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Goibniu
the Ancient Irish God of Smithcraft

By Eamonn P. Kelly

The existence of a smith deity in nearly every Indo-European culture suggests that a common ancestral deity gave rise to these related traditions (Fig. 1). To the ancient Hittites of Anatolia (a region now mostly in Turkey) the smith god was called Hasammili, whereas the Vedic tradition of northern India referred to him as Tvastra. In Lithuanian tradition he was Telyavelik, whereas the Ossetians of the Caucuses called him Kurdalagon. In the Slavic lands he was Svarog, whereas the Germanic peoples called him Wayland and its variants: Old English, Wēland (Fig. 2); Old Norse, Völund; Old High German, Wiolant. To the Romans he was known as Vulcan, from whom the word "volcano" arises, whereas among the Olympian gods of ancient Greece, he was Hephaestus, son of the cow goddess Hera and born of Hera alone, without a father. Hephaestus was ugly and a cripple, which caused Hera to reject him and cast him from the heavens. Falling into the ocean



^ **Figure 1** Throughout Indo-European tradition there is the important role of the god of smithcraft to furnish weapons for the other gods. Image from https://tales-of-brittanis.obsidianportal.com/wikis/ghorn.



^ **Figure 2** Megalithic tomb in Oxfordshire, England, known traditionally as "Weyland's Smithy" – the forge of the English god of smithcraft. Like Hephaestus, Weyland was said to be lame. According to tradition, if a horse or a broken tool was left overnight with a sum of money, next morning the owner would find the horse shod or the tool repaired. Image from https://runesoup.com/2012/01/report-waylands-smithy/.

he was saved by Tethys and Eurynome, the wife and daughter of Oceanus, divine personification of the ocean. Tethys, both sister and wife of Oceanus, was mother of the Potamoi (male river gods who were part bull) and of the Oceanids (female nymphs associated with water and the personification of springs). Eurynome was one of the Oceanids and the goddess of water-meadows and pasturelands. Her name means "She of Broad-Pastures" from the Greek words *eurys* "wide", or "broad", and *nomia* "pasture".

Hephaestus was kept hidden from Hera and raised in an underwater cave where he learned how to craft in metal and other materials. Eventually, Zeus learned of his existence and bid him return to Mount Olympus where he presided as god of fire, metallurgy, and crafts, as well as serving as blacksmith to the other gods for whom he fashioned weapons, armour and regalia. Some of the ancient Greek writers state that the one-eyed Cyclopes who fashioned thunder bolts for Zeus, laboured in the forge of Hephaestus (Fig. 3). In the *Illiad*, Homer depicts Hephaestus as serving wine to the other gods at a banquet in the palace of Zeus. Hephaestus is also credited with having made the chariot in which Helios carried the sun across the heavens and having made a golden cup-boat in which he returned each night from the place of sunset in the west to that of sunrise in the east, ready to ascend the heavens once



^ **Figure 3** Fresco from Pompeii (Italy) from around the 1st century AD depicting Hephaestus and the Cyclopes at the forge. Naples National Archaeological Museum. Image from https://www.theoi.com/Olympios/HephaistosTreasures.html.

more at dawn. Helios loaned the golden cup-boat to Heracles (Fig. 4) to enable him accomplish his tenth labour, which was to steal the cattle of the monster Geryon from the island of Erythia.



> **Figure 4** Heracles sails across the sea in the cup-boat of the sun-god Helios. Made by Hephaestus, the vessel is represented as a cauldron, recalling the magical "cauldron of plenty", a metaphor for the sun. Image: Attic Red figure, *c.* 350 B.C., now in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (Russia). Image from https://kosmossociety.chs.harvard.edu/?p=47556.

As can be seen, the Greek traditions concerning Hephaestus are rich in bovine-, watery- and solar imagery. He is son of the cow goddess and a close associate of the goddess of pastures. His rescuer, Tethys, is mother of the bull-like river gods and of the nymphs who personify springs. Moreover, the fall of Hephaestus from the heavens into the ocean mirrors the setting of the sun in the ocean, whereas his forge in an undersea cave mirrors the Underworld into which the sun descends at night. Hephaestus is the artificer of the solar chariot and of the solar boat, and he fashions weapons for the other gods.

