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A Confluence of Wisdom: The Symbolism of Wells, Whirlpools, Waterfalls and Rivers in Early Celtic Sources

Sharon Paice MacLeod

In numerous Irish and Welsh literary sources, bodies of water are associated with a wide variety of practical and esoteric qualities, including healing, purification, wisdom and transformation. This paper will explore several streams of thought pertaining to this phenomenon, including the connection between rivers and poetic or divinely-inspired wisdom, comparative readings of descriptions of wells or springs associated with sacred knowledge, parallel imagery between whirlpools and sacred vessels, and prophetic or other divine qualities connected with sacred sites located at or near waterfalls.

Rivers of Sacred Knowledge

A number of early Irish texts make reference to rivers that were held in great esteem and were associated with sacred or poetic wisdom and inspiration. Two of the most well-known of these references are the *Dindshenchas* accounts of *Boand* (the River Boyne) and *Sinann* (the River Shannon). In the several versions of the story of Sinann, a woman of the Tuatha Dé Dannan approaches a particular well. In her pursuit of knowledge she follows a stream that issues from the well and is drowned, becoming the eponymous spirit of the river.¹ A somewhat similar story is told of the woman Boand, who approaches a well and unadvisedly walks around it three times. When the water rises up she is disfigured, drowned, and similarly transformed into the spirit of the river.²

Both of the women, in their own way, were involved in a personal quest for knowledge. Boand approached a well guarded by her husband Nechtan (whose name is cognate with that of *Neptune*)

¹ Gwynn, Edward, *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, Part III (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991), 286-297.

² *Op. cit.*, 26-39.

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and his three cupbearers *Flesc* (rod, wand), *Luam* (pilot, steersman) and either *Lam* (hand, arm; prowess, valor, accomplishment) or *Lesc* (sluggish, reluctant).³ The well's powers were so potent that the eyes of anyone (other than Nechtan and his cupbearers) who looked into the well would burst. Even by moving left or right the person would not be able to come away from the well without blemish. In addition, "every secret or mysterious evil" was said to "burst forth" from the well (*maided cech mí-rún*).⁴

A lesser-known reference to a well of power is mentioned in the *Dindshenchas* account of *Cend Febrat*. In this account the poet tells how during his sleep he was shown every fairy-mound in Cend Febrat. He was also shown a variety of grave sites as well as a well or spring that was famous for its beauty and its never-failing properties. Whoever had the well on their right would remain free from spells or disease, while those who had it on their left would experience quick decay or a shortening of their days. The well was said to have certain special virtues or properties, as well as particular prohibitions or spells (*búada is búan-gesse*).⁵

Regardless of the potentially dangerous attributes of these wells and rivers, they were also considered extremely venerable. The sacred nature of the river Boyne is reflected in the fact that it is said to have no fewer than fifteen names in the first *Dindshenchas* account of Boand. At the site of the spring, the river was called by the same name as the well (*Segais*), after which it was referred to as the *Arm of Nuadu's Wife* and then the *Leg of Nuadu's Wife*. Further along it was referred to as the *Great Silver Yoke*, the *White Marrow of Fedlimid*, *Stormy Wave*, *River of the White Hazel* and *Banna* (at least as far as Lough Neagh). At this point the geographical territory of the sacred estuary expands beyond its purely physical bounds to include Scotland (where it was known as *Roof of the Ocean* and *Lunnand*) and Britain (where it included or was equated with *Sabrann*, the Severn). From there it goes on to include other

³ Dumézil, Georges, "Le Puits de Nechtan" in *Celtica* 6 (1963), 59.

⁴ Gwynn 1991, Part III, 28-31.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 226-231.

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venerable rivers known from Biblical sources, including the Tiber, the Jordan, the Euphrates and the Tigris.⁶

In the *Dindshenchas* tradition, the story of Sinann is presented in a somewhat less sinister light than that of Boand. Sinann was described as possessing every sort of fame or reknown except for *imbais/immus* ‘great knowledge’ (presumably referring to the specialized power known as *imbais forosnai*).⁷ In one version the power she seeks is called “great wisdom by way of streams” (*imma sóis co srethaib*), apparently an important or eminent activity (*gníam nóis*) that was needed for what is here referred to as her “new life” (*núa-bethaid*).⁸

