

The Widower And The Goddess Or The Closed Door

On the connection between northern and southern Celts

Cristobo de Milio Carrín, March 2011

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I am going to tell you two stories. They are both very old and they both come from the Atlantic shores of Europe, a green land where sea foam beats the high cliffs. Their plot has many points in common also, and eventually you will realize the two of them share a common origin. Now this all may seem to be not a big deal. The truth is, however, that these parallels are the key to open a door which has remained closed for centuries.

The first tale is “The Debility of the Ulstermen”, also known as “The Labour Pains of the Ulaid”. It belongs to the Ulster Cycle, a collection of epic legends which have survived to us in medieval manuscripts (11th – 14th centuries) written in Old and Middle Irish. These legends were noted down, therefore, in a Christian context but they come from a very old tradition and they are a good source on Irish Pagan beliefs.

The Debility of the Ulstermen

There lived on the heights and in the solitudes of the hills a rich cow-lord of the Ulstermen, Crunnchu mac Agnoman by name. In his solitude great wealth accumulated to him. He had four sons around him. His wife, the mother of his children, died. For a long time he lived without a wife. As he was one day alone on the couch in his house, he saw coming into the mansion a young stately woman, distinguished in her appearance, clothing, and demeanor. Macha was the woman’s name, as scholars say. She sat herself down on a chair near the hearth, and stirred the fire. She passed the whole day there, without exchanging a word with anyone. She fetched a kneading-trough and a sieve and began to prepare food. As the day drew to an end she took a vessel and milked the cow, still without speaking.

When she returned to the house, she turned right about, went into his kitchen and gave directions to his servants; then she took a seat next to Crunnchu. Each one went to his couch; she remained to the last and put out the fire, turned right about again and laid herself down beside him, laying her hand on his side. For a long time they dwelt together. Through his union with her, he increased yet more in wealth. His handsome appearance was delightful to her.

Now the Ulstermen frequently held great assemblies and meetings. All, as many as could go, both of men and women, went to the gathering. “I, too,” said Crunnchu, “will go like every one else to the assembly.”

“Go not,” said his wife, “lest thou run into danger by speaking of us; for our union will continue only if thou dost not speak of me in the assembly.”

“I will not utter a word,” said Crunnchu.

The Ulstermen gathered to the festival, Crunnchu also going with the rest. It was a brilliant festival, not alone in regard to the people, but as to horses and costumes also. There took place races and combats, tournaments, games, and processions.

At the ninth hour the royal chariot was brought upon the ground, and the king's horses carried the day in the contests. Then bards appeared to praise the king and the queen, the poets and the druids, his household, the people and the whole assembly. The people cried: "Never before have two such horses been seen at the festival as these two horses of the king: in all Ireland there is not a swifter pair!"

"My wife runs quicker than these two horses," said Crunnchu. "Seize the man," said the king, "and hold him until his wife can be brought to the race-contest!"

He was made fast, and messengers were despatched from the king to the woman. She bade the messengers welcome, and asked them what had brought them there. "We have come for you that you may release your husband, kept prisoner by the king's command, because he boasted that you were swifter of foot than the king's horses."

"My husband has spoken unwisely," said she; "it was not fitting that he should say so. As for me, I am ill, and about to be delivered of a child."

"Alas for that," said the messengers, "for thy husband will be put to death if thou dost not come."

"Then I must needs go," she said.

Forthwith she went to the assembly. Every one crowded round to see her. "It is not becoming," said she, "that I should be gazed at in this condition. Wherefore am I brought hither?"

"To run in contest with the two horses of the king," shouted the multitude.

"Alas!" she cried, "for I am close upon my hour."

"Unsheath your swords and hew yonder man to death," said the king.

"Help me," she cried to the bystanders, "for a mother hath borne each one of you. Give me, O King, but a short delay, until I am delivered."

"It shall not be so," replied the king.

"Then shame upon you who have shown so little respect for me," she cried. "Because you take no pity upon me, a heavy infamy will fall upon you."

"What is thy name?" asked the king.

"My name," said she, "and the name of that which I shall bear, will for ever cleave to the place of this assembly. I am Macha, daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith (Strange son of Ocean). Bring up the horses beside me!" It was done, and she outran the horses and arrived first at the end of the course. Then she gave vent to a cry in her pain, but God helped her, and she bore twins, a son and a daughter, before the horses reached the goal. Therefore is the place called Emain Macha, the "Twins of Macha."

