

Emily Lyle

*Celtic and Scottish Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures,
University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK*

The Cosmic Connections of the Eight Key Points in the Indo-European Ritual Year

Abstract. The ritual year in Indo-European pagan times formed part of a cosmology which included space as well as time and it is argued that winter is above and summer below in a division of the year that forms a vegetation cycle with four key points at the beginning and end of summer pasturing and the two half-way points. These points correspond to life-cycle transitions and the young gods. The solstices and equinoxes form another set of four key points which relate to fights between the hero and the old gods of heaven, sky, earth and sea who pose threats to humans and have to be controlled.

Key words: calendar, cosmology, dragon, elements, gods, Indo-European, life-cycle, monster, mythology, solstices

Introduction

In the first talk I gave to the Ritual Year Working Group of SIEF, in Malta in 2004, I made an early attempt to deal with the sequence of festivals throughout the year (Lyle 2005), and I am now able to offer a clearer and sharper model of the year cycle as a result of the useful exchanges held within this group over the ten years of its existence. One apparently small matter, which is actually a major advance, is the ability to present the year cycle diagrammatically in a way that reflects its spatiotemporal nature. Because of the conceptual interrelationship of space and time in a cosmological system, it is necessary to know which time-period is “up”, although it seems rather paradoxical to say this about a segment of time. In discussing this point and in the rest of this paper I am treating the Indo-European tradition, but it should not be assumed that the model is exclusively Indo-European since the system modelled may well have extended more widely.

Although the topic of spatiotemporal organisation is obviously still open to debate, I am now satisfied that the winter half of a winter/

summer divide is “up” and the summer half “down” (Lyle 2012: 17). The use of this terminology immediately raises the question of what exactly is meant by the winter and summer halves. The actual days when the transitions occur vary in different cultures but it seems that the ritual attached to the transitions often relates to driving flocks and herds to distant pastures at the beginning of the summer and driving them back to enclosures near the home at the beginning of winter (Mencej 2005). This pastoral movement is dependent on the growth of vegetation, especially grass, in the summer half and so it can be regarded as being primarily associated with vegetation.

**Four key points in each of two series:
the vegetation cycle and the solar cycle**

Each half of the year can be halved in turn to create a fourfold series of seasons with winter and spring in one half and summer and autumn in the other. I refer to the transition points between these seasons as the four key points in the vegetation cycle. These points do not coincide with the solstices and equinoxes, which form a separate fourfold series of transition points which I refer to as the four key points in the solar cycle.

I argue that we can understand the sequence of ritual points throughout the year most fully by interpreting them as offering two different series. The presence of two series has been evident in the Celtic folk calendar where the transitions in the vegetation cycle have been referred to as the “true quarters” and are the important festivals on the day and eve of 1 November (Samhain), 1 February (Imbolc), 1 May (Beltaine) and 1 August (Lughnasad). The transitions in the solar cycle, which have been referred to as the “crooked quarters”, are less strongly marked in this tradition and have been overlaid by Christian festivals, notably that of the birth of Christ near the winter solstice (Lyle 2009).

The solar series is closer to immediate human concerns since it also relates to the human life cycle and the turning point of the sun at midwinter corresponds to the new beginning at birth. The culmination of marriage is marked at midsummer. The equinoctial point in spring between birth and marriage is that of initiation and it seems to relate to ritual contests (Lyle 2008). The equinoctial point in au-

tumn is that of the beginning of a death period (Lyle 2012: 52–53; 2013). Since escape from the extended death period comes only with birth at the winter solstice, there may well be a deepening of the emphasis on death at the 12-day period just before the marking of the increase of light. This relatively short midwinter period clearly had a powerful impact (see Pócs in this volume).

Continuing the idea that time should not be regarded in isolation, I shall put the annual cycle in a full cosmological context as well as in relation to space. The colour coding that it is possible to apply to the set of four that equates to the four seasons in the vegetation cycle is clearly present in Indo-European tradition (Lyle 2012: 16), but some of the correlations and concepts offered here are more speculative. In the scheme offered, the four seasons can be correlated with colours, elements and cosmic levels in the following way: winter = white, air and heaven; spring = red, fire and sky; summer = yellow, earth as element and earth as cosmic level; autumn = blue, water and sea.