The phrase *imma sóis co srethaib* may also refer to an ordering or arrangement (*sreth*) of divinely inspired words, such as may have been used in spells or incantations. This word is found in a number of other sources, in the phrases *sreth rann* (a series of parts [of speech]), *sreth senchais* (a series of stories), *sreatha deich* (the name of a meter), and *sreathaibh roscaigh ocus fasaigh ocus airchetail* (a series of proverbs, commentaries and poetic compositions). It was also used to refer to a general “spreading of knowledge” (*sreth immais*) as well as in a more specific context as a metrical term (*sreth imbais*) referring to the alliteration of all of the words in a particular line. In addition, the word is seen in the phrase *iar sreth na súad* (according to the threads of poetic arts/compositions), which means “handed down by tradition”.⁹

In these place-name stories, wells are perceived as the source of wisdom and the rivers as the method of conveyance. This flow of wisdom is referred to in other sources as well. In *The Cauldron of Poesy*, a particular vessel was said to sing or chant (*ar-cain*) by way of “a stream of honor or pre-eminence” (*sruaim n-ordan*). It was the source of “courses of excellent knowledge” (*rethaib sofis*) as well as a “river or current of great knowledge” (*srethaib imbais*), the latter

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 26-29.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 294-295.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, 288-289.

⁹ *DIL*, s.v. *sreth*, 371; Calder, George, *Auraceipt na n-Éces* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 24-25.

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being the same type of flowing wisdom sought by Sinann in the story above.¹⁰

The idea that wisdom should “flow” from the enlightened or inspired person is also seen in the phrase *sruth sulbaire ind labartha* ‘a stream of eloquence of speaking.’ A particular type of poetic composition was known as *sruth déc* (a stream of ten, tenth stream) and a lower poetic grade called *sruth-bard* (a division of *dóerbard*). A higher poetic grade (and a poetic meter) were both referred to as *sruth di aill* (the former being a subdivision of *sóerbard*).¹¹ In addition, in *Immacalam in Dá Thuarad* ‘The Colloquy of the Two Sages’, the poet *Néde* states that one of the arts he practices is a “stream of science” (*sruth fáil*), a term glossed as “many meters, or the abundance of science.” He also mentions that one of the activities he hopes to undertake is to go “among the streams of knowledge” (*etir sruthu íuil*).¹²

The Well of Wisdom

The source of wisdom in these various accounts is described as a sacred well or spring (*topar/tobar*), a word also used to indicate a “source.” One such well is described in some detail in the first *Dindshenchas* account of Sinann. The well was said to be located under the sea, in the domain of *Condla*. It was located at the edge of a river and seven primary streams flowed from it. In the well could be found *immus na Segsa* (the ‘great knowledge’ of *Segais*) and over it stood the “melodious hazel of the poets” (*coll n-écsi n-ilcheólach*).¹³ The nuts of the tree burst forth all at once along with leaf, flower and fruit and fell from the trees into the “honored well.” From the seven streams came a “whispering” (*cocur*) of musical wisdom or inspiration (*ceól-éicse*).¹⁴ The word *éicse* has a number of

¹⁰ Henry, P.L., “The Caldron of Poesy” in *Studia Celtica* 14-15 (1979-1980), 126.

¹¹ *DIL*, s.v. *sruth*, 381.

¹² Stokes, Whitley (ed.), “The Colloquy of the Two Sages” in *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905), 22-23, 26-27.

¹³ Gwynn 1991, Part III, 286-289.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, 288-289.

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interesting meanings, including (1) divination; wisdom, the profession of a seer, (2) revelation, lore, learning (especially poetry/poetic composition, the poetic art, skill, faculty or calling), and (3) the poetic profession, the bardic order; poets.¹⁵

In the second version of Sinann's tale, the well is directly referred to as *Tipra Chonnlaí* 'the Well of Connla' and is said to be located underneath the ocean. Seven streams rose from the well (six streams, with the seventh being that of Sinann). In this recounting, there are nine hazel trees around the well, which were associated with *Crimall* the sage (*fir glic*). These trees likewise manifested nuts, leaves and flowers all at the same time. They dropped their nuts into the well under the command of some obscure druidical force or knowledge (*le doilbi smachta fo cheó doirchi dráidechta*). The nuts were scattered on the bottom of the well and eaten by the salmon that lived in the well.¹⁶

There is another interesting detail in the second account of Sinann. Here the juice of the nuts was said to have formed "bubbles of wisdom" (*bolca immaiss*) which flowed down the streams. Sinann, who lacked only the power of *imbas*, saw the bubbles of wisdom and went after them into the water, where she was drowned.¹⁷ The word *bolg*, in addition to meaning 'bag,' 'belly,' and 'bellows,' is also used to refer to a 'berry or bud,' a 'blister' or a 'ball.' These 'bubbles' of wisdom or inspiration are mentioned in several other sources, where they are referred to as *bolg fis* or *bolg imbais*.¹⁸ The term *bolg fis* or *bolg imbais* may simply mean 'ball of wisdom,' perhaps a poetic kenning for a hazelnut. However, I suggest that, these kennings may also be references to a type of entheogenic fungus known as the *Amanita Muscaria* mushroom which typically grows near bodies of water and which is used in

¹⁵ *DIL*, s.v. *éicse*, 75.

