

ON DRAGONS AND RED DWARVES

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For countless millennia the campfire served as meeting place and center stage alike as bards entertained their audiences with thrilling tales of dashing heroes. During this period every tribal community had, as it were, its own Homer who, reciting from an iron-clad memory, related the trials and tribulations of the favorite hero, replete with dragon-combats and the rescue of maidens in distress. Held in the highest esteem, these ancient bards were deemed to be mortal repositories of sacred knowledge and hence their tales constitute an enduring record of mankind's earliest thoughts and concerns.

The ultimate appearance of advanced civilizations had a profound influence upon the medium, if not the message, of ancient myth. With the development of writing and other graphic systems capable of preserving sacred traditions, storytellers gradually ceased to form such a vital function in evolving societies. The great myths, hitherto committed to memory and preserved orally for untold generations, now became the common possession of all who could read and write. At the same time, ancient myths became increasingly subject to the vicissitudes of cultural evolution and modifications arising from creative innovation and the attempt to historicize and localize the sacred events.

Despite the ravages of time and the wholesale destruction of countless cultures and their sacred traditions, it is still possible to reconstruct the basic events behind the myth of the dragon-combat. That those events were celestial in nature there can be little doubt. And as the celestial prototype for the warrior-hero, the planet Mars figures prominently in numerous ancient myths of the dragon-combat. Indeed, it is the hero's identity with Mars which alone provides the rationale for many of the most bizarre elements of the myth.

The following essay is an exercise in comparative mythology, and as such it is not intended to represent the definitive analysis of the dragon-combat. Whole volumes will be required to elucidate the spectacular events at the heart of this intriguing mythical theme. Here we merely attempt to analyze several intriguing motives hitherto overlooked.

THE DRAGON AND CREATION

In order to properly interpret the myth of the dragon-combat it is necessary at the outset of our investigation to place it in its proper mythological context. That the dragon-combat has a cosmological import has been recognized since the pioneering researches of Gunkel, who documented that it typically had reference to tumultuous events associated with the Creation.¹ This opinion is readily confirmed by numerous passages in the Old Testament which allude to Yahweh's primeval conquest of the dragon, the latter appearing under one of several different names: Yam, Rahab, Tehom, and Leviathan.²

In the oldest form of the myth, the dragon typically appears as an obstructive force threatening the stability of the world and interfering with the process of Creation. The dragon's assault upon the heavenly kingdom results in an obscuration of the sun and/or imprisonment of the King of the Gods, among other things, and it is only through the intervention of the warrior-hero that the world is saved from the brink of destruction. Upon the dragon's defeat, the sun is restored to its proper place in heaven (or, alternatively, the King of the Gods is restored to power) and Creation is allowed to unfold. Significantly, a prominent episode in several cosmologies finds the Creator building his throne upon the body of the vanquished dragon.

Given its antiquity and prevalence, it would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the myth of the dragon-combat for an understanding of ancient religion and ritual.

With this brief synopsis of the dragon-combat behind us, we turn to the Vedic account of Indra and Vritra.

THE DEFEAT OF THE DRAGON AND THE RELEASE OF THE SUN

Our discussion of the traditions surrounding Indra revealed that the occasion of the hero's birth was associated with great tumult in heaven and earth.³ In the midst of this chaos, the infant found himself confronted by a colossal monster threatening the very existence of the world. Vritra's great crime involved his concealment of the sun and imprisonment of the life-giving waters, and thus Indra's defeat of the dragon secured the release of the sun together with the waters. This primeval event is the subject of countless passages in the *Rig Veda*:

Moreover, when thou first wast born, O Indra, thou struckest terror into all the people. Thou, Maghavan, rentest with thy bolt the Dragon who lay against the waterfloods of heaven.⁴

Another typical passage celebrates Indra as follows:

I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the

¹M. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster* (Leiden, 1973), p. 3.

²*Job* 9:8; *Psalms* 74; 89; 104; 65; and 93. See here J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 18-19.

³E. Cochrane, "Indra" *AEON* 2:4 (1991), pp. 59-76.

⁴*IV:17:7* All translations of Vedic hymns are from R. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda* (Delhi, 1973).

mountain torrents. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain; his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvaster fashioned. Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.⁵

Indra's decisive role in the release of the waters is emphasized again and again in the Vedic texts: "Vritra he slew, and forced the flood of water forth."⁶ A similar passage is the following: "Thou in thy vigor having slaughtered Vritra didst free the floods arrested by the Dragon."⁷

As more than one scholar has noted, the defeat of the dragon and subsequent deliverance of the sun was Indra's greatest deed: "When thou hadst slain with might the dragon Vrtra, thou, Indra, didst raise the Sun in heaven for all to see."⁸ Compare also the following passage: "He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, who leads the waters, He, O men, is Indra."⁹

Brown, one of the first scholars to recognize that Indra's defeat of the dragon belongs to the archaic myth of Creation, summarized this primeval episode as follows:

The sun, it is stated many times, was won by Indra. It had been in darkness...His mighty deed is that he gains the sun, which he set in the sky after slaying Vritra.¹⁰