All who heard that cry were suddenly seized with weakness, so that they had no more strength than the woman in her pain. And she said, "From this hour the ignominy that you have inflicted upon me will redound to the shame of each one of you. When a time of oppression falls upon you, each one of you who dwells in this province will be overcome with weakness, as the weakness of a woman in childbirth, and this will remain upon you for five days and four nights; to the ninth generation it shall be so."

Thus it was. It continued from the days of Crunnchu to the days of Fergus mac Donnell, or till the time of Forc, son of Dallan, son of Mainech, son of Lugaid. Three classes there were upon whom the debility had no power, namely, the children and the women of Ulster, and Cu Chulainn, because he was not descended from Ulster; none, also, of those who were outside the province were afflicted by it.

This is the cause of the Noinden Ulad, or the Debility of the Ulstermen.

(Celtic Literature Archive, 2011A)

The second tale comes from Asturias, in the southern half of the Bay of Biscay... Or the northern coast of the Iberian Peninsula, if you please. This one was not recorded by medieval scribes but survived in oral tradition until Aurelio del Llano, an Asturian folk-lore collector, noted it down around 1920. It's a tale about "*xanes*" which is basically Asturian for "faeries" or "water nymphs":

The Widower and the *Xana*

There was a widower from Carrandena, [a town in the parish of Llibardón, Colunga county] who had two small children. He started to notice that when he was off working in the fields, some stranger combed his children's hair and washed them, carded the linen and tidied the house up. The widower, no matter how hard he tried, couldn't find out who worked such miracles. To find out, he gave up work for one day and hid behind the bench in the kitchen.

He hadn't waited for long when he saw a *xana* entering the door with a hand carder under her arm. He showed up, gave her thanks for all what she had done for his children and asked her to stay and live with him. To this the *xana* answered the following:

—I will stay here on one condition. You will never tell me about anything that you hear when you walk by the Cueva del Moru (Moor's Cave).

The widower merrily accepted such condition.

The *xana* fondly looked after the children: they grew white and red like roses in an orchard.

The widower would climb up the Sueve mountain pass every morning to milk his cows and he never came down without a chip basket with berries for the kids and a bunch of wild flowers for the *xana*.

She would heal with great care a sore that the widower had in his leg with plantain. And in spite of this love and the happiness that the *xana* spread all over the house, the widower started to grow very sad. This was noticed by her, and in spite of all the questions she asked, the widower didn't want to tell her the reason of his grief. Eventually, one day when the *xana* was carding linen she asked him in tears to tell her the reason for his sadness. He still wouldn't comply but at last he said:

—When I walk by the entrance to the Cueva del Moru, even if I cover my ears not to hear, I hear a voice who says:

¡Hey, sister xana! ¡Come see your mother who is so sick!

When the *xana* heard this she threw the hand carder to the widower's legs and left the house saying:

—For your not having refused four more days to please my curiosity, you have lost your chance to be rich and disenchant me forever.

The children regretted so much the departure of the *xana*. And the widower, whenever he walked by the entrance to the Cueva del Moru, a voice would tell him:

Is your leg still sore?

Add plantain and remove plantain, you'll see it healed.

(Del Llano, A. 1983: 42-44)

As it sometimes happens, this tale was not collected by an expert but an amateur, a man who lacked the training or the skills to accurately record the story. The plot seems to have been “softened” somehow. However, it has recently been collected again from a younger informer by a new ethnographer, Berto Peña. In this new version the widower doesn't have a “sore” before the *xana* leaves him. It is she who hurts him when she throws the hand carder at his leg¹. The plot, however, remains basically the same.

The differences between the Irish and the Asturian stories stand out. On one side, the barbarian glare and mystery of Iron Age: bards, druids, a king riding a war chariot and a bloodthirsty mob in a pagan festival. On the other side just a lonely shepherd from the Suevo mountains. It is not the differences, however, that strike the reader, but rather the similarities instead.

- 1) A widower with children in Ireland, a widower with children in Asturias
- 2) The supernatural woman unexpectedly enters their house in both cases
- 3) The lady takes care of home chores
- 4) In Ireland she is silent at first, in Asturias she keeps herself at first hidden to the widower
- 5) She then complies to live with the man
- 6) She imposes one condition upon him, testing his discreetness
- 7) He fails in both cases
- 8) He is punished for his foolishness and she leaves him

In short, it is basically the same story in two different contexts. Now the question arises as to whether this coincidence between both shores of the Western sea is simply an oddity, an isolated example in Asturian and Irish tradition or else if it comes from an unsuspected common heritage. The most obvious way to answer this question is searching for more coincidences. They do exist.

