

The Milky Way and the Goddess of the Henges

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In this forum I want to provide a brief introduction to the possible role played by the Milky Way in the design and use of the ceremonial sites of the British Isles of the fourth and third millennia BC, and how such a role might be found reflected in mythology. The link between ancient ceremonial sites of the British Isles and the solstitial Sun is well known (Burl 1983, 9), yet the role of the Sun was just one part of a greater drama involving the movements of all the heavenly bodies, and most dramatically that of the Milky Way.

In an analysis of the orientation of the henges and other ritual structures of the British Isles in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, c. 3100–2000 BC (Grigsby 2019), I concluded that, unlike the small number of sites with solar orientations, the majority of these sites were aligned either NW–SE or NE–SW, and that these orientations could be interpreted as referencing the rising and setting points of two constellations within the band of the Milky Way. The first constellation is formed from the stars of Crux (the Southern Cross), visible in this period rising in the SE and setting in the SW (although the situation was slightly different in sites in Orkney, where Crux was not visible above the horizon and where instead we see alignments on the star Sirius). In the opposite direction, the stars of the constellation Cassiopeia could have been seen setting in the NW and rising in the NE. Both orientations involved the overarching span of the Milky Way lining up with the henge entrances, as if linking them across the sky, or mirroring the direction of the passages hidden within funerary structures. These particular constellations, singled out by the alignments, were most visible rising and setting in the winter months, suggesting these events formed part of a winter ceremony (or ceremonies) (Grigsby 2019, 156). What is more, this orientation between site and sky was seemingly echoed in the orientation of local rivers in relation to the sites, suggesting the design of the henge or ceremonial feature was intended to “lock” the Earth and sky together in a shared pattern (Grigsby 2019, 195–197).

Although the Milky Way is undoubtedly a spectacular presence in the sky, there must have been some other strong cultural influence to underline this concrete Earth–sky

connection. This led me to consider Proto-Indo-European myth and reconstruct it to suggest a hypothesis involving the Milky Way and a riparian cow goddess found in Indo-European and wider (Near-Eastern) myth. The most obvious version of this figure in local traditions (i.e. local to the geographical spread of the henges) is the goddess Bóand of Irish tradition, whose name means “White Cow” (Old Celtic *Bovinda).

Bóand goes to the well of Segais, a magical well owned by her husband Nechtan, to drink of its waters. However, as she walks around the well it floods, depriving Bóand of a leg, a hand and an eye, and ultimately drowning her. The flood forms the river Boyne. As told in the *Dindsenchas*, an early Irish text of poetic lore:

Once upon a time Bóand went through pride to test the well’s power, and declared that it had no secret force which could shatter her form, and thrice she walked with-ershins round the well. (Whereupon) three waves from the well break over her and deprive her of a thigh and one of her hands and one of her eyes. Then she, fleeing her shame, turns seaward, with the water behind her as far as Boyne-mouth, [where she was drowned] (trans. Stokes 1894, 315–316, round and square brackets in original).

Bóand becomes the river Boyne, which as Stokes (1894, 316) notes is recorded as *Bououivda* (Bououinda) in Ptolemy’s *Geography* (2.1). The medieval *Book of Invasions* (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*) calls the river “Bóand the female-formed” (5.275 = Macalister 1940, 157), indicating that it has been seen in anthropomorphic terms.

The Milky Way also seems to have been associated with her, as it is known as the “Path of the White Cow”, *Bothar Bo Finne* (Grigsby 2019, 70). This association between waters and the galaxy is not unique to Bóand: the Mesopotamian *creatrix* Tiamat is described in *Enuma Eliš* as forming both earthly and heavenly rivers (i.e. the Tigris and Euphrates and the Milky Way) (Dalley 2008, 233), and in Egypt we see many cattle goddesses such as Nut (“Sky” – Hollis 1987, 497) and Mehet-Weret (“Great Flood/Tide” – Pinch 2004, 163) associated both with the earthly River Nile and its celestial counterpart, the Milky Way, the latter known as the “Winding Waterway” (Wells 1992; Maravelia 2003).