The same basic story is alluded to again and again throughout the Vedic hymns, with several different names being applied to the eclipsing agent. On several occasions, the monster is called simply Ahi—"serpent." Other passages credit Indra with overcoming the demon Svarbhanu: "What time thou smotest down Svarbhanu's magic that spread itself beneath the sky, O Indra."¹¹ As to the nature of the demon's crime the *Veda* is explicit—it was the obscuration of the sun: "O Surya, when the Asura's descendent, Svarbhanu, pierced thee through and through with darkness."¹²

It is well-known, of course, that eclipses were occasions of great terror and omen throughout the ancient world. Indeed, the eclipse of the sun-god meant nothing less than the end of the world: "The end of cosmos is seen in an eclipse of the sun, when the very existence of the god of order is threatened and the world is abandoned to the powers of darkness."¹³

The deliverance of the sun from a prison-like pall of darkness, it can be shown, is one of the most pervasive themes associated with the warrior-hero. It is also one of the most

⁵I:32:1-3

⁶I:85:9-10

⁷IV:17:1

⁸I:51:4

⁹II:12:7

¹⁰W. N. Brown, "The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda," *J. of Am. Oriental Society* 62 (1942), p. 97.

¹¹V:40:6

¹²V:40:5

¹³A. Wensinck, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," *Acta Orientalia* (1923), p. 188.

ancient. Early Sumerian seals, for example, appear to show a hero dressed in lion skins engaged in what has been called “the liberation of the Sun-God from his Mountain Grave.”¹⁴

Occasionally the motive of the sun’s deliverance from darkness may be divorced from the context of the dragon-combat. In Southern India, for example, Murukan replaces Indra as deliverer of the sun,¹⁵ although there the eclipsing agent is depicted as a great tree:

In the Tamil myth of Cur, the cosmic tree is not a Tree of Life but a Tree of Death, a dangerous embodiment of uncontrolled power which has upset the proper workings of the universe. Like Vrtra in the Vedic creation myth, it is a force opposed to order, filling and blocking the space necessary for creation, a source of darkness and chaos. This is the axis mundi in its negative aspect, represented by the tree associated with primordial chaos, and, as Indra must kill Vrtra and split open the cosmic mountain with which Vrtra is associated, so Murukan must cleave the mango tree.¹⁶

Given the acknowledged influence of Northern Sanskrit culture upon that of Southern Tamil culture, one might be tempted to argue that any resemblance between the respective traditions associated with Indra and Murukan was simply a product of diffusion. While this is possible, it is more probable that the Tamil mythology associated with Murukan traces to pre-Aryan (i.e., Dravidian) sources and hence is independent of any Sanskrit influence.¹⁷ However we answer this question, Murukan’s role in the deliverance of the sun remains significant given this god’s implicit identification with the planet Mars, the very planet we recognize behind the mythology of Indra (We will have reason to refer to Murukan’s brilliant red color later in this article).¹⁸

A giant tree is also the eclipsing agent in a fascinating tale preserved in the *Kalevala*. There the hero who eventually frees the sun, strangely enough, is a homunculus by the name of Sampsa. The Finnish account reads as follows:

A man rose out of the sea, a hero from the waves. He was not the hugest of the huge nor yet the smallest of the small: he was as big as a man’s thumb...” Confronted with this

¹⁴W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 80.

¹⁵F. Clothey, “Skanda-Sasti: A Festival in Tamil India,” *History of Religions* 8 (1969), p. 236.

¹⁶D. Shulman, “Murukan, The Mango and Ekambaresvara-Siva: Fragments of a Tamil Creation Myth?” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979), p. 32.

¹⁷See the discussion in K. Zvelebil, “Valli and Murugan—A Dravidian Myth,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19 (1977), pp. 245ff.

¹⁸F. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan* (New York, 1978), pp. 144-145. Although it could be argued, perhaps, that this identification traces to the Tamil god’s identification with Skanda, who was likewise identified with Mars, this would be an error. The truth is that the cult of Murukan is permeated with Martian motives. There is an explicit relation between the Tamil god and the color red, for example, Murukan elsewhere being known by the epithet *Cey*, “the Red One”. Here one authority has stated: “Another fundamental symbolism is connected with Murukan’s redness: his complexion is red, he is clad in red and gold garments...The flowers of the katampu, his tree par excellence, are red. His bird, the awakener, is the red cock.” See K. Zvelebil, “A Guide to Murukan,” *Journal of Tamil Studies* 9 (1976), p. 11. D. Handelman, “Myths of Murugan...,” *History of Religions* 27:2 (1987), pp. 133-170, lists the following attributes of the god, all of which have Martian overtones: rambunctious infancy, during which he throws the cosmos into disorder; endures an episode of great heating and/or immolation; acts the part of a fool; prolific shapeshifter; suffers an episode of madness; behaves as if possessed or drunk; etc.

strange little man, a wiseman [Vainamoinen] chides him with the following words: “You seem more like a man to me and the most contemptible of heroes. You’re no better than a dead man and a face on you like a corpse!”¹⁹

At this point the little man blurts back:

“I am a man as you see—small, but a mighty water-hero. I have come to fell the oak-tree and splinter it to fragments!” Vainamoinen, old and wily, scoffed: “Why, you haven’t the strength, you’ll never be able to fell the magic oak-tree and splinter it to fragments!”