In most of his aspects and attributes Hephaestus is closely comparable with Goibniu, the ancient Irish god of smithcraft. The name "Goibniu" derives from Old Irish *gobae*, meaning "a smith" (modern Irish *gabha*). His Welsh counterpart is known by a number of names, such as "Gofannon", "Gofynion" and "Gwydion", the last of these being a fashioner of magic horses and ships and a maker of beautiful shoes. In Irish mythology, Goibniu and his brothers Crédne and Luchta are key figures who appear in the tale of the Second Battle of Mag Tuired (Moytirra, County Sligo) as the artificers of the weapons with which the Tuatha Dé Danann defeat their mortal enemies, the Fomorians. The threesome are known collectively as *na trí dé dána* (the three gods of craft), which represents the Irish tendency to present deities as a triad. Goibniu made keen-tipped spearheads that were always lethal, whereas Crédne made bronze rivets to attach the spearheads to the wooden shafts that Luchta fashioned.

The Second Battle of Mag Tuired, in which Goibniu and his brothers played such an important role, resulted from the deposing of Bres as their king by the Tuatha Dé Danann, because he over-worked and over-taxed them and failed to provide appropriate hospitality. Bres was a Fomorian on his father's side, and he called on Fomorian allies to reinstate him, the foremost of whom was the one-eyed war leader Balar. Preceding Bres as king over the Tuatha Dé Danann was Nuada, until he lost a hand in the First Battle of Mag Tuired (fought against the Fir Bolg), which obliged him to yield the kingship to which Bres succeeded. Goibniu fashioned a new hand of silver for Nuada who was restored to kingship when Bres was deposed; however, when the multi-talented hero Lugh arrived at Tara, Nuada and the Tuatha Dé Danann recognised in him the leadership qualities that could defeat the Fomorians. Nuada, therefore, relinquished his kingship once more in favour of Lugh.

The deposed king, Bres, was married to Brigid of the Tuatha Dé Danann, whose father, the Daghda, opposed Bres and the Fomorians on the battlefield. Brigid was the female double of Goibniu for she was the goddess of smithcraft who, like Goibniu, was closely associated with cattle. And like Goibniu, Brigid's Christian avatar, St. Brigid, possessed the Cow of Plenty. Rúadhán, the son of Bres and Brigid and grandson of the Daghda, sided with his father, Bres. The name Rúadhán ("redness", from *ruad* meaning "red" in the sense of "red-haired") suggests solar associations, because he was appropriate for the grandson of the Daghda, who was the sun god. In an attempt to stem the flow of weapons to the Tuatha Dé Danann, Rúadhán attempted to kill Goibniu, whom he stabbed with a spear. Goibniu removed the weapon and, with it, killed Rúadhán. Goibniu healed his wound in a magical healing well in which injured warriors of the Tuatha Dé Danann were restored to health. A medical charm or incantation written in Irish on a 7th–9th century gospel book in the monastery of St Gallen (Switzerland) shows that Goibniu was associated with healing, for the charm invokes the assistance of Goibniu to remove a thorn. The thorn was a miniature version of the spears made by Goibniu, and it may have been believed that the divine maker of a weapon

was best qualified to remove it and heal its damaging effects. It may also be significant that butter was applied as part of the charm (remembering that Goibniu was the owner of an enchanted cow). In the Otherworld, Goibniu was the host of a feast called *Fled Goibnenn* at which he served a drink to the Tuatha Dé Danann that protected them from old age and decay. This echoes Hephaestus serving drink to the Olympian gods in the palace of Zeus referred to earlier.

Lugh was the battle commander of the Tuatha Dé Danann, his grandfather, Balar, having been the Fomorian war chief. Balar possessed a single, poisonous, fiery eye, whose gaze brought forth death and destruction. Normally, the eye was kept lidded, but, as Balar's retainers were raising it to enable him to destroy the Tuatha Dé Danann, Lugh hurled a sling stone through it (in some accounts a spear) and killed Balar – but not before Balar had killed Nuada in combat.

A central theme of the battle-tale is the restoration of cosmic order through the creation of effective and legitimate kingship. The mixed parentage of Bres and Lugh helps to emphasise that the opposing Fomorian and Tuatha Dé Danann heroes express the unity of opposites that exists in the natural world in the diurnal and annual solar cycle: as between night and day and winter and summer. It is also a story about succession that mirrors the natural order whereby day follows night and the seasons succeed each other in an endless annual cycle. With succession there is renewal as when the old sun dies at the winter solstice only to be succeeded by a new sun whose rebirth restores the earth to fertility.

Lugh's father, Cian, was of the Tuatha Dé Danann and he had met Lugh's Fomorian mother Eithne, daughter of Balar, while seeking to rescue the enchanted cow which Balar had stolen from Goibniu. The enchanted cow, whose milk yield was almost inexhaustible, is known in folklore as *Glas Ghoibhneann,* meaning "the grey of Goibniu", but which also occurs in corrupted forms, such as *Glas Goibhleann* and *Glas Ghoibneach*. The enchanted cow is also known as the *Bó Finne* ("White Cow"), recalling associations with Bóinne (from archaic Irish *bóu-vinda*), the ancient cow goddess, who was mistress of the Daghda and a double of Brigid.