**The old gods at the transition points in the vegetation
cycle**

In cosmology (as I have argued) each of the cosmic levels is a god with earth being female and the other three male. These three male gods and a goddess belong to the earliest time envisaged by the society and are wild and uncontrolled. Myths tell how the young gods, especially the hero-king, battle with these dragon-like creatures and make a space fit for humans to live in, as Michael Witzel demonstrates in his recent book on myth (2012: 64, 166). Witzel is also aware that these cosmic events from the beginning of time can be celebrated annually within the ritual cycle. This is an important point, of course, since applying this insight means that we can restore some of the original cosmic resonance of a ritual in relation to cosmology if we can identify the originating primal event as it is represented within the year. Of course, some ritual components may have been lost from the calendar and, even when they have survived, we may find it difficult to discern which mythic event lies behind a particular transition point. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that a ritual can migrate from the point to which it properly belongs to another point in the year. The concept

of sequencing may help here for these contests with the old gods form a set of four (in the order Heaven, Sky, Earth and Sea) and we can explore whether any particular tradition has the full set and, if not, how many of the four can be located.

The four old gods are necessary since they form the foundation of the cosmos but the mythic stories indicate that they also posed four threats which can be understood as extremes. Heaven was once “too close” and people felt smothered or crushed so that it had to be pushed away. The sea also could come “too close” and people were in danger of drowning so that it had to be contained. The sky was once “too hot” and people were being burnt up so that the heat had to be reduced. The earth was once “too dry” and the land was barren and the people parched so that fresh water had to be made to flow. These four dangers could be articulated in various ways and they are of rather different kinds. Probably the idea of what is appropriate is important. The appropriate place for heaven is far above the earth and the appropriate place for the sea is below the earth. The warmth from the sky should be at a tolerable level and the earth ought to give moisture through its rivers.

The four victories over the cosmic gods

A basic idea is that things in the beginning were markedly different from the current state and had to be changed in order to make human life possible. I shall sketch out the four contests that brought about the change. The first two are discussed by Witzel who gives an important place to the propping up of the sky and the release of the waters (2012: 64).

Since the Indo-European scheme distinguishes two areas above the earth, I have referred here to the higher one as “heaven” and to the lower one as “sky”. Although the story that heaven was once closer to earth and was removed to a distance by some means is widespread (Witzel 2012: 131–137), the specifically Indo-European idea is that a prop is needed to keep it up. In the Greek story, Hercules is asked to hold up heaven but manages to trick the giant Atlas into taking over from him and, according to this story, heaven is kept from falling on our heads by being held up by the giant Atlas or the Atlas Mountains (Gantz 1993: 410–412). A strong statement

of the idea comes from India where Indra is hailed for his feat of propping up the sky and where an Indra pole is erected annually, as Witzel notes (2012: 135):

In Vedic India the pole is most prominently known as “the pole of Indra,” the god who propped up heaven from the earth at the beginning of times. It was erected once per year in Vedic times (indrādhvaja festival), and this is retained in modern Nepal at the indrajātrā festival in late monsoon as well as at the current Hindu New Year in April.

However, the episode that has gripped the Indian imagination most strongly and has been much studied by scholars is the fight of Indra with the serpent, Vrtra, a name that simply means “obstruction”. This creature signals the state of things that precedes the life-giving release of the waters through Indra’s action (Witzel 2012: 78). In my view this is the female dragon of the set of four, and the achievement is brought about by allowing the water to stream out of the dragon which is the earth (Lyle 2012: 106–111). St George’s fight with the dragon seems likely to be a later representation of this battle.

The next fight to be discussed treats the defeat of a sea monster that was threatening to engulf the land. One way to deal with this huge creature is for the hero to allow himself to be swallowed and to hack away from the inside. There are two parallel treatments of this in Greek legend, in the stories of Hercules and Perseus. In a Hercules version, it was so hot inside the monster that the hero’s hair was singed off and he came out victorious but bald. The story is better known as part of the adventures of Perseus when he rescues Andromeda from the sea monster. Although in one instance he does this by being swallowed, like Hercules, he is also said to have held up the Gorgon’s head and turned the monster to stone. (Ogden 2013: 116–129).

