

WHITE SOW, WHITE STAG, AND WHITE BUFFALO: THE EVOLUTION OF
WHITE ANIMAL MYTHS FROM PERSONAL BELIEF TO PUBLIC POLICY

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By

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ABSTRACT

While white animal myths initially expressed humankind's universal and personal quest for holiness, over time these myths have been retold to convey a divine sanctioning of threatened cultures' governing bodies and used as justification for political and social policies including assimilation, warfare, and rebellion. Identifying this pattern sheds new light on cultures and events such as the Devonshire Celts and their relationship to Christianity in Late Antiquity, the Magyars and their land conquests of the early Middle Ages, and the Lakota people and their opposition to the United States government in the late nineteenth century, and may offer a model for understanding the policies of some of today's nations. This study begins with a general exploration of the elements and roles of folktale, legend, and myth as viewed through the lens of anthropology, sociology, philosophy and theology, and the work of Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and Paul Tillich. The theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the findings of David Hunt, Florin Curta and others are used to analyze general color and animal symbols within various cultural contexts. Resultant conclusions are applied to specific myths, namely the Devon Celts' White Sow, the

Magyars' White Stag, and the Lakota's White Buffalo. These myths, with their white animal symbols, are examined against the historical backdrop of the period in which these tales were popular within their cultures. As a result, a link is found between popular myth, major events and the political and social policies of the Devon Celts, the medieval Magyars, and the Lakota during times of cultural stress and change.

EPIGRAPH

. . . it is inconceivable that a nation should exist without mythology.

– Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*

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INTRODUCTION

“Why myths?”¹

This is the question veteran journalist Bill Moyers put to prominent mythology scholar Joseph Campbell² at the start their popular 1988 PBS miniseries, *Moyers: Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*.³ Over the course of filming, Moyers and Campbell discussed the nature of myth and its relevance for a total of twenty-four hours, though only six hours of their recorded conversation aired.⁴ Perhaps their lengthy discussion speaks to the breadth and depth of the topic of mythology—or perhaps it speaks to the difficulty of answering Moyers’ complex question, “Why myths?”

In *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*, a collection of Campbell’s lectures given during his tenure at Sarah Lawrence College and afterward as a noted speaker, Campbell stresses that “myth is not a lie.”⁵ Myth, he goes on to explain, “is metaphor.”⁶ It is “metaphorical of the possibilities of human experience.”⁷ As such, myth’s “symbolic images and narratives”⁸ serve four purposes.

¹ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 1.

² *Ibid.*, xv.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*, ed. Eugene Kennedy (Novato: New World Library, 2001), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

First, according to Campbell, myth can enable humankind to contemplate “the mystery of being.”⁹ In its second role, myth can “present a consistent image of the order of the cosmos”¹⁰ so that men and women can understand their universe. For the individual, myth serves as a touchstone as one enters new and unfamiliar phases of life.¹¹ Finally, Campbell believes myth can “validate and support a specific moral order”¹² for a whole culture. Indeed, in certain cases, myth’s narrative is the blueprint for entire societies.

This idea—that myth can and does shape society’s policies—is not unprecedented. Students of twentieth-century history often link myths of Aryan supremacy to the rise of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich and the annihilation of millions who did not fit the fabled Aryan prototype. Ivan Strenski, author of *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski*, believes that the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer “had a historical sense of the political role of myth” even as Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in 1933.¹³ In *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer writes that Germany’s post-Great War development as an international threat began not with the stockpiling of arms, but “with the origin and rise of the

⁹ Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 16.

political myths.”¹⁴ By asserting that myth had become Nazi Germany’s ultimate weapon, and the master plan for its society, Cassirer is among the first to suggest that myth can and does step outside the “academic domain.”¹⁵ For him, as well as his colleagues caught in the Nazi juggernaut, “myth . . . is behind the feeling of nationality, and gives it its force.”¹⁶ Strenski calls this “Cassirer’s theory of myth as a public moral document.”¹⁷

Patterning a society’s mores after myth is not unique to mid twentieth-century Germany, however. Early Church fathers, from the third century’s Tertullian¹⁸ to Augustine in the sixth century, sought to affect society through exegesis of the Genesis creation stories.¹⁹ Nearly two millennia later, women’s rights advocates from Elizabeth Cady Stanton²⁰ to Judith Plaskow²¹ did the same. White supremacist leaders like Richard G. Butler are the latest in a long line of those who would shape society according to their interpretation of mythic accounts of humankind’s origins.²²

¹⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 282.

¹⁵ Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Scheearing, and Valerie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 131.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 421.

²² *Ibid.*, 499.

In addition to Genesis, Roland Boer, author of *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes*, views the Bible's Exodus story as a driving factor in the present-day politics of nations such as Australia, the United States, and Israel. To Boer, Exodus in particular is the root of "political myth."²³ In his view, the Biblical account of the Hebrew people's flight from Egypt is "much more overtly political than the resurrection [of Jesus] and has been one of the motivating myths of any number of political movements, both revolutionary and reactionary."²⁴ He sees the application and repurposing of the Exodus story in political and social movements such as "the Boers in South Africa, Zionism, the Pilgrim Fathers in North America, African American slaves, anticolonial struggles, and, more recently, liberation theology."²⁵ Perhaps most strikingly, Boer credits the Exodus account with "providing the ideological underpinnings of the modern nation-state"²⁶ and of being the basis of today's "passionate battles over Israel and Palestine."²⁷

Were he writing today, Joseph Campbell would undoubtedly concur. In his view, one role of "a traditional mythology"²⁸ is to give credence to a society's ethics.²⁹

²³ Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 116.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Ivan Strenski voices a similar sentiment, stating that myth “touches us at the roots of our deepest sense of contingency.”³⁰ In other words, myth can and does shape the parameters and policies of society. Myth provides comfort by defining social norms, as well as defending those norms.

Societies do not need to be formal states for myth to shape their policies, however. Vine Deloria Jr., Native American scholar and author of *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, finds a relationship between myth and policy in groups such as the Amish and members of the Church of Latter Day Saints,³¹ neither of which are nations in their own right. To study this relationship between myth and corporate action, Campbell advises that myths must be viewed through the lens “of a certain specific culture and must speak to us through the language and symbols of that culture.”³² That is exactly how this study will view three myths in particular.