Scarcely had he said these words when, before his eyes, the little man was transformed into a giant. He stamped with his feet on the earth and his head reached up to the clouds; his beard flowed to his knees and his hair to his heels. His eyes were fathoms wide and his legs fathoms long...He struck the tree with his axe...Sparks flew from the axe and flame from the oak as he tried to bend the magic tree to his will. At the third stroke the oak-tree was shattered...Now that the oak-tree was felled and the proud trunk levelled, the sun shone again...

The sudden growth of Sampsa offers an intriguing parallel to the rapid swelling which forms such a prominent motive in the traditions surrounding Indra and Cuchulainn.²⁰ It is a motive that we will encounter again and again in the traditions surrounding the warrior-hero.

INTO THE BELLY OF THE DRAGON

An intriguing motive makes the warrior-hero descend into the belly of the dragon in order to conquer it. Such a tale was related of Heracles, for example, a hero whose adventures offer numerous parallels with the career of Indra. According to various Greek chroniclers, it was while waging combat with the dragon which ravaged Troy that the Greek strongman is said to have leapt fully armed into the monster’s mouth. Three days later Heracles emerged from the beast’s belly, although the experience had rendered him bald.²¹

As bizarre as this myth reads, precise parallels to Heracles’ plight can be found throughout the ancient world.²² Consider the following example offered by Leo Frobenius:

¹⁹The following account is taken from C. Jung & K. Kerényi, “The Primordial Child in Primordial Times,” in *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 41-42.

²⁰See E. Cochrane, “Indra” *AEON* 2:4 (1991), pp. 64-69. Here it is relevant to note the apparent relation between the name Sampsa and Sampo, a magical object in the *Kalevala*, identified by several scholars with the World Pillar. See de Santillana and von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 232. Of the latter word the editor of the *Kalevala* observes: “The name would seem to be somehow connected with *sammās* (gen. *sampaan*) ‘pillar, post’ in Vote and *sammās* (gen. *samba*) ‘prop, mainstay, support’ in Estonian. Estonian *sammās* posits a base-word *sampa*, of which Sampo would be an o-diminutive and thus mean or suggest ‘prop of life.’” See F. Magoun, *The Kalevala* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 400-401. The relationship between Sampsa and Sampo thus offers a close parallel to that which pertains between Skanda/Mars and the *skambha*, the latter the name for the World Pillar in the *Veda*. See the discussion in E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

²¹Scholiast to the *Iliad*, 20:146; scholiast to Lycophron, 34. For summaries of this myth, see R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* (New York, 1970), Vol. II, p. 169; and K. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 160-161.

²²For an extensive discussion of this motive see L. Frobenius, *Das Zeitalter des Sonnengottes* (Berlin, 1904), pp. 59-220.

A hero is devoured by a water-monster...Meanwhile, the hero lights a fire in the belly of the monster, and feeling hungry, cuts himself a piece of the heart. Soon afterwards, he notices that the fish has glided on to dry land; he immediately begins to cut open the animal from within; then he slips out. It was so hot in the fish's belly that all his hair has fallen out.²³

The theme of the swallowed hero/god was especially popular among the Polynesian Islanders, with various local creatures assuming the role of the dragon. Upon Tuamotus, for example, it was the ancient god Tangaroa who once was swallowed by a whale, only to find upon cutting his way out that the experience had cost him every hair on his head.²⁴ Much the same story was told by the natives of Hawaii. There it is the hero Kukuipahu who was swallowed by a shark and somehow managed to survive inside the monster's belly for a period of days. Eventually, however, the hero escaped and made it to shore although his hair had since fallen out.²⁵

A similar account comes from the Torres Straits. There it is the hero Mutuk who is swallowed by a great shark and, as was the case with Kukuipahu, the hero is rendered bald as a result of his sojourn within the beast's belly.²⁶ The natives along the North coast of America tell the same basic story. There the offending monster is a whale, and it is said that it was so hot in the whale's stomach that the regurgitated hero's hair fell out.²⁷

In addition to the specific pattern apparent in all these various traditions—the regurgitation of the hero being accompanied by the affliction of baldness—there is also a more general pattern: namely, the discomfiture of the hero in some manner as a result of his sojourn within the monster. Analysis of the respective myths of the dragon-combat suggests that what is implied in these traditions is a temporary “death” suffered by the hero as a result of his encounter with the dragon.

A prominent episode in Jason's expedition to recover the Golden Fleece, for example, found the hero consigned to enter the jaws of a giant dragon which guarded the Fleece.²⁸ Kerényi summarized this episode as follows:

It is from a vase-painter again that we learn how Jason returned from the jaws of the gigantic snake. He was in the same state as Heracles when he emerged from the Nemean lion's den, as indeed it was natural for a mortal to be whenever the underworld gave one back to the world of the living. He hung fainting from the dragon's mouth...Lifeless from exhaustion he came back from the belly of the monster and needed a rescuer who

²³Translation in C. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton, 1976), p. 210.