The following is a legend from Shropshire, an English area next to the Welsh border. It was noted down in the 12th century by Walter Map:

Wild Edric

[Wild Edric] lost his way [in the forest of Clun] and wandered about till nightfall, alone, save for one young page. At last he saw the lights of a very large house in the distance, towards which he turned his steps; and when he had

¹ Told by Candido Fernandez Coviella, 73 years old from Carbes, county Amieva, noted down on February the 17th, 2005, by Alberto Alvarez Peña (unpublished)

reached it, he beheld within a large company of noble ladies dancing. They were exceedingly beautiful, [...] They circled round with smooth and easy motion, singing [...] Among them was one maiden who excelled all the others in beauty, at the sight of whom our hero's heart was inflamed with love. [...] he rushed [into the house] and snatched the maiden who was the object of his passion [...] The dancers assailed him with teeth and nails, but [...] he escaped [...] and succeeded in carrying off his fair captive. For three whole days not his utmost caresses and persuasions could prevail on her to utter a single word, but on the fourth day she suddenly broke the silence. "Good luck to you, my dear!" said she, "and you will be lucky too, and enjoy health and peace and plenty, as long as you do not reproach me on account of my sisters, or the place from which you snatched me away, or anything connected with it. For on the day when you do so you will lose both your bride and your good fortune; and when I am taken away from you, you will pine away quickly to an early death."

He pledged himself by all that was most sacred to be ever faithful and constant in his love for her, and they were solemnly wedded in the presence of all the nobles from far and near, whom Edric invited to their bridal feast. At that time William the Norman was newly made king of England, who, hearing of this wonder, desired both to see the lady, and to test the truth of the tale; and bade the newly-married pair to London, where he was holding his Court. Thither then they went, and many witnesses from their own country with them, who brought with them the testimony of others who could not present themselves to the king. But the marvellous beauty of the lady was the best of all proofs of her superhuman origin. And the king let them return in peace, wondering greatly.

Many years passed happily by, till one evening Edric returned late from hunting, and could not find his wife. He sought her and called for her for some time in vain. At last she appeared. "I suppose," began he, with angry looks, "it is your sisters who have detained you such a long time, have they not?" The rest of his upbraiding was addressed to the air, for the moment her sisters were mentioned she vanished. Edric's grief was overwhelming. He sought the place where he had found her at first, but no tears, no laments of his could call her back. He cried out day and night against his own folly, and pined away and died of sorrow, as his wife had long before foretold.

(Briggs, K. 1992: 104-105)

The modern, Asturian version was published in the same collection as "The Widower and the Xana"

The Xana And The Shepherd

There is in the high fields of Ponga a cave which was inhabited by a group of *xanas*. They went out at night to do the washing at the well and they hung it under the moonlight. And at dawn they would weave and spin in a field in front of the cave.

[A local herdsman comes to be friends with the *xanes*, he falls in love with the most beautiful one and he declares her his feelings. She answers the following]:
'If you want to take me with you, your mother must give her consent first. Then

to take me out of here you must do the following: when my companions and I get close to the cave and are ready to enter in it, just grab my underskirt, throw a handful of soil from the church on me and I will be yours'. The shepherd followed these instructions and he took the *xana* with him.

One day when the *xana* was carding, the shepherd arrived from the mountain and told her that when he walked by the cave he had heard a voice which said: 'Hey, *xana*, our sister! You went away and we are so alone now'

The *xana* threw her hand carder at him and vanished forever.

(Del Llano, A. 1983: 44-45)

Do you think these are very different tales? Think again.

-The girl lives with her sisters in some vaguely un-human place (the heart of the forest, a cave). They spend their time acting as one, either dancing, washing or weaving.

-She doesn't get to her lover. This time it is him who steps forward and conquers her.

-He must use some force to get her, he basically kidnaps her from among her sisters

-She accepts living with him on one condition

-The condition is the same in both cases: don't mention her sisters

-The husbands fail in both tales

-They get punished: Edric dies, the Asturian shepherd gets beaten with the hand carder which, as we know from the Widower's tale, is quite a dangerous weapon.