This study will focus on a specific kind of myth as well, namely, the animal myth. According to Andre Varagnac, contributor to *Larousse World Mythology*, myth changed during prehistoric times as “the divine came to be pictured in other, inevitably animal, forms”³³ Prior to this, art, ritual, and very likely myth, focused on “the

³⁰ Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth*, 74.

³¹ Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 202.

³² Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 5.

³³ Andre Varagnac, “The Problem of Prehistoric Religions,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 20.

repeated fertility of the women”³⁴ in a world where hunger and disease guaranteed life would be short.³⁵ Varagnac theorizes that at that time, procreation was viewed as the “main chance of survival”³⁶ for the small groups of humans dotting Eurasia.³⁷ As a result, about twenty-nine thousand years ago,³⁸ people began to craft female figurines with “exaggerate[d] sexual features.”³⁹ Rather than portraiture or art for art’s sake, these statuettes are considered by scholars to be the “divine incarnation of procreation, very early precursors to the mother-goddesses.”⁴⁰

This focus on fertility and procreation, however, only would have been half of humankind’s survival equation.⁴¹ Feeding the people, Varagnac states, would have been just as critical for the continuation of any group,⁴² and only the killing of a large animal would meet that need.⁴³ The hunt could be deadly for man as well as animal,⁴⁴ but it

³⁴ Varagnac, “Problem of Prehistoric Religions,” 17.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

was imperative.⁴⁵ Art and ritual became centered on the animal to be hunted, as well as the hunter's safety and success.⁴⁶ Varagnac calls this kind of art a ritual "preparation"⁴⁷ for the hunt, and the archaeological record indicates the focus on crafting the female form in order to connect with fertility gave way to it. From this preparation and preoccupation with animals, animal cults⁴⁸ as well as animal myths⁴⁹ were born.

Joseph Campbell also describes the rise of animal myth, though he sees its development somewhat differently. He writes that before 3200 BCE "the focus of awe was not on a cosmic order but on the extraordinary appearance of the animal that acts differently from others of its species, or certain species of the animal that seems to be particularly clever and bright"⁵⁰ Whether Campbell is correct in this, or Varagnac's view of animals in art and myth as preparation for the vital act of hunting is more accurate, animal myths grew in a variety of world cultures. From the animal fables dating to 400 BCE and credited to a North African slave named Aesop,⁵¹ to Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval talking rooster, Chanticleer,⁵² and the advent of Mother Goose in

⁴⁵ Varagnac, "Problem of Prehistoric Religions," 18.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 3.

⁵¹ Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 107.

⁵² Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 215.

the 1600s, animal tales have persisted in popularity and prevalence. While many of these animal tales may be found in children's storybooks today, their roots extend backward through time to humankind's first expression of the concept of holiness. David Leeming, author of *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, states that in the Paleolithic era⁵³ as now, "animals take on specifically sacred functions in mythologies"⁵⁴

Perhaps no other animal, regardless of its species, has been held to be more sacred than the white animal. China's legend of White Snake,⁵⁵ recurring themes of the White Horse in Indo-Aryan stories,⁵⁶ and the lucky White Rabbit, whose name has been invoked by many British at the start of a new month,⁵⁷ all speak to a universal belief in the sanctity and power of white animals. In three societies, however, white animals and their myths may have been held in higher esteem than in any others. These are the Lakota Sioux of the nineteenth century and their White Buffalo, the Magyar people of medieval Europe and their White Stag, and the early inhabitants of England's Devonshire coast and their White Sow.

Interestingly, the popularity of these three white animal myths appears to

⁵³ David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2005), 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zhao Qinnge, *The Legend of White Snake*, trans. Paul White and Thomas Shou (Shanghai: Shanghai Press and Publishing Development Company, 1998), 7.

⁵⁶ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1972), 57.

⁵⁷ Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.

coincide with a time of stress and rapid change within each of these cultures. It is, therefore, the ultimate goal of this paper to discover a link between the telling and retelling of these three myths, their growth to a divine sanctioning of their cultures' governing bodies, and the justification of these cultures' political and social policies regarding rebellion, warfare, and assimilation. Identifying this pattern will shed new light on the policies of the Devonshire Celts during their initial contact with Christianity in Late Antiquity, the Magyars and their land conquest of the early Middle Ages, and the Lakota people in their opposition to the United States government in the late nineteenth century. In the end, this study may fill a gap in the literature chronicling the relevance of myth and perhaps offer a method of understanding the policies of present-day nations as well.

To this end, the following chapters will explore the elements of these particular myths within their cultural contexts. The symbolism inherent in the color white will be examined, as will the cultural meanings conveyed by the sow, the stag, and the buffalo. Brief histories of the Devonshire Celts, eastern-European Magyars, and the Lakota people will be considered, with special attention paid to the events unfolding during the height of these myths' popularity within these cultures. Parallels between the principles outlined in the myths and these societies' policies will prove that white animal myths grew from individuals' beliefs to guidelines for these cultures' governing bodies, and will shed light on Bill Moyers' question posed more than twenty years ago, "Why myths?".

CHAPTER 1

MYTH, FOLKTALE, AND LEGEND

For those who call English their mother tongue, four little words herald the start of a good story. Those little words are *once upon a time*. Most English speakers learn this phrase in childhood. Even as adults, they know that the tale that follows those words will be entertaining, set in the distant past, and may contain magical elements. “Cinderella,” for instance, is entertaining, is set in the long-gone feudal days of Europe, and is rife with magical elements, often a fairy godmother, glass slippers, and a pumpkin that transforms into a horse-drawn carriage. Sometimes, the story even features a magical white bird instead of a fairy godmother.¹

Homer’s *Odyssey*, however, is also entertaining. Though composed in the mid-800s BCE,² it is set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, or in other words, even for Homer the action takes place in the distant past. Like “Cinderella,” it contains magical elements. The transformation of Odysseus’ men into swine at the mercy of the powerful Circe is just one example. Likewise, George Lucas’ 1977 film *Star Wars*³ is entertaining, set in the remote past, and if the advanced technology in the world of *Star Wars* is not a kind of magic in and of itself, certainly the mystical abilities of Lucas’ Jedi knights is.

¹ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, trans. E.V. Lucas, Lucy Crane, and Marian Edwardes (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publishers, 1965), 156.

² Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, 1965), 250.