²⁴M. Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology* (Honolulu, 1970), p. 503. Of Tangaroa's possible identification with the planet Mars speaks a number of things, not the least of which is the fact that he was described as being bright red in color.

²⁵M. Beckwith, *Hawaiian Mythology* (Honolulu, 1970), p. 132. A very similar story is told of the hero Kaeha. *Ibid.*, p. 437.

²⁶L. Frobenius, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁷*Ibid.* p. 82.

²⁸Note that the Fleece is said to have hung in the Grove of Ares. As Kerényi points out, this places the scene of the myth in the Netherworld. It also signifies the region as the axis mundi associated with the World Pillar, the Grove of Ares forming a mythical analogue of Ares' spring and/or hill. See E. Cochrane, “The Spring of Ares,” *KRONOS* 11:3 (1986), pp. 15-21.

should awaken him from the drunken swoon of death. In this painting it is Athene who does this; elsewhere it is Medeia, who is seen on vase-paintings following the hero with her magic herbs. The hardest point for the later narrators was the death apparently, and in a sense really, undergone by Jason, through which he won the Golden Fleece.²⁹

Jason's "death" in the wake of the dragon-combat has a multitude of mythic parallels, prominent examples including the temporary death of Heracles as a result of his combat with Typhon and Apollo's "death" at the hands of Python.³⁰ The discomfiture of Jason in the wake of the dragon-combat, moreover, conforms to a widespread pattern in which the warrior-hero experiences a temporary "death," "coma-like" sleep, or period of stupor in the wake of some formidable labor. One thinks here of the mysterious sleep which overtakes Heracles in the wake of wrestling with the Nemean Lion³¹; Gilgamesh's coma upon the felling of the sacred Cedar trees³²; Samson's lethargy in the aftermath of his slaughter of the Philistines³³; Cuchulainn's death-like sleep in the grave of Lerga³⁴; and the enfeeblement and near death of Ares in the wake of his release from imprisonment in the jar of the Aloeds.³⁵

It is among the sacred traditions of the Maori, perhaps, that one finds the most remarkable parallel to Jason's "death". There it is the dauntless hero Maui who—goaded into accepting the challenge of entering into the belly of a dragon-like monster known as Hine-nui-te-po—finds that entering the monster is easier than exiting it. Just as he was about to emerge from the dragon's maw, the great beast clamped shut its jaws, crushing Maui in the process. And so it was that death first entered the world:

Thus died this Maui we have spoken of...According to the traditions of the Maori, this was the cause of the introduction of death into the world (Hine-nui-te-po being the goddess of death): if Maui had passed safely through her, then no more human beings would have been destroyed.³⁶

The traumatic experiences of Jason and Maui, alas, find an intriguing parallel within the career of Indra. Thus, in the *Mahabharata* it is related that Indra was swallowed by the dragon Vritra, from whom he barely escaped.³⁷ Indra only succeeds in escaping the maw of the monster by way of a ruse—the war-god shrinks to a miniature form and slips through the gaping mouth when the monster yawns.³⁸ Elsewhere it is reported that upon defeating the

²⁹K. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York, 1959), pp. 264-265.

³⁰Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistoi* 10:47:392d; Zenobius, *Paroemiographi* 5:56. See also the discussion in J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 86-88.

³¹See Kerényi, *op cit.*, pp. 142.

³²See the discussion in S. Kramer, "Gilgamesh: Some New Sumerian Data," in ed. P. Garelli, *Gilgames et sa legende* (Paris, 1960), p. 65.

³³*Judges* 15:19

³⁴On the sleep of Cuchulainn see E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 171.

³⁵*Iliad* 5:385-391.

³⁶G. Grey, *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History of the New Zealanders* (Sydney, 1929), pp. 40-41. See also the valuable discussion of this myth in M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1975), pp. 220-221.

³⁷*Mbh.*, Udy 9-16. See also the discussion in J. Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 198.

³⁸D. Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, 1985), p. 222.

dragon, Indra “ran away” and assumed a diminutive form within a lotus stalk, unconscious as if dead and cowering like a serpent.³⁹

Although the account in the *Mahabharata* is late and may well be sanitized in light of Indra’s divinity, there can be little doubt that the Vedic god of war—like Jason and Maui—came close to death as a result of his encounter with the dragon. On this score we find ourselves in complete agreement with Fontenrose, who summarized this myth as follows:

The *Mahabharata* is later than the *Vedas*, which say nothing about the swallowing of Indra or his lying as in death at the world’s end. Yet we should not attribute the epic’s elaborations entirely to the poet’s invention—these episodes belong to the myth of the dragon combat.⁴⁰

THE RED DWARF

It is probable that the aforementioned episode in which Indra assumes a miniature form likewise belongs to the most archaic elements of the dragon combat. Here it is significant to note how often the dragon-combat turns in accordance with the hero’s ability to make himself alternately tiny and/or gigantic.⁴¹ A widespread motive has the shape-shifting hero assume a miniature form in order to enter the dragon’s belly, from whence he subsequently carves his way out. The Maya hero Ez, for example, is said to have assumed a tiny form in order to gain entrance into the belly of a great dragon. Shortly thereafter, “When the serpent swallowed him, he cut his way out with the obsidian and killed the serpent. He emerged bigger and stronger than before.”⁴²