Of course there are differences. The most obvious one is the distance between the Asturian herdsman and Wild Edric. The Asturian fellow is just, well, an anonymous herdsman whereas Edric is a powerful Saxon magnate who led the resistance against the Normans in the 11th century.

Power and powerful people were involved in "The Labour Pains of the Ulaid" also. Macha, the main character, is found in several other legends. Scholars believe her to be a local goddess, an embodiment of sovereignty. She is also related to horses and war (Green, M. J. 1995: 31). Her husband bears some special relation to the country, too, since we are told that the Ulster got its name after Crunnchu's grandfather, Curir Ulaid (Kinsella, T, 2002: 8).

There are plenty of legends about a certain lady, a goddess who seduces a chosen young man and offers him the throne of Ireland or an Irish province after he

overcomes some kind of test. Typically he is told to keep a few taboos, the so called *geasa*. Eventually he will break them and then die.

These divine seducers don't always appear as young women of amazing beauty. They can also be horrible hags of repulsive ugliness. Let's take the following, for instance. Back to Ireland:

The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon

<http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/eochaid.html>

[...] the sons went and hunted, and it happened that they went far astray. When they ceased from straying they kindled a fire, broiled some of their quarry, and ate it until they were satisfied. Then they were thirsty and in great drought from the cooked food. "Let one of us go and seek for water," they said. "I will go," said Fergus. The lad went seeking water, till he chanced on a well and saw an old woman guarding it.

Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black as coal. Like the tail of a wild horse was the gray bristly mane that came through the upper part of her head-crown. The green branch of an oak in bearing would be severed by the sickle of green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears. Dark smoky eyes she had: a nose crooked and hollow. She had a middle fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased, her shins distorted and awry. Her ankles were thick, her shoulder blades were broad, her knees were big, and her nails were green. Loathsome in sooth was the hag's appearance.

"That is so," said the youth. "'Tis so indeed," said she.

"Art thou guarding the well?" asked the youth.

"Yea truly," she answered.

"Dost thou permit me to take away some of the water?" said the youth.

"I will permit," she answered, "provided there come from thee and kiss on my cheek."

"By no means!" said he.

"Then no water shalt thou get from me," said she.

"I give my word," he answered, "that I would rather perish of thirst than give thee a kiss."

The lad then went back to the place where his brothers were bidding, and told them that he had not found water. So Ailill went to look for water, and chanced on the same well. He too refused to kiss the hag, returned without water, and did not confess that he had found the well. Then Brian, the eldest of the sons, went to seek water, chanced on the same well, refused to kiss the old woman, and returned waterless. Fiachra then went, found the well and the hag, and asked her for water. "I will grant it," said she; "but give me a kiss."

"I would give few kisses for it."

"Thou shalt visit Tara," said she. That fell true, for two of his race took the kingship of Erin, namely Dathi and Ailill Wether, and no one of the race of the other sons, Brian, Ailill, Fergus, took it. So Fiachra returned without water. So then Niall went seeking water and happened on the same well. "Give me water, O woman," said Niall.

"I will give it," she answered, "but first give me a kiss."

"Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!" Then he threw himself down upon her and gave her a kiss. But then, when he looked at her, there was not in the world a damsel whose figure or appearance was more loveable than hers! Like the snow in trenches was every bit of her from head to sole. Plump and queenly forearms she had: fingers long and slender: calves straight and beautifully colored. Two blunt shoes of white bronze between her little, soft-white feet and the ground. A costly full-purple mantle she wore, with a brooch of bright silver in the clothing of the mantle. Shining pearly teeth she had, an eye large and queenly, and lips red as rowanberries.

"That is many-shaped, O lady!" said the youth.

"True," said she.

"Who art thou?" said the youth.

"I am the Sovereignty of Erin," she answered; [...] "Go now to thy brothers," she said, "and take water with thee, and the kingship and the domination will for ever abide with thee and thy children [...]"

(Celtic Literature Archive, 2011b)

Miranda Jane Green believes this is a very ancient legend, maybe from the 5th century (Green, M.J. 1995a: 84), and finds a very interesting parallel inside Irish epic, the story of king Conaire. Conaire is offered the throne of Ireland as long as he keeps a long list of *geasa*. He breaks all of them but one and then the goddess of many names, under her hideous disguise as a hag, pushes him to break the last one, thus driving him to death:

The Destruction of Da Derga`s Hostel

[...] When they were there they saw a lone woman coming to the door of the Hostel, after sunset, and seeking to be let in. As long as a weaver's beam was each of her two shins, and they were as dark as the back of a stag-beetle. A greyish, wooly mantle she wore. Her lower hair used to reach as far as her knee. Her lips were on one side of her head.