³ Internet Movie Database, “Star Wars,” IMDb.com Incorporated, www.imdb.com/title/tt0076759/releaseinfo?mode=desktop (accessed 8 March 2012).

Do these commonalities mean *Star Wars*, the *Odyssey* and “Cinderella” are the same kind of story? Thanks to the Brothers Grimm, who included “Cinderella” in their published collection of European folk narratives, this story is widely held to be a folktale in general, and a fairy tale specifically.⁴ Few, though, would label the epic poetry of Homer in the same way despite its similarities. Thomas Bulfinch includes the *Odyssey* in *The Age of Fable*, the first volume of his chronicle that is widely known as *Bulfinch’s Mythology*.⁵ One could say the *Odyssey*, therefore, is a myth. What, then, is *Star Wars*? Joseph Campbell states that the film offers “a valid mythological perspective,”⁶ yet it shares more story elements with “Cinderella,” a fairy tale, than with the *Odyssey*, a myth. After all, “Cinderella” and *Star Wars* are both entirely fictional, while the *Odyssey* describes fantastic occurrences after a real and legendary event, the Trojan War.

In his contribution to *Myth: A Symposium*, Stith Thompson notes that any criterion for delineating these kinds of narratives from one another “never seems very clear to the reader of many books on mythology.”⁷ He calls these types of tales

⁴ Grimm and Grimm, *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 155.

⁵ Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable*, 180.

⁶ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 23.

⁷ Stith Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 170.

“traditional stories”⁸ and includes “myths . . . legends and traditions . . . folktales, and . . . animal tales”⁹ among them. From the mid-nineteenth century, scholars tried to make distinctions between these forms based on a story’s origin.¹⁰ Thompson argues against this approach, stating that the “origins of myths and folktales over the world must be extremely diverse . . . it is not safe to posit any single origin even for those of a particular people.”¹¹ Rather, he supports categorizing stories by “type of subject matter.”¹² Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, a former professor of Classics at Yale University and Fellow of Cambridge University’s Trinity Hall, is also an advocate of looking to subject matter for clarification of story type. He separates narratives into three major categories. These categories he calls myth, folktale, and legend.¹³

Legends are stories that “are founded, or implicitly claim to be founded, on historical persons or events.”¹⁴ The young George Washington and his alleged exploits with an axe and his father’s cherry tree is an ideal example. As is common knowledge, George Washington is a historical personage. The story of his chopping down the

⁸ Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” 170.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 172.

¹¹ Ibid., 170.

¹² Ibid., 173.

¹³ Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

cherry tree and, due to his deep-seated truthfulness, confessing this to his father when human nature could have led him to tell a lie, is not historical fact. Because the story is reportedly based on the life of George Washington, a historical figure, it is a legend. By this definition, however, Homer's *Odyssey*, with its perils of a man returning from the Trojan War, could be categorized as a legend.

For Kirk, folktales “are traditional tales, of no firmly established form.”¹⁵ He notes magical elements within them, but he writes that, more importantly, folktales “are not primarily concerned with ‘serious’ subjects or the reflection of deep problems and preoccupations.”¹⁶ He sums up his definition of folktales, saying “their first appeal lies in their narrative interest.”¹⁷ Furthermore, Kirk includes animal tales, and more specifically animal fables, as a subset of folktales. He notes that “we can see from Hesiod, Stesichorus, and Aesop that the genre was well developed in Greece, as indeed it had been in Mesopotamia.”¹⁸ By any standard, “Cinderella,” with or without its white bird, is a folktale. Kirk's definition, however, could also include *Star Wars* since its enduring appeal indicates it is a story with definite narrative interest.

When Kirk turns his attention to myth, he pinpoints a number of characteristics that set this form apart:

¹⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The characters, particularly the hero, are specific, and their family relationships are carefully noted; they are attached to a particular region . . . the action is complicated, and often broken up into loosely related episodes. It does not usually depend on disguises and tricks, but rather on the unpredictable reactions of individuals rather than types. Indeed, one of the distinguishing characteristics of myths is their free-ranging and often paradoxical fantasy¹⁹

In terms of character, setting, action, form, and fantastical elements, then, the *Odyssey* much more closely resembles myth than legend. The *Odyssey* is a myth.

Philosopher Ernst Cassirer sees a more profound role for myth than the one described by Kirk, however. Cassirer writes that “through myth man objectifies his own deepest emotions; he looks at them as if they had an outward existence.”²⁰ More than that, theologian Paul Tillich believes myth “aims to give expression to the true and the real.”²¹ In his view, “myth is the form of expression for the content of revelation.”²² For Mircea Eliade, myth indeed expresses what could be termed the first revelation. When comparing the philosophies of Eliade to Cassirer and others, Ivan Strenski finds that “Eliade holds that the Creation story has a special place in the mythologies of the world. It is the model and exemplar for every other creation story, and . . . for every other

¹⁹ Kirk, *Myth*, 39.

²⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 173.

²¹ Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 102.

²² *Ibid.*

story we might want to call a ‘myth.’”²³ Myth, by these measures, could include any number of story types.

For his part, Thompson sees little need to draw lines between the narrative forms of myth, legend, and folklore.²⁴ Kirk notes that “one school of thought denied any distinction between myths and folktales—an attitude that had some support from anthropologists.”²⁵ Mike Ashley, in his introduction to *The Giant Book of Folklore and Legends*, maintains that “there is no difference between traditional fairy-tales, folklore, myths, or legends.”²⁶ Above all, he stresses that when considering narrative material, “indeed, the key word is ‘tradition.’”²⁷ Since *Star Wars* is not a traditional tale, it is neither a myth, nor a folktale, and it is not a legend.

Just as the labels of myth, folktale, and legend have been applied alternately to “Cinderella,” the *Odyssey* and *Star Wars*, these same tags each can describe the Devonshire Celts’ story of the White Sow, the Magyars’ account of the White Stag, and the Lakota’s narrative of the White Buffalo. These traditional white animal stories could be said to fall under of the umbrella of animal fables, and therefore folktales. At the

²³ Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 62.

²⁴ Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” 172.

²⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 35.

²⁶ Mike Ashley, “Introduction,” in *The Giant Book of Myths and Legends* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), x.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

same time, they deal with historical persons and events. These are the components of legend. On many fronts, however, these three stories meet Kirk's standards for myth, as well as the criteria set forth by Cassirer, Tillich, and Eliade. Consequently, as much as any other stories, the traditional tales of the White Buffalo, White Stag, and White Sow are myths.