¹⁶ Gwynn, 1991, Part III, 292-293.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, 294-295.

¹⁸ *DIL*, s.v. *bolg*, 138-139.

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various pan-Eurasian contexts for trance induction and the acquisition of sacred or occult knowledge.¹⁹

One of the most well-known descriptions of a sacred well comes from *Echtrae Chormaic i Tír Tairngiri* ‘Cormac’s Adventures in the Land of Promise’. Inside a royal dwelling made from beams of bronze, wattles of silver and thatching of the wings of white birds, King Cormac sees a fountain with five streams flowing from it. He also perceives the inhabitants of the Otherworld drinking of its water. Nine red or purple (*corcor*) hazel trees grow over the fountain, which are referred to as the “hazels of *Buan*” (everlasting, enduring). The hazels drop their nuts into the fountain where the five salmon in the streams sever their husks and send them floating down the streams. As in the first *Dindsenchas* account of Sinann, there is a musical component. In *Sinann*’s tale, a “whispering” of musical wisdom or inspiration is heard, while in Cormac’s tale the sound of the falling of the streams was said to be “more melodious than any music that men sing.”²⁰

At the end of the tale, the meaning of the mythical scenario is explained to Cormac by a supernatural informant, Manannán mac Lir:

I am...king of the Land of Promise; and to see the Land of Promise was the reason I brought thee hither.... The fountain which you saw, with the five streams out of it, is the Fountain of Knowledge, and the streams are the five senses through which knowledge is obtained. And no one will have knowledge who drinks not a draught out of the fountain itself and out of the streams. The folk of many arts are those who drink of them both.²¹

¹⁹ MacLeod, Sharon Paice, Lecture notes (unpublished) for GSAS Research Workshop, The Hazel of Immortality, Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, Dec. 12th, 2000.

²⁰ Cross, Tom P. and Slover, Clark H. (tr.), *Ancient Irish Tales* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 504-505.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 507.

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Here I would like to note an interesting correspondence between these mythical descriptions and a historical account of a healing well on the Isle of Skye. In 1695, Martin Martin mentioned the many springs and fountains found on the island, the most celebrated of which was the *Loch Siant* well. It was visited by the inhabitants of the island and numerous mainland visitors, who believed it had the power to cure a variety of ailments. Those who knew the customs of the well walked three times around it in a sun-wise direction and drank its water, leaving a small offering on the stone that covered the well. Nine springs issued from the hill above the well, and local inhabitants paid a tribute of water from the springs to a rivulet that issued from the well itself. Near the well was a small lake in which lived a number of trout that were highly esteemed and protected.²²

The Vessel of Knowledge

In both Irish and Welsh literary sources, there is ample evidence for the association of cauldrons, cups or vessels with wisdom and inspiration. One of the most famous is the *Story of Gwion Bach*, in which the magician *Ceridwen* brews a magical elixir of prophetic knowledge for her son. The magical drops fall on a young boy who is tending the fire, who thereby acquires the gifts of poetry, prophecy and shapeshifting.²³ In his new poetic incarnation as *Taliesin* (Shining Brow), he appears in several other contexts as well. In one of these he proclaims to have obtained *awen* (poetic inspiration) from the cauldron of Cerridwen. The word *awen* is cognate with Old Irish *ái/*auí* which means ‘blowing, breath, wind’ (or in the words of Patrick Ford, ‘in-spiration’).²⁴

²² Munro, Donald, *Martin Martin – A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999), 93.

²³ Ford, Patrick K., *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 162-164.

²⁴ Ford, Patrick K., *The Celtic Poets* (Belmont, MA: Ford and Baillie, 1999), xxvii.

