainess as Circe. We may therefore be sure that by the Augustan age, whatever Italic figure may have been originally featured in this legend had been identified with the Greek goddess. But we may also be certain, from the characteristics of the story, that this was not Circe, nor in any way related to the Sun.

Both in the *Argonautica* and in the *Odyssey*, Circe lives on an island and may only be reached by a sea voyage ; in Ovid, she haunts the forests of Latium, has nothing to do with the sea, and first sees Picus when he is out hunting. In Greek epic, her home is at the end of the world, only reached by the greatest heroes after the most desperate voyages ; in the story of Picus, "Circe" may be stumbled on by a young man during a day's recreational hunting near his own city walls, with his hunting friends with him and his young bride not far away.

And her character ! The *Odyssey's* goddess is an innocent mixture of beauty and horror : who can forget our first glimpses of her, when Eurylochos' trembling party is surrounded by gambolling and fawning beasts of prey that act like domestic dogs, and over those strange horrors rises the beautiful sound of her songs ? She breaks men into animals because it is her nature to break anything less strong than her ; she is, after all, of the terrible household of the Sun. But she loves Odysseus, without guile or jealousy, for his strength ; and there is a clear hint that she has kept herself for him, the one male she could not break, the man of destiny promised by Hermes, whom she praises in ringing words for his invincible spirit, and we are reminded that she is a marvelous singer. Once she gives Odysseus her word, she keeps it loyally, holding nothing back ; indeed, the men she returns to him are younger and stronger than before. In the *Argonautica*, she knows the rules of Greek law, purifies suppliants at her hearth, but refuses to have anything else to do with her fratricidal niece Medea, guessing at her unconfessed crime : her conduct, in short, may fairly be described as just but merciful. With one of the most notable lovers of Greek legend, Jason, before her in her own house, she pays him no more attention than if he was made of stone. Jealousy, deception and sexual greed are entirely alien to her ; compare her with another of the *Odyssey's* divine lovers, Calypso, who would have done anything to keep the hero with her against his wish, had not an order from God Himself, by no means unmixed with threats, forced her to let him go !

Is this the same person whom Ovid, not only in the episode of Picus, but also in that of Glaucus and Scylla, presents as a murderous power-mad nymphomaniac witch ? Is this the same person who, begged by the sea-god Glaucus for a love potion to win the heart of the

¹ Also known as Canens "the Singer" for her beautiful voice.

APPENDIX II : THE WELL OF St. ELIAN AT LLANELIAN YN RHOS

A curious item from the enormous and still insufficiently studied source of information that is Welsh folklore shows a partial but unmistakable parallel with the cult of Fortuna Primigenia at Præneste.

The Well of St. Elian in the tiny hamlet of Llanelian yn Rhos, a mile or two from Colwyn Bay, was known till this century for its cursing powers. People who wanted to curse anyone wrote their enemy's name on a piece of paper, placed the paper inside a piece of lead and tied it to a slate on which were written the initials of the man who made the curse. This package was thrown into the well as the curse was recited according to a particular formula. The person who had been cursed was then informed and promptly rushed around to the well-keeper, paying him over the odds to have the curse package removed and the curse lifted. The well-keeper read two psalms to the curse victims, made them walk around the well three times while reading Scripture, and then removed the leaden piece with its curse from the well and gave it to them. This custom was in full flower for much of the nineteenth century, and a well-keeper who died in the mid-eighteenth hundreds, John Evans, was famous across Wales and was reputed to have profited considerably from his office¹.

Some authors record a belief that the well was originally a wishing well, until the greater potential of the activity of cursing impressed itself on its owners. This is almost certainly an unhistorical legend invented to bring the unusual feature of a cursing well closer to the more familiar idea of a wishing one : the well had been devoted to its unusual function for a century or more, and peasant memory cannot be held to stretch further. What is more, the use of writing curses on metal² and then throwing them in water is well documented throughout the Celtic world, including Britain³.

The points of resemblance between Llanelian and Præneste are readily apparent. They were both unique places in their countries ; people came from all over Wales to curse or be un-cursed at Llanelian, people came from all over Latium to Præneste, because the service they offered were unique. I know of no other cursing well in Wales, and of no other fortune-telling temple in Latium. They were religious sites⁴ but with an intensely practical purpose. In both places, the heart of the ritual was in the placing and removing of written words, placed in a "box" made of a very definite material, into a well : even in Præneste, the original placing of the *sortes* in the well was a major part of the foundation legend ; and the *sortes*, after all, must have been replaced in the well after use. And both Llanelian, in its

¹ F. JONES, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, Cardiff, p.119-122.

² The use of paper in Wales was probably a matter of practicality : poor Welsh farmers were unlikely to be able to afford carvings on metal.

³ Which suggests in turn that the sites where cursing tablets were found might represent cultic places of this unusual and distinctive type.

⁴ The Welsh well belonged to a saint and the well-keeper ritually used Scripture in the un-cursing ritual.

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