Throughout this study, accounts of the White Buffalo, White Stag, and White Sow frequently will be referred to as myths, a position that followers of Cassirer, Tillich, and even Thompson can support. Thompson teaches that "it must be recognized that when we use such European terms as myth, etiological story, *Märchen*, *Sage*, or the like, we are merely using these terms as points of reference."²⁸ He asserts that it is only Westerners who are concerned about categorizing traditional stories in the first place. Other cultures, particularly those that anthropologists sometimes term as "more primitive peoples,"²⁹ are not as concerned "about separation of folktales into the mythical and non-mythical."³⁰ The pressing desire to classify tales could be due to a particular mindset among those in the West. Stephen Ausband, author of *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order*, notes that today, Western men and women "tend to think of myths as stories that other people believe or once believed to be true, but that are not

²⁸ Thompson, "Myths and Folktales," 175.

²⁹ Ibid., 173.

³⁰ Ibid.

really true.”³¹

This question of truth is perhaps the sticking point for Western cultures that have borrowed heavily from the classical Greeks and their ways of thinking. Studies of the Hausa of West Africa, however, and of the Dakota, who, like the Lakota, are a subset of the Sioux, reveal that traditional societies in fact do see distinctions between stories which are to be regarded as true and those that are primarily for entertainment.³² Additionally, Thompson finds that in Native American communities, the people “have a tendency to differentiate between ordinary tales and those about an ancient world preceding the present.”³³ In the end, he believes it is “often possible to speak of certain tales as essentially mythological because they deal with origins and with higher powers.”³⁴

The most important factor when considering the ‘certain tales’ of the Devonshire Celts, the Magyars of Eastern Europe, and the Lakota Sioux, therefore, is not so much their classification as what they conveyed to the people who told them. To gain an understanding of what any traditional story communicates, Kirk advises looking to symbols within the narrative. He notes that “myth derives any significance it may

³¹ Stephen Ausband, *Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 1.

³² Kirk, *Myth*, 32.

³³ Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” 173.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

possess from its inclusion of one or more special symbols.”³⁵ Each special symbol in a myth “represents some important and complex emotion or some widespread but not easily expressible intuition about the world.”³⁶ Myths and symbols play an even greater role than communicating emotion and intuition, though. According to Eliade, it is the symbols in cultural myths that “sustain those cultures.”³⁷ Certainly, then, the Lakota, Magyars, and Celts could have been guided through times of conflict by the precepts outlined in their stories through symbol. Their folktales and legends are undoubtedly myths, and the symbols within myths nourished their communities.

³⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 279.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174.

CHAPTER 2

COLOR AND MEANING

Of all the descriptors in all the languages of the world, color is perhaps the one used most frequently. The color assigned to a person or object can connote a specific meaning about that person or thing far beyond its shade or hue. For instance, in Walter Mosley's 1990 mystery novel, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, white defines more than a character's ethnicity.¹ Again and again, antagonist DeWitt Albright is described as "the white man"² dressed head-to-toe in white,³ who drives a white Cadillac,⁴ and even jots instructions for the protagonist with a white pen.⁵ Yet, the word white serves a larger purpose in Mosley's story about a woman caught between the strictly-delineated Caucasian and African American cultures of late-1940s Los Angeles. *White*, and comparable words such as *light* and *bright*, enable readers to picture more than Albright's appearance and possessions. As Mosley tells his readers, while Albright stands on a pier poised for violence, "There was light everywhere and there was darkness everywhere too."⁶ The words *white*, *light*, and *bright* come to mean moral

¹ Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1990), 45.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁶ Ibid., 102.

darkness and even evil in Mosley's work because he uses color words as more than mere descriptors. Colors are symbols of something more.

According to Paul Tillich, renowned twentieth-century theologian and philosopher,⁷ symbols "point beyond themselves to something else."⁸ Such is the case with Mosley's white man, white car, and white pen, and so it is with the mythic White Sow, White Stag, and White Buffalo. Spanish poet and painter J.E. Cirlot refers to this use of descriptive words to convey more than coloration as "colour symbolism."⁹ In his opinion, "colour symbolism is one of the most universal of all types of symbolism."¹⁰ Such "symbolic thinking,"¹¹ Mircea Eliade wrote, "is consubstantial with human existence."¹² In short, all human beings think in symbolic terms. One of the ways human beings do this is through the use of color words. Certainly, the Devonshire Celts, the Magyars of the Middle Ages, and the Lakota Sioux, though divergent in time, place, and culture, thought symbolically. Their color words, meant to describe more than the outward aspects of the animals in their stories, live on in their myths of the

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), vii.

⁸ Paul Tillich, "The Meaning of Symbol," in *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (New York: Macmillan Publishing Group, 1987), 41.

⁹ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1972), 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.

¹² Ibid.

White Sow, White Stag, and White Buffalo.

Seeking Symbolic Meaning in Color

Perhaps not surprisingly, identifying the use of color symbolism within various cultures and decoding color/symbol meanings can be a difficult task.¹³ When reviewing myths and stories from past cultures, scholars sometimes applied the “theory of correspondences”¹⁴ to deduce meaning by linking a color, such as red, to a tangible thing of the same color, such as blood,¹⁵ and finding symbolic significance based on the similarities between them.¹⁶ The theory of correspondences technique is often considered “the traditional approach to the analysis of colour symbolism,”¹⁷ yet plainly this method could lead a researcher to miss more obscure correlations between a color and what it represents within a particular culture.

With the dawn of twentieth century and the advent of psychology, understanding color symbolism became more complex¹⁸ and researchers often pointed to subtle meanings they believed to be inherent in color words, rather than only more obvious

¹³ David Hunt, “Colour Symbolism in the Folk Literature of the Caucasus,” *Folklore* 117 (December 2006): 337.

¹⁴ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 330.

¹⁸ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 52.

meanings. For instance, the so-called warm colors, specifically yellows, oranges, and reds of the spectrum, were said to indicate “assimilation, activity, and intensity.”¹⁹ Blues and purples, on the other hand, were considered symbols of “dissimilation, passivity and debilitation.”²⁰ These interpretations may have relied on the theory of correspondences, but the connection seems tenuous.