As a dragon-slaying dwarf, Ez has numerous parallels in the sacred traditions of Pre-Columbian Indians from North and South America. Consider, for example, a fascinating figure from South America known as Mura, the trusty servant of the great god Pura, the primal sun.⁴³ Described as a red dwarf renowned for his club and giant knife, Mura is said to reside upon the World Mountain at the center of heaven, together with—but in a position

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 222-225. See also the discussion in G. Dumézil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago, 1970), p. 124.

⁴⁰Fontenrose, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁴¹Marukan, for example, assumes a gigantic form embracing the whole of creation during his combat with the demon Cur. See D. Shulman, “Murukan, Mango and Ekambaresvara-siva,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21 (1979), p. 31. The Maori dragon-slayer Maui, similarly, was a notorious shape-shifter. If on one occasion the hero is capable of shrinking himself to the size of an insect, on another he can assume a gargantuan form embracing all of heaven. The following account is from a myth associated with the raising of the sky—a vestige, apparently, of ancient Maori cosmology—whereupon Maui is said to have engaged in a great battle with Ru: “Ru seized Maui, who was of small stature, and hurled him to a great height. In falling, however, Maui assumed the form of a bird, and lightly reached the ground, quite unharmed. In a moment he resumed his natural form, but extended to gigantic proportions; and he hurled Ru, sky and all, to a tremendous height—so high that the sky could never get back again; and the head and shoulders of Ru got entangled among the stars, where he was held prisoner, struggling, until he perished.” See J. Andersen, *Myths and Legends of the Polynesians* (Rutland, 1969), p. 223.

⁴²M. Pickands, “The Hero Myth in Maya Folklore,” in G. Gossen, *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community* (Albany, 1986), p. 121.

⁴³Pura was the leading god of the Arikema Indians, a Carib tribe of the Guianas. See A. Kruse, “Pura, das Hochste Wesen der Arikema,” *Anthropos* 50 (1955), p. 406.

subordinate to—the sun-like Pura. Once upon a time, according to Arikena tradition, Pura and Mura found themselves in the belly of a great serpent and it was only with great difficulty that they eventually hacked their way out thanks to the aforementioned knife.⁴⁴ It is the possibility of relating Mura to the red planet that peaks our attention, of course, and thus it is tempting to compare the club-bearing red dwarf with Heracles, the latter alike being renowned for his club and homunculus-like (daktyl) form.⁴⁵

As is the case with any truly archetypal mythical motive, the shape-shifting red dwarf can be found throughout the ancient world.⁴⁶ A prominent example can be found in the *Ramayana*, where a trickster-like figure by the name of Hanuman finds himself confronted by a giant monster:

Later, a huge form stood in his way and said: “Enter my mouth. I have been without food for a long time and am eagerly waiting for you,” and the monster opened wide like a cave...Hanuman thought quickly and decided what to do. Step by step he made his body grow bigger and bigger. The Raakshasa form (the monstrous form assumed by Surasa, a Naaga goddess) opened its mouth correspondingly wider and wider. When the mouth was thus enormously wide, all of a sudden Hanuman contracted his body into a speck and, darting through the demon’s mouth and body, came out again and resumed his former normal shape.⁴⁷

Hanuman resorts to the same ploy on another occasion. This time, however, it is the very fact of the hero’s assuming a gargantuan form that causes the belly of the dragon to burst, thereby bringing about its death. Jung summarizes the episode as follows: “Once more he had recourse to his earlier strategem, made himself small, and slipped into her body; but scarcely was he inside than he swelled up to gigantic size, burst her, and killed her, and so made his escape.”⁴⁸

The fact that Hanuman (or his face) is elsewhere said to be ruby-red in color offers a striking parallel to the aforementioned dwarves from the New World.⁴⁹ Nor can the shape-shifting contortions ascribed to Hanuman fail to evoke comparison with the grotesque contortions undergone by the ruddy-colored heroes Cuchulainn and Indra whilst in the throes of their respective “furors”.⁵⁰ In Indra’s case, it will be remembered, he swelled to such an

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁴⁵On Heracles as a daktyl see E. Cochrane, “The Death of Heracles,” *AEON* 2:5 (1991), pp. 66-68.

⁴⁶Compare the red dwarf of Quiche lore known as Sparkstriker. See D. Tedlock, *Popul Vuh* (New York, 1985), p. 368. Other Quiche names for the red dwarf include C’oxol, Tzimit, and Tzitzimit. See B. Tedlock, “On a Mountain in the Dark: Encounters with the Quiche Culture Hero,” in G. Gossen, *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community* (Albany, 1986), pp. 125-138. A red dwarf is also a prominent figure in the sacred lore of the Indians of Columbian Amazon, where he is known as Vai-Mahse. See G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago, 1971), p. 80ff. I am indebted to Dave Talbott for this last reference.