In folk tradition, Goibniu's forge, known as the *Cerdcha Ghaibhnenn*, was thought to be located near Mullaghmast (County Kildare) where there was an important royal centre located in an area that contained copper and gold deposits. Another tradition located his smithy on Aolbhachat, or Crow Island, a tiny island off the tip of the Beara Peninsula in County Cork, another area rich in copper deposits. Here, he kept the Glas Ghoibhneann which would leap the ocean channel to graze on the mainland.

The popularity of Goibniu as a deity is suggested by his later emanations as the master craftsman Gobán Saor and as the enchanted smith, Lon mac Liomtha. An avatar of Goibniu also appears in the person of the smith, Culann, whose house was protected by a ferocious watchdog. When the boy hero Sétanta was obliged to kill the dog in self defence, he offered to take the animal's place until a replacement could be reared and, for this, he was renamed *Cú Chulainn* – "Culann's hound".

The Gobán Saor, another legendary avatar of Goibniu, was a popular figure about whom numerous tales were told throughout Ireland and Scotland during medieval and later times. The name *Gobán* is related to *Goibniu*, indicating "a smith", while *Saor* means "an artificer, or craftsman." The folktales depict the Gobán Saor as a quick-witted master-builder and carpenter who inevitably triumphs in disputes with patrons, sometimes with the assistance of his clever wife. Some folktales locate the forge of the

Gobán Saor at Slieve Anierann, the "Iron Mountain" in County Leitrim, where iron and coal were mined for centuries. The Gobán Saor is reputed to have built numerous round towers (Fig. 5), monastic buildings and castles throughout Ireland and is said to have been buried in the monastery of Derrynaflan (County Tipperary) (Fig. 6). A story tells how the Gobán Saor was being interviewed about his skills by a prospective employer, who was sceptical of the craftsman's claims. Before going to lunch, the man challenged Gobán Saor: "Can you make a cat with two tails?" When the man returned Gobán had carved a sculpture of a cat with two tails. A number of carvings depicting a two-tailed cat are to be found in Counties Tipperary and Limerick, most of which are associated with folktales of the Gobán Saor (Fig. 7). The image of the two-tailed cat is also known on medieval metal pilgrim badges.



> **Figure 5** Tradition holds that the 10th – 11th century round tower of Antrim was built by the master-builder Gobán Saor who was a popular avatar of Goibniu, the god of smithcraft. Image from http://www.round-towers.org/antrim/P5140107ax.jpg.



< **Figure 6** Medieval gravestone at Derrynaflan (County Tipperary), said to be the burial place of the Gobán Saor. Image from http://www.irishstones.org/place.aspx?p=814&i=3.



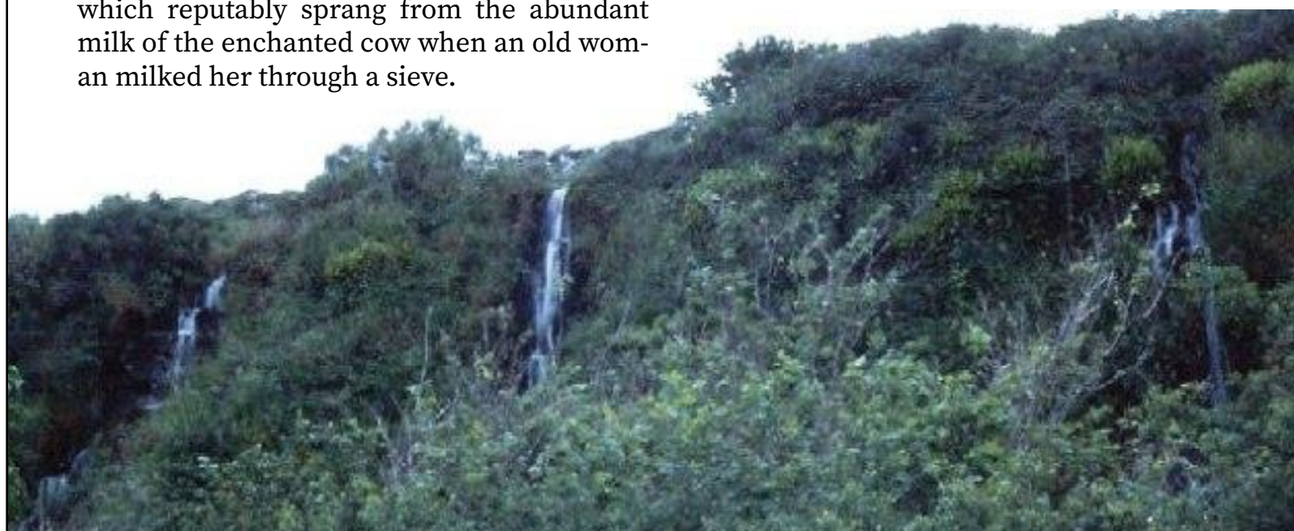
^ **Figure 7** Two-tailed cat at Swiss Cottage (County Tipperary) said to have been carved by the Gobán Saor. Image from http://www.irishstones.org/place.aspx?p=845&i=3.