Perhaps the most effective technique for understanding the relationship between color and symbol in this thesis is the technique developed in the mid-twentieth century by Claude Lévi-Strauss.²¹ His approach to the study of human-made systems is called “structural anthropology,”²² and in the case of color words involves gleaning meaning from “colour combinations or colour contrasts.”²³ Folklore expert David Hunt applies these principles of structural anthropology in his analysis of the folktales of Eurasia and areas of the former Soviet Union. Hunt notes that the driving notion behind Lévi-Strauss’ method is that “many symbols can be considered as contrasting pairs or even meaningful sequences.”²⁴ So, understanding the meaning of one symbol in a set will make the meanings of the other symbol or symbols more readily apparent.

¹⁹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 330.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

To illustrate how a sequence can reveal symbolic meaning, consider the children's game "Duck, Duck, Goose." This is a game of chase that begins with a group of children seated in a circle. A designated player walks around the perimeter of the circle, patting each child on the head and reciting either the word *duck* or *goose* with each tap. With a designation of *duck*, a tapped child keeps her seat. If *goose* is proclaimed, she jumps up and chases the designated player around the circle, hoping to win the round by catching him before he takes her vacated seat among the group. Several repetitions of the word *duck* can occur before a *goose* is chosen and the ensuing chase begins.

Typically, the word duck is understood as "any of various swimming birds [of the] family Anatidae"²⁵ or, when used as a verb, "to plunge"²⁶ or "move quickly"²⁷ or "evade a duty, question, or responsibility."²⁸ A goose is generally accepted to be "any of numerous large waterfowl . . . that are intermediate between swans and ducks"²⁹ or "to poke."³⁰ Within the context of the children's game, however, not only does the word *goose* symbolize the child elected to chase the other, but its meaning is defined in part

²⁵ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "duck."

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "goose."

³⁰ *Ibid.*

by its place in the sequence, *e.g.* after a series of the same word, *duck*.

According to Hunt, analyzing words relative to their place in a sequence to unlock their meaning can be especially useful when studying color as well as animal symbols within the stories of a culture.³¹ In this study, with its emphasis on the white animal tales of the Devonshire Celts, the Magyars of Eastern Europe, and the Lakota, Lévi-Strauss' technique of examining contrasting pairs may be of even greater use. Hunt illustrates this idea of deriving meaning from contrasting pairs by pointing to the juxtaposition of the word *night* to the word *day*.³² *Night* is meaningful as a concept because human beings, regardless of differences between cultures, understand *day* to mean "the absence of darkness."³³ *Night*, therefore, is "the absence of daylight."³⁴ By comprehending the symbolic meaning of one half of the pair, one can understand the symbolic meaning of the other half.

All in all, whether applying the theory of correspondences to colors, or using Lévi-Strauss' techniques of considering a word's place in a sequence or as half of a contrasting pair, one thing is clear. Color words are symbols of concepts greater than themselves. By employing the color word white in their myths, the Lakota, the Magyars, and the Celts communicated much more than the shade or hue of the buffalo,

³¹ Hunt, "Colour Symbolism," 330.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

stag, and sow in their stories.

Color as Symbol of the Spiritual and the Valuable

Paul Tillich once wrote, “Man’s ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate.”³⁵ As noted in the previous section of this study, color words can double as symbolic language within the lexicons of all peoples. Colors can symbolize many things, yet some colors surely symbolize what Tillich termed “the ultimate.”³⁶ For Tillich, this ultimate means matters touching both the creative and social expressions of humankind, but also any idea that reflects “above all, religion.”³⁷

In Europe, color becomes the symbol for the complex ideas connected to religion during the Middle Ages. Experiments in the field of optics influenced peoples’ concepts of symbolic meanings represented by the color spectrum,³⁸ Europeans believed the human eye to be an origin of light,³⁹ and Latin color words mainly were “derived from lexical variations of the vocabulary of light.”⁴⁰ This perceived connection

³⁵ Tillich, “The Meaning of Symbol,” 41.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 52.

³⁹ Florin Curta, “Colour Perception, Dyestuffs, and Colour Terms in Twelfth-Century French Literature,” *Medium Aevum* 73, no. 1 (2004): 43.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

between the eye, light, and color led to color words becoming synonymous with “the seven faculties of the soul . . . the seven virtues (from a positive point of view) . . . [and] the seven vices (from a negative viewpoint).”⁴¹ Medievalist Florin Curta posits the twelfth-century “chromatic scale, like the one described on the basis of Aristotelian and Averroist theories by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, represented a continuous variation of *claritas*.”⁴² The twelfth-century French poet, Chrétien de Troyes, through whom the West came to know the stories of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table,⁴³ illustrates the importance the full color spectrum—running from white, through green, to black—to medieval symbolic language. Curta notes in de Troyes’ epic romance, *Erec et Enide*,⁴⁴ “the head of Enide’s horse is black on one side and white on the other, with a stripe in the middle that was ‘plus vert que n’est fuelle de vingne’ (‘greener than the vine leaf’),”⁴⁵ or in other words includes the full spectrum. Such symbolism is so important across the corpus of medieval poetry that a variety of “colour terms appear in epics and romances as ‘focal points.’”⁴⁶

During this period, the entire range of visible colors became associated with

⁴¹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 53.

⁴² Curta, “Colour Perception,” 44.

⁴³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 1.

⁴⁴ Curta, “Colour Perception,” 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

abstract spiritual and religious concepts. By representing such intangible ideas, colors not only meet Tillich's definition of what it means to represent "the ultimate,"⁴⁷ but they fulfill one of Tillich's rules defining symbols as well. As words that signify spiritual matters, colors "[open] up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us."⁴⁸

Medieval Europeans, however, were not the only society to understand color words as symbols of the spiritual. In his studies of Spanish and European art and literature through the twentieth century, J.E. Cirlot posits "the series black-white-red-gold, denotes the path of spiritual ascension"⁴⁹ in these art forms. Meanwhile, a continent away, Loyola University's Paul S. Breidenbach lived and worked among the Fante of coastal Ghana during the early 1970s,⁵⁰ studying the Nakabah people,⁵¹ also known as the Twelve Apostles Church.⁵² Breidenbach notes that the beliefs and rituals of this group are patterned after Methodist and Roman Catholic teaching, but stresses this body is an independent, indigenous movement.⁵³ Still, in Nakabah culture, colors

⁴⁷ Tillich, "The Meaning of Symbol," 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 56.