The remaining one of the four deals with the condition “too hot”. This has to do with the sky blazing down on the earth, perhaps in the form of a larger, more fiery sun. The reduction in heat is told as a story of Vivasvat, the Indian sun god, being shaved until only a sixteenth part of him is left, and this small remnant is regarded as attractive (O’Flaherty 1975: 68–69). The star Sirius is connected with heat and drought (West 2007: 257), and perhaps the story was

that it was once huge and overwhelming until it was defeated and driven far away.

This last suggestion involves reading between the lines. We often have just fragments of stories that have been used for other narratives and some of this discussion is bound to be speculative at present. My argument is based on the concept that these particular stories were meaningful in antiquity and that they formed a set which was annually recalled in ritual.

The young gods at the transition points in the solar cycle

Once the old gods had been controlled and had had their places determined, the young gods were able to take over. It has been difficult to examine the roles of the young gods since for a time scholarship was inclined to dismiss any mention of the sun and other cosmic bodies as belonging to an outmoded “solar mythology”. However, the stories do deal with the sun, moon and stars, as West accepts (2007: 237), and we have to understand them within the framework of a more developed view of cosmic structure (Lyle 2012: 56). Their king, who defeated the dragons, has the thunder-weapon, i.e. lightning. His helpers are the moon and the morning and evening stars (i.e. the planet Venus seen at these times of day), while his queen is the sun. These gods can be characters in a drama corresponding to human life so that the life cycle series mentioned earlier is also that of the young gods, with the moon especially connected with birth and the sun-goddess with marriage, while the stars relate respectively to initiation and death. In this way, the young gods could be celebrated at the corresponding points of midwinter and midsummer and the equinoxes, and the stories told about them went on being good stories after the gods faded from belief. Some stories are likely to survive attached to saints of the more recent belief system, and that it one area which it will be useful to explore in connection with this theoretical construct.

Conclusion

The main theory discussed here is that the four points in the vegetation cycle commemorate four great cosmic battles. The theory has two components. One is that cosmic events which happened at

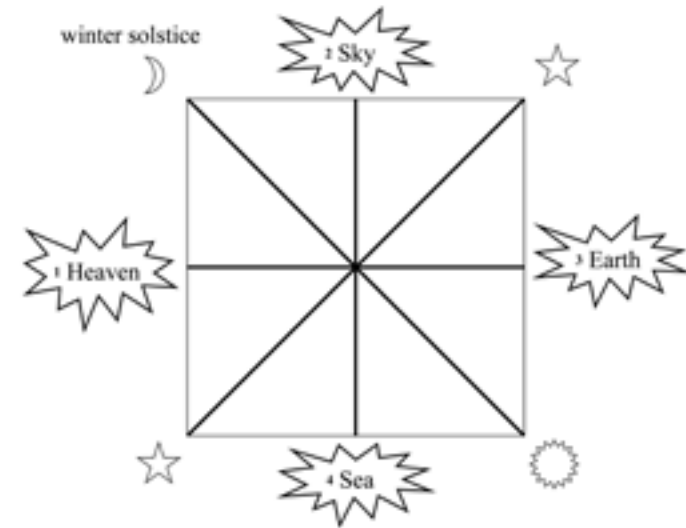


Figure 1. The eight key points in the Indo-European ritual year.

the beginning of imagined time account for ritual commemorations in the calendar, and form part of the corpus passed on through cultural memory with the help of ritual specialists as explored by Jan Assmann (cf. Erll 2011: 29). The other component is that there were four distinct threats that came from Heaven, Sky, Earth and Sea and that the gods of these levels were brought under control by the culture hero.

The solar series of four deals with the cycle of life and also probably commemorates events played out by the young gods at the beginning of time, although this set of events is not explored here. Human life is projected onto the divine level which in turn validates human activities.

The whole eightfold system is presented in relation to the year in Figure 1. The young gods are simply shown by symbols for the moon, sun and stars, with the starting point at the winter solstice corresponding to birth. The defeats of the four cosmic gods occur in

the sequence that corresponds to the order from top to bottom and begins with Heaven, at the 1 November point in the year.

All this seems rather remote from present-day reality, and so it is – it is perhaps five thousand years away from our time. But traditions can be tenacious and our modern consciousness can be enriched by speculating about how much has been retained from a distant past within the framework of the ritual year.

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THE RITUAL YEAR 10

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Edited by
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