⁴⁷C. Rajagopalachari, *Ramayana* (Bombay, 1968), p. 209.

⁴⁸C. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton, 1976), p. 211.

⁴⁹C. Rajagopalachari, *op. cit.*, p. 208. See also J. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion* (New York, 1961), p. 109.

⁵⁰See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “Indra,” *AEON* 2:4 (1991), pp. 64-71. Cuchulainn’s status as a dwarf has been recognized by several leading scholars.

extent that he dominated the region between heaven and earth, actually threatening to block out the light of the sun. Recall again the Vedic description of Indra's epiphany:

Indra, endowed with all heroic valor. Then up he sprang himself, assumed his vesture, and filled, as soon as born, the earth and heaven.⁵¹

A similar passage is the following: "Indra, Impetuous One, hath waxed immensely: he with his vastness hath filled earth and heaven."⁵²

Indra's ability to assume a gigantic form is a decided point of emphasis in the Vedic hymns, and more than one scholar has called attention to the prominent role of the root *vrđh*, "to increase, or swell," in his mythus.⁵³ A stock epithet of the god—*Pravrđdha*—emphasizes this ability to swell, signifying "swollen, enlarged, expanded, increased, violent."⁵⁴

The Celtic hero Cuchulainn, similarly, was described as swelling up like a ball when angry:

Then it was that he suffered his *riastradh*, whereby he became fearsome and many-shaped, a marvelous and hitherto unknown being. All over him, from his crown to the ground, his flesh and every limb and joint...quivered as does a tree, yea, a bulrush in mid-current. Within his skin he put forth an unnatural effort of his body: his feet, his shins, and his knees shifted themselves and were behind him...Then his face underwent an extraordinary transformation: one eye became engulfed in his head so far that 'tis a question whether a wild heron could have got at it where it lay against his occiput, to drag it out upon the surface of his cheek; the other eye on the contrary protruded suddenly, and of itself so rested upon the cheek. His mouth was twisted awry until it met his ears. His lion's gnashings caused flashes of fire, each larger than the fleece of a three-year-old-wether, to steam from his throat into his mouth...Among the clouds over his head were visible showers and sparks of ruddy fire, which the seething of his savage wrath caused to mount up above him...His hero's paroxysm thrust itself out of his forehead longer and thicker than a warrior's whetstone. Taller, thicker, more rigid, longer than a ship's mast, was the upright jet of dusky blood which shot upwards from his scalp, and then was scattered to the four airts.⁵⁵

Cuchulainn's *riastradh* bears comparison with the metamorphosis undergone by Hanuman, as described in the *Ramayana*:

At once Hanuman's form began to swell like the sea at high tide...The hair of Hanuman's body stood on end and he roared and lashed his tail on the ground. He contracted his hind parts, held his breath, pressed down his feet, folded his ears and stiffened his muscles...He seemed to swallow the sky as he flew forward. His eyes glistened like mountain forests on fire. His red nose shone like the evening sun. His huge frame spanned the sky like an enormous comet.⁵⁶

⁵¹IV:18:5

⁵²IV:16:5

⁵³See Dumézil, *op cit.*, p. 126, who cites Renou and Bergaigne.

⁵⁴M. Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1972), p. 644.

⁵⁵Hull, *op cit.*, pp. 174-175.

⁵⁶C. Rajagopalachari, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

ON FORCIBLE EXITS AND BIRTHS

With the bizarre tale of Hanuman before us, it is interesting to speculate upon the possibility that the hero's bursting of the dragon's belly represents a mythical analogue of the widespread motive whereby the hero's forcible birth results in the death of his mother.⁵⁷ This hypothesis is supported by several considerations. In numerous cases, like that of Hanuman, the dragon is identified as being a great goddess. Elsewhere, as was the case with Maui, the monster is explicitly identified with the Goddess of death, who also doubles as the hero's mother.⁵⁸ In a few cases both motives—the death of a dragon-like monster and the death of the hero's mother—are conjoined in a single myth. Such is the case in a curious episode from the mythical career of Finn, a dwarfish hero of Celtic lore.

In Celtic folktale it was related how Finn once became forced to carry his mother in order to escape from their enemies. Eventually the weight became too much for the hero to bear, whereupon he threw his foster-mother down, at which point she turned into a hag-like dragon and began ravaging the land. Later, upon confronting the monster and being swallowed, the hero hacked his way out of the beast's belly.⁵⁹ Significantly, upon emerging, Finn was described as “without a single hair or shred of clothing on his body.”⁶⁰

Other Celtic traditions relate that Finn's birth resulted in the death of his mother. Like the bees enclosed by Baltic amber, these tales preserve “fossilized” motives, as it were, and offer abundant proof that archaic elements have been preserved even amongst these oral tales of the Irish, many of which were only first committed to writing in the last 200 years.⁶¹

Finn's role in the death of his mother is of interest to us here because Indra too, apparently, caused the death of his mother as a result of the unusual manner of his birth. According to the Vedic account, Indra refused to take the customary canal of delivery, announcing his intention to issue “forth from the side obliquely.”⁶² The hymn recounting the god's birth—acknowledged to be among the most ancient in the *Veda*—relates that Indra was concealed by his mother prior to his battle with Vritra.⁶³ That this concealment possibly involved his being swallowed is strongly suggested by a subsequent verse in the same hymn,

⁵⁷That many heroes caused the death of their mothers through their abnormal birth is well-known. The Iroquois “Mars”, Tawiskaron, offers a classic example of this motive. He is said to have forced his way out of his mother's armpit, thereby causing her death. See the account given by W. Miller, “North America,” *Pre-Columbian American Religions* (New York, 1969), p. 182.