⁵⁰ Paul S. Breidenbach, "Colour Symbolism and Ideology in a Ghanaian Healing Movement," *Africa* 46, no. 2 (1976): 137.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

seen in dreams and visions are understood as symbolizing specific spiritual realities.⁵⁴ White, red, and black carry particular meaning for the Fante in general, and for the Nakabah particularly.⁵⁵ Healing rituals may or may not be performed, depending on the colors seen in dreams and visions.⁵⁶ The colors, and the underlying concepts they are believed to symbolize, are regarded as true and absolute. These perceived spiritual realities, understood through color, guide the people in what actions to take.

Other cultures also identify spiritual meaning with colors or color words. Researcher Victor Turner found “ritual colour symbolism” in Zambia’s Ndembu people in the mid-twentieth century.⁵⁷ Among the neighboring Hausa of West Africa, Pauline M. Ryan notes a “great consistency in the symbolic values ascribed to [certain] colors.”⁵⁸ Red, in fact, is usually “associated with spiritual agency and power”⁵⁹ in Hausa literature.

Color words can do more than represent only spiritual concepts, however. They also can symbolize great value. Among the most expensive and highly valued commodities of medieval Europe were fabrics. Curta makes a case for “the relative

⁵⁴ Breidenbach, “Colour Symbolism and Ideology,” 142.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁸ Pauline M. Ryan, “Color Symbolism in Hausa Literature,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 141-160, abstract in JSTOR Archive <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3629660> (accessed 12 October 2011): 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

abundance of words for cloth [in medieval French culture], which were later generalized for colours.”⁶⁰ As is the case with color words and their symbolizing spiritual concepts, color’s representation of material value is not exclusive to medieval European Christian culture. Curta notes that “the records of the Cairo Geniza show that Jewish contemporaries of [the medieval French] had a wide variety of terms for describing exact hues and for matching the colours of the parts of their dress.”⁶¹ Terms defining expensive fabrics became color words in the vernacular. Consequently, color can connote considerable value.

Color-indicated value is not necessarily measured in monetary terms, however. Fact-based legendary heroes, like William the Conqueror, Charlemagne, and even Baligant, Charlemagne’s nemesis in the epic poem *The Song of Roland*, are revered for their wisdom, bravery, and military skill in the poetry of the 1300s⁶² and all of these heroes sport “white hair or [a] beard.”⁶³ Consequently, Florin Curta suggests the valued qualities of leadership are symbolized by the color word white.⁶⁴ After all, color words have been long recognized as “focal points”⁶⁵ in medieval epic poetry and, more

⁶⁰ Curta, “Colour Perception,” 49.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 47.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 49.

importantly, “as devices used by twelfth-century authors to emphasize the role or the change of a particular character.”⁶⁶

Of all the color words symbolizing spiritual ideas or degrees of value, however, one color stands apart. That word is white. Objects described as white are often more sacred or more valuable than others. The word white conveys this meaning because, in the syntax of a wide variety of cultures, it is half of a contrasting pair where the other half of the pair is often the word black. In the visual and language arts, black and white, according to Cirlot, are “diametrically opposed symbols of the positive and the negative.”⁶⁷ To understand black is to understand white.

White and Symbolic Meaning

Among the people of the Caucasus and the former Soviet Union, David Hunt finds that white and black are often conceptualized as complete opposites.⁶⁸ In the myths of the Indo-Aryan peoples, J.E. Cirlot sees “the opposition of the two worlds . . . in the portrayal of one white and one black horse.”⁶⁹ Unlocking the symbolic meaning of the word white means looking to what its opposite, the word black, conveys.

In his research, Hunt notes that the “most important associations with the

⁶⁶ Curta, “Colour Perception,” 52.

⁶⁷ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 56.

⁶⁸ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 334.

⁶⁹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 57.

white/black contrasting pair are good/bad or day/night, although they also include life/death”⁷⁰ and that “the colour black is generally associated with something impure, bad or dark.”⁷¹ Hunt’s colleague, Seyfi Agirel, who studies the folk literature of the Azeri and Turkic peoples, finds a similar understanding of the word black among that population as well. “The association of black with evil”⁷² is one of several key symbols in Azeri myth.⁷³ Black can symbolize villainy as well.⁷⁴ According to Florin Curta, dark colors, including black, are “associated with non-Christians in the *Song of Roland*.”⁷⁵ These so-called non-Christians are predominately Muslim, while aspects of the Christian Crusaders in the tale are described in light shades.⁷⁶ Florin Curta notes that in other medieval French epics “black or very dark hair was the ideal ugliness.”⁷⁷ For instance, “the beard of the Giant Herdsman in *Yvain* is *noire*.”⁷⁸

Cirlot asserts that “black pertains to the state of fermentation, putrefaction,

⁷⁰ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 334.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁷² Seyfi Agirel, “Colour Symbolism in Turkish and Azeri Folk Literature,” *Folklore* 120 (April 2009): 93.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Curta, “Colour Perception,” 44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

occultation and penitence”⁷⁹ in nearly every European culture. The Europeans are not alone in this perception, either. For the Nakabah of Ghana, black “has a predominant negative association in traditional meaning”⁸⁰ and symbolizes “darkness, loss, hidden and impure things and forces, witchcraft, bad luck and death.”⁸¹ In their study of color and symbolic meaning, Gary D. Sherman and Gerald L. Clore claim that “black has no good connotations for many reasons; it is the color of night, uncertainty, and danger.”⁸² Yet, the word white has positive spiritual associations.⁸³ Things described as white are “universally understood to be something that can be stained easily and that must remain unblemished to stay pure.”⁸⁴ Moreover, Sherman and Clore cite a number of other studies from 1986 and 2006 to conclude “there exists a moral-purity metaphor or that likens moral goodness to physical cleanliness.”⁸⁵

To prove their theories, Sherman and Clore measured the reactions of undergraduates at South Dakota State University⁸⁶ and found when rating the moral

⁷⁹ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 56.