She came and put one of her shoulders against the door-post of the house, casting the evil eye on the king and the youths who surrounded him in the Hostel. He himself addressed her from within.

"Well, O woman," says Conaire, "if thou art a wizard, what seest thou for us?"
"Truly I see for thee," she answers, "that neither fell nor flesh of thine shall escape from the place into which thou hast come, save what birds will bear away in their claws."

"It was not an evil omen we foreboded, O woman," saith he: "it is not thou that always augurs for us. What is thy name, O woman?"

"Cailb," she answers.

"That is not much of a name," says Conaire.

"Lo, many are my names besides."

"Which be they?" asks Conaire.

"Easy to say," quoth she: "Samuin, Sinand, Sesclend, Sodb, Saiglend, Samlocht, Caill, Coll, Dichoem, Díchuil, Díchim, Díchuimne, Díchuinne, Dárne, Dárine, Der Úane, Egem, Agam, Ethamne, Gnim, Cluche, Cethardam, Nith, Nemuin, Nóenden, Badb, Blosc, Bloar, Úaet, Mede, Mod

On one foot, and holding up one hand, and breathing one breath she sang all that to them from the door of the house.

"I swear by the gods whom I adore," says Conaire, "that I will call thee by none of these names whether I shall be here a long or a short time."

"What dost thou desire?" says Conaire.

"That which thou, too, desirest," she answered.

"'Tis a tabu of mine," says Conaire, "to receive the company of one woman after sunset."

"Though it be a tabu," she replied, "I will not go until my guesting come at once this very night." [...]

(Anonymous, 1909)

This is the same hag who liked Niall so much and offered him the throne of Ireland, only that here she hates the current king and wants him to die. In Niall's story the lady gave him water and quenched his thirst, in Conaire's it is just the other way round: when besieged, the king falls under a spell from an enemy druid which makes him feel a terrible thirst. He then sends Mac Cecht in quest of water but in all the rivers and lakes of Ireland he just can't find water enough to fill his cup. Eventually the king dies of thirst and Mac Cecht arrives too late to save him. The very land who offered kingship to Niall as water from the well, now refuses the same to Conaire.

Ireland escaped Roman rule and therefore, she was able to keep her native language and traditions well into medieval times. The peoples in the Iberian Peninsula were not so lucky and we just don't have ancient collections of local myths. In some strange, distorted way, however, it seems as if the old belief survived in the memory of peasants. Let's take the following story, for instance. It comes from Galicia, right in the northwestern corner of the Iberian Peninsula, next to Asturias. It's not literature but an actual lawsuit from the early years of the 17th century. A priest called Vázquez de Orxas sued some local villagers on the rights over certain prehistoric mounds (*mámoas*). Legend had it that these mounds kept gold and they all believed they had real economic value. The proceedings go as follows:

One of his servants called Hilario Alonso had met a woman in that location. She had scarce, loose hair and was dressed in poor, brown clothes. This was short after sunset as he went to the mill with a bag of grain and she was holding in her hand a few hairs, and she had asked him which thing did he liked most, either what she had in her hand or else herself. Then he answered that he liked her better than what she held in her hand and she had ordered him to dig said height of the Segade mound and that he would find there a hoard large enough for himself and all his generation.

(Linares, M^a del Mar, 1990: 48)

The old, hideous woman doesn't even care any more about princes of royal blood. Neither she offers now the crown of the kingdom to her young suitor (this wouldn't make sense at all in 17th Century Galicia). She still is an embodiment of the land though, since she knows exactly where the hidden treasures lie, she still offers herself to the man who meets her and she still rewards the one who complies. The myth is basically the same, only that now it has become a private matter: the goddess of the country now doesn't offer sovereignty but the riches hidden in her bosom instead. When the suitor fails, when he lets his greed prevail and he makes the wrong choice, the lady gives him a severe punishment. In the following example from Asturias

the male character proves to be covetous and instead of rewarding him, the xana curses him with a life of hard work, poverty and disease:

In Cobiella, in Cangas de Onís county, lies the Cueva de la Huelga cave. Certain Midsummer's morning a young shearer reached the place and at the entrance of the cave he saw a young woman sitting behind a stall where hardware was on display and he stood by it.