⁵⁸W. Westervelt, *Maui: Demi-god of Polynesia* (Honolulu, 1910), p. 5.

⁵⁹Of this legend Nagy offered the following commentary: “It is not altogether inappropriate to mention here in regard to the implied intimacy between Finn and his monstrous opponent that, according to some Irish storytellers, Finn's foster mother, after she became a ravaging water beast, swallowed Finn and his men, who then hacked their way out.” J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 302.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 302. A similar tale is also preserved of Finn's son who, upon being swallowed by a giant dragon, emerges from it's belly devoid of hair.

⁶²IV:18:1-2 Here W. O'Flaherty, “The Case of the Stallion's Wife,” *J. Am. Oriental Society* 105:3 (1985), p. 493, writes: “Indra himself was kept in his mother's womb for many years, and finally broke out against her will.”

⁶³IV:18:5

where an otherwise unknown female by the name of Kusava is said to have swallowed the god.⁶⁴

Whether or not one accepts the hero's forcible bursting from the belly of the dragon as analogous to the hero's unusual manner of birth, it is clear that the harrowing experiences of Hanuman, Finn, and Ez can contribute to our understanding of Indra's plight when swallowed by Vritra, not to mention his subsequent flight and shape-shifting.

THE HERO AS IMPLANTED EMBRYO

In light of the resemblance between the myth of the hero's birth and his exit from the dragon's belly, it is interesting to note the widespread motive whereby a hero assumes (or is given) a miniature form in order to be reborn. In an intriguing myth from South America, for example, it is related that once-upon-a-time the hero Karuetaruyben was rendered minuscule in form and re-inserted into the womb of his mother.⁶⁵ Karuetaruyben grew so fast upon being "born" that he earned the name *Bekit-tare-be*, "the male child who grows fast." Here it is impossible not to recognize the analogy between this myth and the hero's entrance into the belly of the dragon as a homunculus: In both cases the hero enters the belly/womb as a dwarf-like being and swells or grows with great rapidity upon emerging. And as the hero swallowed by a dragon is frequently a red dwarf, so too was the metamorphosed embryo Karuetaruyben described as a ruddy-colored being, his name signifying "the red male macaw with the bloodshot eyes."⁶⁶

Significantly, a similar story surrounds the Celtic hero Cuchulainn, whom we have elsewhere identified with the planet Mars.⁶⁷ Once upon a time, it is said, the Celtic god Lug—renowned for his brilliant red form—assumed a miniature form and was reborn from the goblet of Dechtair (a Celtic goddess) as Cuchulainn.⁶⁸ That this motive offers a mythic variation upon the motive whereby the red dwarf is swallowed by the dragon is supported by the fact that it is elsewhere reported that Cuchulainn was born bald.⁶⁹

Significantly, at least one modern scholar has identified Lug with the planet Mars.⁷⁰ And it is well-known, moreover, that more than one of the aboriginal Celtic war-gods subsequently identified with the Latin Mars were explicitly described as being red in color.⁷¹

⁶⁴IV:18:8 For a similar conclusion see N. Brown, *op cit.*, p. 95.

⁶⁵This account is taken from C. Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes* (Chicago, 1973), pp. 205-206.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 206. That the planet Mars was specifically associated with disturbances of the eyes—particularly so bloodshot eyes—has been documented by us elsewhere. E. Cochrane, "On Mars and Pestilence," *AEON* 3:4 (1994), pp. 60, 75.

⁶⁷E. Cochrane, "Indra," *AEON* 2:4 (1991), pp. 66-71.

⁶⁸A. Nutt, *Cuchulainn: The Irish Achilles* (London, 1900), p. 5. In the universal lexikon of symbols, of course, the goddess originally was synonymous with the vase or goblet.

⁶⁹J. Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London, 1898), p. 437.

⁷⁰R. Hicks, "Astronomical Traditions of Ancient Ireland and Britain," *Archaeoastronomy* 8:1-4 (1985), p. 77.

⁷¹A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 169-171. All told at least 59 Celtic deities were identified with the Latin Mars. See also M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 27-28.