The enchanted smith, Lon mac Liomtha, another avatar of Goibniu, is also known widely in the folklore of Ireland and Scotland. He appears in the fourteenth century "Lay of the Smithy", a tale that is part of the lore of Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fianna. One day, Fionn, his son Oisín, and six companions were at Slieve Luachra, in west Munster, when a hideous giant made an unexpected appearance. The giant had one eye, one foot and three arms; physical defects that echo those of the crippled Hephaestus and lame Weyland. The giant introduced himself and challenged the Fianna to a race over a course that covered much of the country, ending at the Cave of Corann (County Sligo) (Fig. 8). Within the cave there was a forge where a number of gigantic and hideous smiths were busy making weapons. The smiths equipped each Fenian warrior with a sword and spear of superlative quality, each with a different name. Fionn's sword was called Mac an Luin. The warriors were also provided with accommodation and, when they awoke next morning, they found themselves back on Slieve Luachra, still bearing their new weapons.



< **Figure 8** Although the forge of Lon mac Liomtha was said to be located in the "Cave of Corann", there are, in fact, sixteen caves in the limestone plateau of Kesk Corann (County Sligo) of which this is the largest. Image from http://www.carrowkeel.com/sites/carrowkeel/kesh1.html.

Lon mac Liomtha is also associated with Slievenaglaise (the mountain of the Glas Ghoibhneann) in the Burren area of County Clare where a number of monuments and features are associated with the mythical blacksmith and his enchanted cow. This includes a stone fort called Cahernaglasha, "the fort of the Glas" (where the cow was stabled with her seven keepers, the sons of Lon), and Mohernagartan, "the smith's fort", which contains a man-made cave or souterrain with cinder-like debris, which is the reputed forge of the smith. It was here that Lon forged swords for Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fianna until Fionn's companions Goll mac Morna and his brother Conan broke the smith's anvil, so powerfully did they strike it with the sledge. Footprints of the Glas Ghoibhneann and of her calf, as well as those of Lon mac Liomtha and his seven sons, are said to be visible in the surrounding rocks, as is the bed on which the Glas slept (*Leaba na Glaise*) and the nearby bed of her calf. There is also a waterfall of seven rivulets called *Seacht Srotha na t-Aéscaíghe* (Fig. 9), "the Seven Streams of the Overflowing", which reputably sprang from the abundant milk of the enchanted cow when an old woman milked her through a sieve.



> **Figure 9** Teeskagh Waterfall in the Burren (County Clare). Seven rivulets are said to have been formed by a flood of milk flowing from the enchanted cow of Lon mac Liomtha. Image from https://like-a-river.com/2011/02/19/or-like-many/.

Many of the male characters in Irish mythology are metaphors for the sun and each has been created to express a different aspect or attribute of the sun, which passes through many phases and stages. Goibniu's guardianship of the enchanted cow suggests that he is a double of Find, the God of Wisdom; however, unlike Find, Goibniu appears to exercise his powers in the Underworld, for he is a metaphor of the night-time sun as it passes through the subterranean realm. Goibniu is a chthonic fire deity who possesses a craft that is almost magical in its transformative powers, whose forge is to be found in caves. He possesses powers of healing and, by preserving the Tuatha Dé Danann from old age and decay, his feast confers immortality. However, this is but a metaphor for the dead in the Underworld who never grow any older. Goibniu is a double for Balar, and it is significant that the figure of Lon mac Liomtha appears to display aspects of both Goibniu and Balar, suggesting that he is modelled on both characters. The solar attributes of the Greek god Hephaestus have already been mentioned, and similar traits are also to be found in other Indo-European versions of the smith god. Recall that the Vedic deity Tvastra is represented both as a smith god and as a solar deity; in Lithuanian tradition, it is the smith god Telyavelik who forges the sun. And the Slavic smith god Svarog is said to be the father of Dažbog, who is a solar deity.