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In the First Battle of Mag Tuired, a member of the *aes dána* from the *Tuatha Dé Danann* was called *Aí mac Olloman*.²⁵ In *Lebor Gabála Érenn* a great-grandson of Ogma went by the name of *Aí mac Ollam*.²⁶ A figure named *Ae Fhind mac Deadaid* was also mentioned in *Lebor Gabála*.²⁷ In *Tecosca Cormaic* ‘The Instructions of Cormac’ it is stated that a king should support this skill or power (*biathad cech n-aí*).²⁸

The concept of *aí*—or “*ae*”²⁹—is also referred to in *Auraceipt na n-Éces*. In one instance it is said to be a science that should be perceived in the mind, seen in the phrase *in cetna ae for seis* ‘first science of learning’ (although in this context a preferable translation for *séis* might be ‘ordering’ or ‘arrangement’).³⁰ Seven “sciences” (*seacht n-ae*) or “prime meters of the poetic art” (*primeillge na filideachta*) are mentioned,³¹ as well as five separate forms of *ae* (“*ae* that nourishes, *ae* that sings, *ae* that sues, *ae* that judges and *ae* that sits”).³²

This poetic concept is also mentioned in *Immacalam in Dá Thuarad*. Here it appears as a gloss on a poetic name for the poet Néde (*Tene feth*, Fire of Speech), glossed as *loscud inna ai*.³³ The concept of poetic heat, breath or inspiration may also be perceived in a description of an Otherworldly cauldron from the medieval Welsh poem *Preiddau Annwn* ‘The Spoils of Annwn’. In this tale, King Arthur and his retinue travel to the Welsh Otherworld to free a prisoner and to obtain a magical cauldron from the Chief of Annwn.

²⁵ O’Rahilly, T.F., *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies: 1984), 316.

²⁶ Carey, John (tr.), “Lebor Gabála Érenn” in Koch, John T. and Carey John, (eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age* (Oakville and Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), 258.

²⁷ Macalister, R.A.S. (ed., tr.) *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, Part IV (London: Irish Texts Society, 1997), 188-189.

²⁸ Kuno Meyer (ed.), “Tecosca Cormaic” in *Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series XVI*, 4.

²⁹ *DIL* s.v. 2 *aé* poetic inspiration.

³⁰ Calder 1995, 36-37.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 56-57.

³² *Op. cit.*, 30-31.

³³ Stokes 1905, 20-21.

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The cauldron, which would not boil food for a coward, was said to be kindled by the breath of nine maidens. It also appears to have had some connection with the ocean, for it was said to be “dark about its edge with pearl.”³⁴

In a text known as “The Caldron of Poesy,” the legendary poet *Amairgen Glungél* mentions a cauldron which poured forth “the oral language (*ai*) of poetry.”³⁵ In this text, three special cauldrons are mentioned: *Coire Goriath* (The Cauldron of Warming), *Coire Érmae* (The Cauldron of Motion) and *Coire Sois* (The Cauldron of Excellent Knowledge). These cauldrons were said to be the source of poetic art and every other type of knowledge and were believed to exist within the body of a person.³⁶

Coire Goriath is described as having been given to the poet directly from the divine (from “the mysteries of the elements”) and could be used to compose poetry “with many great chantings.”³⁷ From *Coire Érmae* issued “accumulations of knowledge” (*rethaib softs*), “strewings of wisdom” (*srethaib imbais*), “an estuary of knowledge” (*indber n-ecnai*), a “river of splendour” (*srúaim n-ordan*) and “streams of scholarship” (*srúamannaib suíthi*). It was connected with the mastery of language, the “darkening” of speech and the propagation of knowledge, and was referred to as a “noble brew in which is brewed the basis of all knowledge.”³⁸ *Coire Sois* was associated with the laws by which “every art is set out,” an attendant increase in prosperity, and the magnification and exaltation of people of artistic knowledge or skill.³⁹

In one passage, the author states that *Coire Érmae* turns or changes position according to the amount of knowledge a person possesses, and that this change can take place as a result of some experience of particular joy or sorrow. When this occurred, the Cauldron of Motion was then converted into the Cauldron of

³⁴ Bollard, John K., “Arthur in the Early Welsh Tradition” in Wilhelm, James J., ed., *The Romance of Arthur* (New York: Garland, 1994), 20.

³⁵ Ford 1999, xxvii.

³⁶ Breatnach 1981, 48-49, 65.

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, 62-63.

³⁸ *Op. cit.*, 68-71.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, 62-63.

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Knowledge. The four types of sorrow that can turn the vessel are longing, grief, jealousy and “exile for the sake of God” (i.e. “separation from the Divine”).⁴⁰ The four types of joy are (1) the force of sexual longing, (2) safety and freedom from care, ample food and clothing (until one begins the pursuit of *bairdne*, bardic composition or craft), (3) joy at the prerogatives of poetry after a good study of it and (4) “the arrival of *imbas* which accumulates in the nine hazels of Segais in the realms of the *síd* and which is sent upstream along the surface of the Boyne.” A gloss on the fourth type of joy mentions a “bubble” on the herbs or plants caused by the sun, as well as the fact that “whoever consumes them will have an art or skill (*dán*).”⁴¹