SUMMARY

The myth of the dragon-combat, as we have documented, can be found amongst the sacred traditions of peoples throughout the ancient world. In many cultures these traditions were associated with mimetic rites commemorating the primordial combat. It is well-known, for example, that the myth of the dragon-combat plays a prominent role in countless rites of initiation. A widespread motive in many puberty rites, found among aboriginal peoples of both the Old and New Worlds, finds the initiate consigned to enter the belly of an effigy representing a great monster. Of such rites, Eliade offers the following observation:

Several times during our exposition we have met with the initiatory ordeal that consists of being swallowed by a monster. There are innumerable variants of this rite, which can be compared with Jonah's adventure with the whale...This initiatory motif has given birth not only to a great number of rites but to myths and legends not always easy of interpretation.⁷²

It is Eliade's opinion that the initiatory rites featuring the novices' swallowing by a dragon gave rise to the various myths and legends, some of which we have encountered above. In this opinion he has been followed by other scholars. It is patently obvious, however, that Eliade's thesis leaves unexplained the origin of the rites themselves, not to mention the peculiar details of the dragon-combat. From whence derives the inspiration for the hero's entry into the belly of the dragon, or the bizarre motive of the hero's becoming alternately miniature and gigantic?

According to our thesis, in which the ingested hero—Heracles, Indra, Mura, Maui, Hanuman, etc.—represents a personification of the planet Mars, one would expect to find the inspiration for both the myths *and* the associated initiation rites in spectacular events associated with the red planet itself. The archaic rites of initiation featured an entrance into the body of a great monster for the simple reason that the Martian hero was witnessed performing a similar deed at the dawn of time.

But how are we to understand the hero's entry into the belly of the dragon? A decisive clue is provided by the complimentary myth of the implanted embryo. If one approaches this tradition from the vantage point offered by the Saturn-thesis, it is obvious that as Mars rose up the polar column in the direction of Venus it appeared as if the warrior-hero was re-entering the womb of the mother-goddess (Venus). In our essay on Heracles, it was suggested that the movement of Mars into the near vicinity of Venus—whereby the smaller red orb actually appeared to be enclosed by the larger Venus—accounts for the hero's assumption of a dwarf-like form (Heracles as daktyl) as well as for the hero's rejuvenation upon the lap of Hera during his ascent to heaven.⁷³

That the planet-goddess Venus was frequently represented as a dragon is well-known.⁷⁴ In light of the overlapping identities of the dragon and mother goddess—explicit in the case of Finn, Maui, and Hanuman, but deducible in numerous other variations of the same motive—it is apparent that the belly of the dragon is synonymous with the womb of the

⁷²M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (New York, 1975), p. 219.

⁷³E. Cochrane, "The Death of Heracles," *AEON* 2:5 (1991), pp. 65-68.

⁷⁴Such is the case in both the Old World and New. See the discussion in E. Cochrane & D. Talbott, "When Venus was a Comet," *KRONOS* 12:1 (1987), pp. 5-13.

mother goddess. Thus it is only logical to attempt to understand the hero's forcible birth from the goddess as a variation upon his forcible exit from the belly of the dragon.

The same conclusion is supported by the curious circumstance whereby the hero swells in size both upon birth from the mother goddess (as in the case of Indra, Karuetauyben and others), and upon exiting the dragon's belly (as in the case of Hanuman, Ez and others). As I have documented, this rapid "swelling" is specifically associated with the planet Mars and with "Martian" heroes throughout the ancient world.⁷⁵ And as Talbott and I have argued, this widespread motive of the planet-hero's swelling is best interpreted as reflecting the appearance of Mars as it descended along the polar axis towards Earth, whereby it appeared to wax great in size.

One motive has yet to be accounted for—the hero's being rendered bald as a result of his exiting the dragon's belly. While the full story of this episode will require whole volumes and thus must await another time, a couple of observations are in order here. As Talbott and I have shown, Venus was widely regarded as the "hairy-star" *par excellence*, or as a sacred lock of hair.⁷⁶ Needless to say, we would refer such traditions to a specific episode in the recent history of Venus, one in which the planet's atmosphere became greatly distended, presenting the appearance of a spiraling curl or "lock of hair". During the period of Mars' appearance within the visual outlines of Venus (i.e., in the belly of the dragon), it stands to reason that the Martian hero would naturally partake of this "hairy" symbolism. And thus it is that many Martian heroes are distinguished by their sacred lock of hair as youths (the Egyptian Horus offers the most familiar example of this motive, but the theme is universal in extent). Indeed, as I have documented, one of the defining characteristics of the "youth" in many cultures is the presence of a sacred lock of hair.⁷⁷ Upon the hero's exit from the dragon—in reality, the movement of Mars away from Venus and towards Earth, with the result that it now appeared outside of and beneath Venus—it follows that the planet-hero left his "sacred lock/hair" behind and thus became "bald".

⁷⁵E. Cochrane, "Indra: A Case Study in Comparative Mythology," *AEON* 2:4 (1991), pp. 65-71. Amongst the Polynesian Islanders, for example, Mars was known as *Horo-pukupuku*, "Quick-swelling". See M. Makemson, *The Morning Star Rises* (New Haven, 1941), p. 194.

⁷⁶See the discussion of D. Talbott, "The Great Comet Venus," *AEON* 3:5 (1994), pp. 13-23.

⁷⁷E. Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67. This is the original meaning of the Greek *kouros*, for example, signifying a youth whose hair is yet unshorn.