However, the connection between the Irish and Egyptian myths is more than generic and includes important shared details. In Egypt part of the Milky Way was known as the “Lake of the Thigh”, or “Nut’s Thigh”; Chapter 98 of *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* (better known as *The Book of the Dead*) contains the following passage: “Oh thou Leg in the Northern Sky, and in that most conspicuous but inaccessible Stream; I rise up and come to light as a god, I am conspicuous but inaccessible. I rise up and live, and bring myself to light as a god” (trans. Renouf 1904, 165). Renouf explains that “[t]he Stream which is so conspicuous but cannot be reached is the Milky Way, and the Leg is the constellation Cassiopeia in the Northern Sky” (Renouf 1904, 166).

Interestingly, in the *Dindsenchas* a section of the river Boyne is similarly named after “the wife of Nuada’s [i.e. Bóand’s] leg”, a reference to the dismembering of the goddess after her visit to the well (Gwyn 1906, 27). The correspondence between the two mythologies, Egyptian and Irish, is striking, given the focus on the leg/thigh of a bovine river goddess associated with the Milky Way.

There are also other links. In Egypt the river/cow goddess gives birth to the Sun, while in Ireland Bóand gives birth to the god Óengus at the winter solstice, clearly a solar reference, in the passage grave of Newgrange, *Bru na Bóinne* (which translates as “Womb of the White Cow”). In Egypt the rising of the Nile was heralded by the heliacal rising of the star Sirius, while the passage at Newgrange (where the Boyne flood occurred, so the myth states) was aligned on the rising of Sirius, which shared the same declination as the midwinter Sun c. 3200–2900 BC. Considering such parallels, the similarities of the Newgrange myths to the Egyptian examples suggest that the Neolithic Irish cosmogony may have been derived from the same roots as its Near Eastern counterpart.

If this was the case, might Near Eastern tradition help suggest what was going on in the henges and ceremonial sites of ancient Britain? In Egypt the tomb itself signified the body of the cow goddess which the souls of the deceased were to enter in order to be reborn in the Milky Way. As receiver of bodies at death, and restorer of them (Piankoff 1934, 57–61), the womb of the cow goddess was the place of celestial transformation and rebirth. Might the henges and tombs of Britain and Ireland have had a similar funerary function? If the Neolithic cosmology of the British Isles concerning the Milky Way resembled that found in ancient Egyptian tradition, then the Milky Way may have been seen as a kind of “road of souls” by which the spirits of the dead travelled to be reborn in the celestial realm, a realm perhaps identified with a bovine goddess. Such an idea of a galactic “road of souls” has currency in many ancient and pre-modern societies (Lebeuf 1996; Harris 2012), and is perhaps best expressed in literature in Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* (Book 6 of *On the Republic*) where in a fictional dream-vision Scipio meets his ancestors along the Milky Way – the route to the celestial Elysian fields (Harris, 2012, 278).

Similarly, one might suggest that in Neolithic Britain the spirits of the dead or of the ancestors might have been believed to have risen into the sky along this “Path of the White Cow” at certain times of the year, for instance when the entrances of the henges aligned to the Milky Way, allowing ingress within the body of the celestial mother cow. The entrance, then, would have formed a kind of “stargate” through which the souls of the dead might pass, and thus become an ever-living soul in the firmament, through journeying through the body of the Milky Way goddess, as was believed in Egypt. Silva, speaking of stellar alignments in Portuguese dolmens, states that these stars “could be conceptualized as the land of the dead in the celestial skyscape, or as the conduit to such a land” (Silva 2015, 136). The entrances might also have framed the setting of the Milky Way and thus have been thought of as a place where the souls – ancestral, godly or otherwise – came down from the sky to the Earth, making the henge a place of birth/rebirth from the cosmic/galactic mother.

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