⁸⁰ Breidenbach, “Colour Symbolism and Ideology,” 139.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸² Gary D. Sherman and Gerald L. Clore, “The Color of Sin: White and Black Are Perpetual Symbols of Moral Purity and Pollution,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 8 (2009): 1020.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1019.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1024.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1020.

meaning embodied in words printed in either a black or a white font, students' "immorality-blackness associations operate quickly and automatically."⁸⁷ That is to say that words embodying immoral concepts, printed in a black font, quickly and decidedly elicited a reaction suggesting that the black print communicated the word's negative meaning.

White, on the other hand, represents "illumination, ascension, revelation and pardon"⁸⁸ both historically and in many contemporary societies. It "is generally associated with good, purity . . . a lack of blemish [and] has the connotation of virginal"⁸⁹ in Hunt's folktales from the Caucasus. Agriel concurs, writing, "white represents purity, good, and reverence in Turkic folk literature."⁹⁰ Europeans and Asians are not alone in perceiving white in this way, however. Breidenbach states that to those participating in the Ghanaian healing movement, white means "Life and Health are already present"⁹¹ and that a healing ritual "is not really needed."⁹² All in all, white is equated with spiritual concepts more than any other color word.

White is a symbol of the spiritual and the valuable as well as a designation of

⁸⁷ Sherman and Clore, "The Color of Sin," 1021.

⁸⁸ Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 56.

⁸⁹ Hunt, "Colour Symbolism," 332.

⁹⁰ Agriel, "Colour Symbolism," 94.

⁹¹ Breidenbach, "Colour Symbolism and Ideology," 142.

⁹² *Ibid.*

color. Yet, even as a symbol of the spiritual, it is still only a descriptor. To understand the symbolism of the word white is to understand only part of the significance of the White Buffalo, the White Stag, and the White Sow. Surely, these three animals, being white, embody spiritual aspects. What, though, can be said for the aspects each of these animals represents on its own? The buffalo, the stag, and the sow must symbolize concepts for the cultures who told their tales. By applying the same techniques that decode color symbolism—such as the theory of correspondences, or better yet, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of contrasting pairs or even meaningful sequences—animal symbolism within the Lakota, Magyar, and Celtic culture can be deciphered. With the meaning of white and the meaning inherent in particular animals in mind, it will be possible to pinpoint the role stories of the White Sow, White Stag, and White Buffalo played in the cultures that told them.

CHAPTER 3

ANIMAL AND MEANING

Just as color words carry meaning beyond mere description of coloration, animal words can convey concepts beyond themselves. In today's Information Age, it may be difficult to imagine animals as a key component of human communication and understanding, but they—and more importantly what they represented—undoubtedly were. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, editors of *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, note that, at one time, “human beings lived in closer proximity with nature than they do now, and believed in an ‘anima mundi.’”¹ B. van de Walle theorizes it is likely early peoples, and specifically the Egyptians, “went in healthy fear of [animals], and this, in the natural course of things, led to veneration.”² Long before the Egyptians, however, human beings painted animal figures on the walls of caves and carved them into rock outcroppings, wood, stone, and bone. Early scientists who initially studied such prehistoric cave paintings “believed at first that [they] were simple, representational paintings: man depicting for pleasure.”³ Later, such paintings were viewed as “sexual symbols.”⁴ Views changed as study continued and by 2011 researchers like Katri

¹ Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), ix.

² B. van de Walle, “Egypt: Syncretism and State Religion,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 26.

³ Andre Varagnac, “The Problem of Prehistoric Religions,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Saarelainen believe animal figurines found in early Iron Age sites throughout the Near East serve as “an important witness to the religion of the ancient inhabitants [of the region].”⁵

Due to an understandable lack of evidence, however, a definitive conclusion about the symbolism of early representations of animals may never be proven.⁶ The academic community cannot currently prove whether the first animal depictions were symbols of sex, religious belief, or merely something pretty. With this in mind, Andre Varagnac believes they are even more than decoration or symbols of physical aspects, such as sex. He writes that “it is within the bounds of possibility that paintings and carvings portrayed not so much the animal as such, as the animal-spirit, the animal as seen by the visionary—a prophetic symbol.”⁷ Consequently, “prehistoric societies probably had animal cults”⁸ wherein human beings believed animals connected them with the divine. Despite these theoretical interpretations, however, one thing is clear. Animals are symbols.

Animal as Symbol

For psychologist Carl Jung, “all human beings possess similar inborn tendencies

⁵ Katri Saarelainen, “Figurines of the Early Iron Age,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 74, no. 2, (2011): 85.

⁶ Varagnac, “Problem of Prehistoric Religions,” 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

to form certain general symbols.”⁹ Jung postulates these general symbols include “wise old man, earth-mother, divine child, the self, god, the sun, the animus and anima (idea of man in a woman and vice versa), the number four, the cross, the mandala, and a few others.”¹⁰ These general symbols, said to be found universally, point, in his opinion, to “some general collective origin.”¹¹ While he does not cite animals among his general symbols, the widespread depiction of animals, and their use in art, story, and ritual, suggests they are among these general symbols, if such symbols do exist.

Gregory Stephen Kirk, in his work *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, disputes Jung’s notion that same symbols develop in differing cultures and that they grow from some primeval understanding. He points to an absence of cross-cultural studies comparing symbols on a statistical basis as proof that Jung’s viewpoint is not defensible.¹² Instead, he asserts that any commonality of symbol “arise[s] out of the common experience of humanity.”¹³ Whether one subscribes to Jung’s view of cross-cultural symbols, or to Kirk’s, one can say animals have indeed acted as symbols across a variety of cultures and throughout time. Tania M. Dickinson, in her study of zoomorphic metallurgy, crafted as fittings for shields and found in

⁹ Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 275.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 276.