-Of all what you see, what do you like best, shearer? - The enchanted girl asked

-These golden scissors

-Then take them, you filthy shearer; may you never lack neither sheep to shear nor scabies to scratch.

(Del Llano, A. 1983: 93, 94)

Asturian countryside, just like Galician, remained relatively untouched by migrations or Industrial Revolution until the beginning of the 20th century. This means folklorists have had the chance to rescue quite a large amount of traditional music, tales, proverbs, superstitions, spells (yes, magic spells), legends and lays (*romances*) before they fell into oblivion. Even today, as late as 2011, some researchers keep riding into small mountain villages to ask the elders about anything that they can remember they were told during their childhood. And even today they still get some answers.

They have found many *xanes* tales. They are often very simple, something like "they say there was a *xana* living by the fountain X" or "They said that in Midsummer's night the enchanted *xana* would appear in her cave and display her treasure on a stall".

Being enchanted means that the lady remains permanently attached to a certain location, typically a cave or a well, due to some evil spell. It means also that she yearns for delivery from such condition. The man who tries to break the spell must overcome some terrible trial requiring him to be courageous and dauntless. In the most common version the hero must stand still while the girl, transformed into a dreadful snake, coils around his body - then he must kiss the snake. Some Galician scholars understand this to be a metaphor for sex. In some versions the man has to pick with his own lips the carnation that the snake holds in its mouth, which is then believed to represent the vagina. If he manages to do it, the snake will turn again into a beautiful girl, she will make him immensely rich and in some versions they will marry. This all makes sense if we bear in mind how Niall should accept kissing the hag before she turned into a beautiful woman and he became king. Again, when fear overcomes the young man and he flees before disenchanting the *xana*, she may leave him lame with her comb or even curse him with death within the year.

This snake-woman tales remind us a lot of an ancient Greek legend, that of Hercules' tenth labor. When searching for the missing mares of his chariot, Hercules

reaches a wooded district called Hylaea, by the Black Sea. There he meets a half-serpent half-woman creature who claims to have his horses. Then they have intercourse. Before the hero leaves, he gives the half-serpent his bow and tells her to test the son who will be born of their relation: if he is strong enough to bend it, then he should be the king of the land. That's the origin of Scythian kings and there it is, sovereignty again.

Asturian tradition can be traced back to many different sources, though I think by now it should be quite obvious that there is a deep, strong link with Ireland, Great Britain and Celtic culture in general. Let's take for instance one of the most typically Asturian *xanes* legends, "The Four Cornered Bread". Many versions have been collected but it goes basically as follows: the male character gets to the accustomed cave in Midsummer's night where he meets the faerie, as usual. He has to disenchant her, again, but this time the procedure is different. The *xana* gives the man a four-cornered bread and orders him to keep it untouched for one year, then he must come back and throw it back inside the cave. The man gets back home and keeps his bread inside the pantry, but then his wife discovers it and breaks one of the corners. The bread starts to bleed and she grows scared, thus keeping it back again in the pantry.

When the time comes, the man goes back to the cave and throws the bread in. Then the *xana* shows up riding a horse (sometimes they may be three *xanas*, a typically Celtic triad) with one broken leg. "You didn't keep your promise, failed to rescue me and getting rich. I forgive you though, and as a gift you may give this scarf to your wife". The man, on his way back home, makes a halt to have a drink by a well and rests the scarf on a tree, which immediately sets on fire².

Keeping the bread untouched for one year is a taboo, just like those which Conaire had to keep, and has a Celtic taste. The hatred of the *xana* to the mortal wife, however, is found in Greek myth. Medea, the sorceress, took revenge on Creusa, princess of Corinth when she married her lover Jason by giving her a cursed gift: a crown which, when Creusa put it on her head, threw flames all around thus burning to death both herself and the guests to the wedding.