The word *coire*, here translated as “cauldron,” has a secondary meaning of “whirlpool.” One of the most well known instances of its use as a place-name is in the *Dindshenchas* account of *Coire Breccáin* (Corryvreckan). Here it is referred to as the “cauldron of a hundred measures,” a place the poet says he does not wish to go until he dies. It was believed that four seas gathered together at the site of the whirlpool and that no man could cover the space between the edges of the cauldron within a month’s time. No “generous chieftain” who reached it ever returned, and even if the “hosts of the three parts of the world” were set side by side with all those who had yet to be born, this would still not fill the cauldron. One legend stated that Breccán, a son of Partholón, drank a draught from the whirlpool and was drowned. In one stanza, he is referred to as *Breccán of Bérré*.⁴²

In Scottish folk tradition Coire Bhreacain was associated with the legendary supernatural figure of the *Cailleach Bhéara*. She was said to wash her blankets in the whirlpool, perhaps accounting for the inclusion of the Scottish Gaelic word *breacan* (tartan) in the place-name. Before her washing began, the roar of a coming tempest was heard by people on the shore for a distance of twenty miles for three

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, 66-67.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, 66-67.

⁴² Gwynn, 1991, Part IV, 80-87. Another legend claimed that Saint Columba threw a handful of clay into the whirlpool, after which it became quite peaceful.

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days before the cauldron “boiled.”⁴³ Interestingly, glosses in “The Caldron of Poesy” mention that *Coire Goriath* (a vessel associated with heating and warmth) possessed the potential quality of being “variegated” (*brecc*), as this was one of the forms of praise poetry (white, black or variegated). The cauldron was also associated with “many chantings of poetry” which were described as being “numerous displays out of the great seas of poetry.”⁴⁴

Cascades of Creation

Another body of water with interesting legendary properties in Celtic literary and folklore contexts is the waterfall. The word *es(s)* refers to a cataract or rapid, as well as a rapidly flowing stream.⁴⁵ Waterfalls are mentioned in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, as the poet Amaingen magically invokes the features of the land in order for his people to gain access to it:

I invoke the land of Ireland;
Surging is the mighty sea,
Mighty is the upland full of meadows,
Full of meadows is the rainy wood,
Rainy is the river full of waterfalls,
Full of waterfalls is the spreading lake,
Spreading is the spring of multitudes,
The assembly of the king of Tara...⁴⁶

The *Metrical Dindshenchas* contains several versions of a place-name story associated with a waterfall called *Ess Ruaid* (modern Assaroe < *ruad* ‘red’ or ‘strong/mighty’). In the first version the waterfall was located near a *síd*-mound associated with a supernatural figure known as *Aed Ruad* (Red/Mighty Fire). The son of *Badurn*, he is a handsome, wealthy and generous figure described

⁴³ Grant, K.W., “The Myth of Cailleach Bheur” in *Myth, Tradition and Story from Western Argyll*, printed in *Oban Times Press* (1925), 8.

⁴⁴ Breatnach 1981, 62-63.

⁴⁵ *DIL*, s.v. *es(s)*, 179.

⁴⁶ Carey 2003, 267.

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as being “honorable among the men of Emain [Macha]” (*for Áed fial na fir-Emna*).⁴⁷ Aed Ruad is mentioned in the *Dindsenchas* of Emain Macha where he is said to be the father of Macha Mongruad (Macha Red-Mane). The account tells how Macha overcame the five sons of Dithorba and forced them to build her a fortress. It then proceeds to give a brief version of the famous story of Macha’s race against the king’s horses.⁴⁸

The tradition that Aed Ruad was Macha’s father is also mentioned in the *Rennes Dindsenchas* account of Emain Macha. In this account, three kings were ruling in joint-sovereignty over Ireland: Dithorba mac Dimmán (of Uisneach in Meath), Cimbaeth mac Fintan, son of Argatmar (of Finnabair of Mag Inis), and Aed Ruad mac Báduirn, son of Argatmar (from Tír Aeda). Aed Ruad is said to have been the first of the three kings to die, having drowned in Ess Rúaid from where his body was borne into the adjacent *sí*-mound (*Síd-Aeda*). He had no children except a single daughter, Macha Mongruad, who demanded her father’s turn at the kingship.⁴⁹

In the *Dindsenchas* of *Ard Macha*, Macha gives birth to twins after winning a race against the king’s horses. The twins are called *Fir* and *Fial* (perhaps reflecting confusion between these names and her father Aed Ruad’s designation *fial na fir-Emna*).⁵⁰ The names of the twins may reflect concepts pertaining to ‘truth’ or ‘brightness’ on one hand and ‘nobility or honor’ on the other (if the names derive from 1 *fir* ‘true’ or 2 *fir* ‘white,’ and 1 *fial* ‘noble/honorable’). However, they may well reflect a form of the word *fer* ‘man, person’ and 3 *fial* ‘kin, related.’ This would be particularly appropriate in light of the Indo-European theme of the divine twins whose names

⁴⁷ Gwynn 1991, Part IV, 2-6. This reference is followed by a variant legend of a woman named Ruad, daughter of Maine Mil-Scothach. She falls in love with Aed Srónmár and sets out by sea to meet him. However, she falls asleep amongst the streams and leaps overboard due to the spell-like humming or droning sounds emanating from the realms of the *sí*. She was said to have been traveling in the vessel of Abcan, an ‘arch-poet’ (*ard-fili*).

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.*, 308-311.

⁴⁹ Stokes, Whitley, “Rennes Dindsenchas, Second Supplement” in *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895), 281-282.

⁵⁰ Gwynn, 1991, Part IV, 126-129.

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usually reflect the words for ‘man’ and ‘twin’ (the second of which is also seen in the place name *Emain Macha*). The divine twins are often associated with horses and with a female figure. In addition, as J.P. Mallory points out, the significance of the divine twins in Indo-European mythology is underscored by their association with foundation or creation myths; in many cases they were believed to be the progenitors of the human race.⁵¹ Aed Ruad may therefore be the grandfather of the divine twins. In the *Dindchenchas* of Emain Macha, his daughter states that she is the daughter of *Sainrith mac Inboith* (Pre-Eminence Son of Existence? < *sainred* ‘special, pre-eminent,’ *in-* ‘worthy of/capable of/fit or proper for’ + 1 *buith* ‘being, existing’), a shadowy figure potentially associated with creation or existence.⁵²

Aed Ruad is described as the son of *Badurn* (perhaps a form of *báidid*, drowns, submerges; extinguishes, quenches; destroys, overwhelms.). This association with water is also seen in connection with his daughter Macha. In the *Dindshenchas* of Emain Macha she is summoned to the horse race from “beneath the ocean waves” and her domain is described as a “roofless dwelling in the west.”⁵³ As Patrick Ford points out, another goddess associated with horses and sovereignty also displayed possible connections with the ocean. The widely venerated deity Epona was given a feast day in the Roman calendar (December 18th) between the Consualia (December 15) and the Opalia (December 19). As Consus was identified with Poseidon Hippios, the placement of Epona’s feast day near that of a deity associated with water and horses may have been no coincidence.⁵⁴

In addition to themes connected with water and creativity, in these scenarios we also see themes pertaining to fire, heat or inspiration. Georges Dumézil and Patrick Ford have both written about various Indo-European manifestations of the concept of “fire in water.” This was a potent essence believed to be maintained in

⁵¹ Mallory, J.P., *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 132, 135, 140.

⁵² Gwynn, 1991, Part IV, 126-129.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Ford, Patrick K., *The Mabinogi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.

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certain bodies of water. It was accessible only to a select few and endowed them with extraordinary powers. This power of ‘fire in water’ possessed characteristics associated with potential danger and destruction, as well as heat, burning and illumination, and associated concepts pertaining to wisdom and the attainment and manifestation of poetic or prophetic skill.⁵⁵

There are other written sources that support a connection between fire, water and divine wisdom. One well-known mythological element in early Irish tradition was the *eó fis* or ‘salmon of wisdom,’ which inhabited certain wells, springs or rivers. One of its traditional habitations was at the waterfall of Ess Ruaid.⁵⁶ This site was connected with Aed Ruad as well as with another mythical figure known as *Aed Álaind* (Lovely or Splendid Fire). In addition to the titles *In Ruad Rofhessa* and *Eochaid Ollathair*, the Dagda was also known as *Aed Álaind* of Ess Ruaid.⁵⁷ A few sources give this as a name of a son of the Dagda⁵⁸ or one of his grandsons (offspring of the Dagda’s male child *Bodb Derg*).⁵⁹ However, the correlation between the Dagda and the name *Aed Álaind* is supported by another traditional habitation of the *eó fis*, the pool of *Linn Féic*. The Dagda was also referred to as “the king of Linn Féic” (*rig Féic-Linne*).⁶⁰

A number of themes pertaining to sacred wisdom are seen in connection with the Dagda. In *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, he is described as a “god of druidry.”⁶¹ In *Cormac’s Glossary* he is said to be the father of Brigit, a “female sage” and “woman of wisdom” described as “the goddess whom poets adored.”⁶² In *Immacalam in*

⁵⁵ Ford, Patrick K., “The Well of Nechtan and ‘La Gloire Lumineuse’” in Larson, Gerald J. (ed.), *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (1974), 67-74; Dumézil 1963, *passim*.