We lack ancient sources and we can't compare modern Asturian or Galician legends with local Pagan myths, but there is a chance that we can have a glimpse of the way the heroes of the past were downgraded. Let's look at the following tale:

² There is plenty of bibliography on *xanes*, *mouras* and *encantadas*, however it is found in Spanish, Asturian and Galician languages most of the times. Of course Aurelio del Llano, Constantino Cabal and María Josefa Canellada, being the oldest collectors of Asturian legends, are a must read on the subject. Alberto Álvarez Peña has published a lot of books and articles (especially in *Asturies, Memoria Encesa d'un País* review) where he has shown his most recent findings on oral tradition. Jesús Suarez and his *Folklore de Somiedo - Leyendas, Cuentos y Tradiciones* published by the Ayto. de Somiedo, Gijón 2003 has some fine Four-Cornered Bread examples. As to the snake woman, see "Madres Contra Rameras" by Felipe Criado Boado, published within BERMEJO BARRERA, J.C: *Mitología y Mitos de la Hispania Prerromana 2*, Akal ediciones, Madrid 1986

In San Cristobal de Maeza there used to be two springs called Los Catanales and La Carbayal. In La Carbayal every year a mermaid would appear. One day she appeared to a man from L`Arquera and told him not to be afraid, just to come back bearing a stick with a metal spike in one end (in Asturian a *guiyada*, it serves to herd cattle) and she would turn into a giant snake. Then he would hit her with the spike in the middle of her head and pour out a drop of blood.

The man showed up in Midsummer`s night, when the mermaid had told him to, bearing the stick with the metal point, and the enchanted woman appeared as a snake. She started to hiss frighteningly and then the man got scared and fled. Then the mermaid showed up again so enraged because he hadn`t been able to disenchant her. At this point thunders and flashings broke out. I heard this from Jose Pico, a man whom they called Pepe la Pescancia, if he were alive now would be sort of 100 years old.

Mercedes Iglesias Quintana, 68 years, San Cristobal, parish of Maeza, Salas county, Asturias. Collected in July the 16th, 1997

(Álvarez Peña, Alberto, 2000: 42-43)

There are two interesting details about this story: first, the mermaid provokes storms, thunders and flashings when she is angry. This is quite a remarkable feature and proves that she is basically a goddess of nature. Second, the man has to hit the snake with what seems to be a toy spear, a downgraded lance. Once and again it seems just as if the ancient, epic myths had been preserved and adapted to the prosaic life of Asturian peasantry. Thus the knight fighting the dragon turns into a commoner with a *guiyada*.

Yes, people modified their myths according to the changes in their environment. The reason for this is very probably that they *believed* in them. These stories have come down to us shortened, simplified and downgraded because they expressed ancient, non-Christian beliefs which for centuries have been shrinking, being encircled and threatened by a tide of new ideas, Christianity to begin with. However, there are other aspects of oral tradition which are far more resilient, such as folktales. The following is a very popular tale in many Asturian counties: "La Niña Encantada" and it explains a lot about most of the legends which have been produced in these pages:

The Enchanted Girl

Once upon a time there was a great lord who had two daughters: one of them was about to marry a count. The other one was dating in secret a poor, commoner young man. The girl`s father found out about this and he locked her in a room of his palace.

Through a window she would keep talking to her boyfriend, but this was discovered too and the young man decided to leave after a lord who was fighting the Saracens.

Following the instructions of sorcerers, the father took his daughter and took her to a mountain; a sorcerer started to read from a book, and out of a cave the dragon which would guard the girl went out. She was weeping, begging her father not to enchant her, but the tyrant made her enter the cave and the only consolation he gave her was telling her the means which should be necessary to deliver her and there he left her.

In the meantime her boyfriend, ready to gain honor, made so many feats fighting the Moors that the king made him a nobleman and gave him coat of arms.

Thus he returned and reported by his girlfriend's palace. From an old servant who esteemed the girl very much, he learned of the enchantment. And the young man went to the mountain and checked all the caves with no result.

Then he sat for rest under the shadow of an ash tree and suddenly heard the voice of a herdsman who went after his flock singing:

-Girl who are enchanted
In the cave of Cirbian,
I am to release you
In Midsummer's morn

The young man ran across a gorse field and reached the well where the shepherd stood. Then he asked him about the meaning of the song

The shepherd answered that while he was hidden inside the trunk of an oak tree to shelter from the rain, he had seen in terror the enchantment of the girl.

And before he left, the father had said to his daughter:

-Whoever dares to disenchant you he must show up here in Midsummer's morning bearing a lot of relics and give death to the dragon, with a thrust of his spear in its throat.

And if no one else dares to do this – the herdsman added – I will when I grow up. You should see how beautiful the girl is!

-Stop it! That girl it is me who must disenchant.

So in Midsummer's morning, armed with a spear and bearing a lot of relics, the young man went to the cave where his girlfriend was enchanted and waited.