⁵⁶ O’Rahilly 1984, 319; DIL s.v. *eicne*, *bratán*.

⁵⁷ O’Rahilly 1984, 320; Gray, Elizabeth (ed., tr.), *Cath Maige Tuired* (Nass: Irish Texts Society, 1982), 121.

⁵⁸ Gwynn 1991, Part IV, 92-95; Macalister, 1997, 150-151.

⁵⁹ O’Rahilly 1984, 320, n.2.

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, 320 n.5.

⁶¹ Gray 1982, 121.

⁶² Stokes, Whitley (ed.), *Sanas Chormaic* (Calcutta: Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), 23.

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Dá Thuarad, Brigit was said to be a *ban-fili* as well as the mother of three sons (*Brian, Iuchar* and *Úar*).⁶³ In *Lebor Gabála*, however, they are said to be the sons of the Mórrígan or her alter-ego, Dana/Donann.⁶⁴ The sons were sometimes referred to as “the three gods of poetry” (*na trí nDea nDána*), although there is quite a bit of confusion regarding the identity of this divine trio.⁶⁵ In *Immacalam in Dá Thuarad*, the poet Néde says that he is the son of Poetry (*macsa Dana*), son of Scrutiny, son of Meditation, son of Lore, son of Enquiry, son of Investigation, son of Great-Knowledge (*mac Rofhessa*), bringing to mind the Dagda’s epithet *In Ruad Rofhessa*. The poet then goes on to list the remainder of his poetic ancestry: son of Great-Sense, son of Understanding, son of Wisdom, son of the three gods of Poetry (*Ecna mac na trí nDea nDána*).⁶⁶

In *Lebor Gabála* the three sons of Bríg (and three grandsons of the Dagda) are described as “three druids” from whom the Tuatha Dé Danann took their name, although this honor properly belongs to Danu (i.e. the Mórrígan).⁶⁷ In the *Metrical Dindshenchas* the Mórrígan is described as wife of the Dagda.⁶⁸ In *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* the Dagda and the Mórrígan engage in a sexual union around the time of Samhain, after which she advises him to summon the *áes dána* of the Tuatha Dé Danann to assemble and follow her instructions.⁶⁹ In *Dindshenchas* tradition the Dagda resides for some time at *Brug na Bóinde*, a site also associated with the Mórrígan through the place-name the Paps of the Mórrígan.⁷⁰ The Mórrígan and Macha were sisters, and in addition to being skilled in the arts of magic, both display pronounced characteristics of the archetypal

⁶³ Stokes 1905, 30-31.

⁶⁴ Macalister 1997, 161, 189; MacLeod, Sharon Paice, “Mater Deorum Hibernensium: Identity and Cross-Correlation in Early Irish Mythology,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium 19* (1999), 341-342, 366-367.

⁶⁵ Carey, John, “The Name ‘Tuatha Dé Danann’” in *Éigse 18* (1981), 291-294; MacLeod 1999, 341-342, 366-367.

⁶⁶ Stokes 1905, 30-31.

⁶⁷ Macalister 1997, 163; MacLeod 1999, *passim*.

⁶⁸ Gwynn 1991, Part IV, 196-201.

⁶⁹ Gray 1982, 44-45.

⁷⁰ Gwynn 1991, Part II, 18-21.

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Goddess of Sovereignty.⁷¹ The second *Dindshenchas* account of *Brug na Bóinde* mentions a nearby plain in which was kept “the Grey Steed,” undoubtedly the *Líath Macha*, a horse belonging to Macha.⁷²

Early Irish sources make constant reference to rivers, wells, waterfalls and other bodies of water associated with prophetic, poetic or divine wisdom. These sites were associated with male and female figures who either seek or personify this type of knowledge. Hazel trees with red leaves and nuts are mentioned, as well as salmon of wisdom whose flesh was also red in color. There is also the presence of several mythic figures whose names translate as ‘Red Fire’ or ‘Lovely Fire’, and the all-consuming quest for *imbas forosnai* (the second element of which reflects a verb meaning ‘to kindle or illuminate’).

The connection between waterfalls and supernaturally obtained wisdom is also seen in a number of interesting accounts of divination rites from early modern Scotland. In Pennant’s journey through Scotland in 1769, he describes a divinatory practice he witnessed on the Isle of Skye:

A wild species of magic was practiced in the district of Trotternish, that was attended with horrible solemnity: a family who pretended to oracular knowledge practiced these ceremonies. In this country is a vast cataract whose waters falling from a high rock, jet so far as to form a dry hollow beneath, between them and the precipice. One of these imposters was sewed up in the hide of an ox, and, to add terror to the ceremony, was placed in this concavity; the trembling enquirer was brought to the place, where the shade, and the roaring of the waters, increased the dread of the occasion. The question is put, and the person in the hide delivers his answer.

⁷¹ Gray 1982, 128-129; MacLeod 1999, *passim*.

⁷² Gwynn 1991, Part II, 22-23.

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And so ends this species of divination styled
Taghairm.⁷³

A somewhat similar practice was described by Martin Martin in 1695, almost a century earlier, referring to common practices seen in the western islands of Scotland (although this account does not mention the waterfall):

The second way of consulting the oracle was by a party of men who first retired to solitary places, remote from any house, and there they singled out one of their number, and wrapped him in a big cow's hide, which they folded about him; his whole body was covered with it except his head, and so left in this posture all night until his invisible friends relieved him by giving a proper answer to the question in hand, which he received, as he fancied, from several persons that he found about him all that time. His consorts returned to him at break of day, and then he communicated his news to them, which often proved fatal to those concerned in such unwarrantable inquiries.⁷⁴

Another version of the *taighairm* given in *Armstrong's Gaelic Dictionary* reflects the importance of the waterfall in the rite:

The divination by the *taghairm* was once a noted superstition among the Gael, and in the northern parts of the Lowlands of Scotland. When any important question concerning futurity arose, and of which a solution was, by all means, desirable, some shrewder person than his neighbours was pitched upon, to perform the part of a prophet. This person was wrapped in the warm smoking hide of newly-

⁷³ Ross, Anne, *The Folklore of the Scottish Highlands* (New York: Barnes and Noble/Batsford, 1976), 58.

⁷⁴ Munro 1999, 77.

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slain ox, and laid at full length in the wildest recess of some lonely waterfall. The question was then put to him, and the oracle was left in solitude to consider it. Here he lay for some hours with his cloak of knowledge around him, and over his head, no doubt, to see the better into futurity; deafened by the incessant roaring of the torrent; every sense assailed; his body steaming; his fancy in a ferment; and whatever notion had found its way into his mind from so many sources of prophesy, it was firmly believed to have been communicated by invisible beings who were supposed to haunt such solitudes.⁷⁵

The Old Irish word *togairm* signifies an ‘act of calling; appellation, vocation; act of invoking, petitioning; act of summoning; ‘act of inviting.’ These folkloric accounts display similarities with earlier descriptions of the *tarb-feis* (bull-sleep) in which a bull was sacrificed and a priest or druid, after eating of its flesh, dreamt of the identity of the future king.⁷⁶ Divinatory sleep was also involved in the rites associated with *imbais forosnai* in which the *fili* chewed upon a piece of raw flesh, chanted an incantation and went into a prophetic sleep or trance state.⁷⁷ They are also reminiscent of the divinatory sleep or incubation in a darkened place practiced by poetic candidates in late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth century accounts of poetic schools in Scotland and Ireland.⁷⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, evidence from a variety of literary and ethnographic sources suggests that bodies of water were physically and metaphorically associated with creation and destruction, healing

⁷⁵ O’Rahilly 1984, 324; Dwelly, Edward, *Faclair Gaidhlig gu Bearla le Dealbhan* (Glasgow: Gairm Publications, 1994), 920.

⁷⁶ Cross and Slover 1969, 97.

⁷⁷ Stokes 1868, 94.

⁷⁸ Munro 1999, 79-80; Ford 1999, xxvi.

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and transformation, and the acquisition and manifestation of divine wisdom and poetic skill. The archetypal scenario suggested by these sources focuses on an Underworld well of wisdom, which was believed to be the source or origin of these powers. Sites where the water bubbled to the surface of the earth (wells, springs, river sources) were considered potent and sanctified locations where the inhabitants of this world might gain access to the powers of the Otherworld.

The varied attributes and powers of the waters flowed through the realms of humankind by way of various streams and rivers of the inner and outer landscape. These powers seem to have intensified where they congregated in whirlpools or rushed over the edge of the earth in waterfalls or cascades. The symbol of the vessel or cauldron played an important role in many of these scenarios, as did the hazel of knowledge and the salmon of wisdom. Throughout the tradition, the illuminating power known as *imbas* seems to have exercised a particularly important function, suggesting that this power, like so many others, traced its ultimate origin to the Celtic Otherworld realms.