Short after he heard a great noise and he so that the dragon was coming to him while hissing and hitting the ground with his tail.

The young man took the chance when the dragon straightened up in front of him, swelling his neck, he thrust his spear through its neck and killed it.

At this very moment the enchanted was broken and the girl appeared [...] the shepherd watched the fight of the young man with the dragon from the same spot where he had seen the enchantment and when he saw the beast fall dead he ran to tell what had happened to the old servant. Her father had died the day when he enchanted her.

Great preparations were made in the palace, and all the inhabitants in the area headed to the mountain in search of the loving couple, who married a few days

later. And they gave the shepherd a share of the money which was kept by the girl during her enchantment.

(Del Llano, A. 1983: 85-87)

This tale connects both *xanes* tales and a bunch of well known ancient myths. The enchantment and disenchantment process are typical *xanes* stuff, only that here the *guiyada* is still a spear and when the hero gets the girl, the people still gather to meet him and salute him as the new king. The idea of an old, unworthy king who locks the girl in a tower to prevent a new suitor from replacing him, however, is mythology. The old ruler's rival gets to the tower and begets the next king, then he vanishes from the story. When the child is born his evil grandfather tries to kill him but then he returns miraculously to defeat his grandfather and become the next king, or even the next god. In Ireland we may check the myth of Balor, Cian and Lugh, in Greece it is Danae, Acrisius and Perseus, in Rome Romulus, Remus, Rea Silvia and Amulius. Math, Son of Mathonwy, from the Third Branch of the Welsh Mabinogion can be added to the list. In England the legend of King Arthur was begotten in a similar fashion, has some points in common with "The Enchanted Girl" too.

In fact a long track of similar tales and legends can be followed from the Irish Book of Invasions, where the Sovereignty goddess is presented as a triad (Eriu, Banba and Fotla) to the late medieval French story of Melusine, the snake woman who married the Lord of Lusignan and made him the happiest of men as long as he kept a certain taboo.

There is a gap between these stories and the ancient, Iron Age, Pre-Roman pagan Celts. Historians have tried to fill the gap by studying ancient shrines where Gauls and Britons worshipped healing goddesses. These shrines are often found by springs or wells, such as Aquae Sulis (Bath) where pilgrims prayed to Sulis Minerva or Sources de la Seine where Sequana, the river Seine goddess, had her seat.

In the Iberian Peninsula one of these river goddesses stands out clearly: her name was Nabia and many engraved stones have been discovered where worshippers asked her some gift. Several rivers in Asturias and Galicia are named after her, including the longest river all over the Northern coast of the Peninsula. Nabia was undoubtedly the most important goddess in the area. Recent research³ has shown that she had several different roles, both as a cosmic deity (maybe a partner to the sky god) and also as a protector of the tribe and therefore a sovereignty goddess. For all that we know about her, Nabia was a typical poly-functional Celtic goddess.

Here goes my hypothesis: modern tales about *xanes* and enchanted women of all sorts in Asturias and Galicia derive from a very ancient myth about the relation between the tribe or the nation and the land, as embodied by the king and the sovereignty goddess. The candidate to the throne must undergo some tests where he will prove to be worthy. He may keep some taboo, as to show that he is steady and trust-worthy, therefore a fair and just ruler. He may kill a monster or else resist a

³ See Juan Carlos Olivares Pedreño, "Los Dioses de la Hispania Céltica"

horrible vision as to prove his courage and dauntlessness, then being a good warrior and a defender of the people. He may, finally, reject gold and treasures and choose the love for the country instead, this being the most important virtue for a Celtic king: generosity or bounty, since his own largess will reflect on the generosity of the Earth with good crops.

This myth has been preserved in many sources, both ancient and modern, in a wide area all over Europe. Asturian and Galician legends, however, seem strangely close to some Irish, Welsh and English examples, thus reinforcing the theory of a very ancient cultural connection between the north and the south. Since we know that no big scale Celtic invasions can be detected in the archeological record during Iron Age in the north of Iberia, let alone after the Roman invasion, the best explanation for these parallels lies even earlier.

It was during Prehistory, from Neolithic up to the Bronze Age when trade and cultural exchange flourished in the Atlantic Façade of Europe. It is from this extraordinarily ancient cultural layer that so many common traits are found in the tradition of northern and southern Celts.

In the first lines of this text I wrote that these tales were the key to open a door which has kept us apart and unaware of our kinship for such a long time. Shall it remain open now?

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