Anglo-Saxon gravesites across eastern England at burials such as Sutton Hoo, calls animal symbols that change with time, place, and culture “malleable.”¹⁴

Dickinson concludes animal symbols initially envisioned by the Romans may have been adapted within “post-Roman successor kingdoms”¹⁵ like the Anglo-Saxons’ culture to represent a wide variety of possibly meanings for the “emergent warrior-elite.”¹⁶ Perhaps in addition, animal forms may have been used to indicate “military insignia, including practical means of identification in battle.”¹⁷ Animal art may have acted as “ancestral or ‘clan’ totems”¹⁸ following the Germanic tradition.¹⁹ They may have served as “ostentatious social display, and protective symbolism.”²⁰ In this last case, Dickinson as well as her colleagues believe animals may have symbolized Christian or pagan spiritual concepts²¹ for men who knew they may not survive battle. She connects animal scenes on the shields with the triumphs of Odin as described in

¹⁴ Tania M. Dickinson, “Symbols of Protection: The Significance of Animal-Ornamented Shields in Early Anglo-Saxon England,” in *Medieval Archaeology* 49, no. 1, 2005: 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Norse myth²² and some that seem to reflect Christian ideas like “Christ ascending to heaven as an eagle carrying the souls of deceased believers (variously represented as fish, snakes or small animals)”²³ as depicted in Carolingian manuscripts.²⁴

Dickinson’s explanation of malleability in symbol, where a later culture adopts and adapts the symbols of their predecessors, could be said to support Jung’s theory that symbols have developed from a “collective origin.”²⁵ Likewise, David Leeming, editor of *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* notes, that “as early as the Paleolithic period, animal costumes were used to carry shaman-like humans into the mythic world of spirits.”²⁶ Later, however, “animals take on specifically sacred functions in mythologies such as the Egyptian.”²⁷ Still, in many cultures, animals symbolized the mystic, the sacred, and in some cases, the gods themselves. Eventually, as in ancient Egyptian culture, “the gods took the shape of some animal, which was regarded as the soul (Ba) of the god.”²⁸ Leeming points out that “all tricksters—the Norse Loki and the

²² Dickinson, “Symbols of Protection,” 110.

²³ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Kirk, *Myth*, 275.

²⁶ David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2005), 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ van de Walle, “Egypt,” 26.

Native American Coyote are good examples—have shape-shifting ability”²⁹ and that, to suit their purposes, these gods sometimes assumed the shape of animals.³⁰ Zeus does exactly this in classical Greek tradition to pursue “certain lascivious adventures that he wished to hide from his wife.”³¹ Goddesses adopted animal forms as well. The Gauls’ “deity Rhiannon, the ‘Great Queen’, was a mare-goddess.”³²

For the Gauls, particular creatures including the “horse, raven, bull and boar were sacred animals.”³³ These same animals appear again and again in world mythology. The horse is the mystic embodiment of the dawn, the year, the weather, and the landscape for Hindus³⁴ and it protects the enchanted king Oisín from the realities of the world in Irish tales.³⁵ The raven appears in myth and art from Scandinavia to the Pacific Northwest.³⁶ Yet, these four—the horse, raven, bull, and boar—are not the only animals to be found in wide-ranging myths.

Repeated incidents of the same animal symbolizing the spiritual or the sacred in

²⁹ Leeming, *Oxford Companion*, 19.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² G. Roth and P.M. Duval, “Celtic Lands: Myth in History,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 339.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008), 201.

³⁵ Ibid., 192.

³⁶ M. Bouteiller, “North America: Spirits of Good and Evil,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 457.

many diverse cultures do seem to support Jung's assertion that some symbols are general and universal, but does it? One could easily think so. The serpent, for instance, appears in the myths of many civilizations. It "symbolized many things in Aztec mythology, but particularly strength and skill and ingenuity"³⁷ while for some within the various sects of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the serpent eventually "symbolizes Satan or one of Satan's minions."³⁸ In other Semite texts, "the torturous serpent, the beast with seven heads . . ." is Loran and the enemy of Baal³⁹ rather than humankind. Among the Aborigines of Australia, the Rainbow Serpent is a powerful, highly revered animal, associated with the positive phenomenon of "rain and seasonal fertility"⁴⁰ and is "one of the central figures in the myths relating to the group of ancestral beings known as the Djanggawul,"⁴¹ who established the landscape and the natural rock formations that "are the focus for the most important ceremonies"⁴² even today.

Rather than supporting Jung's ideas, these divergent meanings support Joseph

³⁷ M. Simoni, "Central America: Gods of Sacrifice," in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 470.

³⁸ Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing and Valerie H. Ziegler, eds., "Hebrew Bible Accounts," in *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 33.

³⁹ A. Caquot, "Western Semitic Lands: The Idea of the Supreme God," in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 90.

⁴⁰ Catherine H. Berndt, "Australia," in *Mythology: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Principal Myths and Religions of the World*, ed. Richard Cavendish (Dubai: Fall River Press, 2004), 211.

⁴¹ A. M. Panoff, "Oceana: Society and Tradition," in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 513.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Campbell who warns of the fallacy in assuming cross-cultural comparisons will prove the universality of a symbol. He writes, “A system of mythological symbols only works if it operates in the field of a community of people who have essentially analogous experiences.”⁴³ In other words, a symbol, such as the serpent, only means strength, or temptation, or seasonal fertility to those who “share the same realm of life experience.”⁴⁴

Ultimately, the pervasiveness of certain animals as symbols such as the serpent, or even the horse, raven, bull, and boar, may not be due to Jung’s notion of general and universal symbols, but rather to the fact that some animal species are found globally while others are not. For example, the Hindu god Ganesha is conceptualized with an elephant’s head and is considered to be “among the five most important [Hindu] gods.”⁴⁵ Yet, the elephant rarely represents anything in other parts of the world whereas the serpent is a symbol in culture after culture. Of course, the elephant is native to a relatively limited geographical area while serpents exist on nearly every continent and, thus, have come into contact with nearly every civilization. In this light, the pervasiveness of the serpent symbol in myth, as compared to the elephant, has little to do with being a general, universal symbol as Jung would define it. The endurance of the serpent as symbol, though, is likely due to Dickinson’s idea of malleability. Symbols

⁴³ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*, ed. Eugene Kennedy (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stuart Blackburn, “India’s Eternal Cycle,” in *Mythology: The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, ed. C. Scott Littleton (New York: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2007), 379.

are malleable. What is general and universal, however, is that animals can serve as symbols and that they symbolize the sacred in the myths of many local cultures.

This, then, is the key to understanding animals as symbol. Through knowing the significance of an animal to the people of a particular culture, one can begin to grasp the meaning of that animal as symbol. One more factor can influence meaning as well, however. That factor is color. Color words are symbols in their own right. When combined with animal symbols, color words add another layer of meaning. In the case of the color word white, that meaning can be quite evocative for those who tell white animal myths.

The White Animal as Symbol

Folklorist David Hunt, who specializes in the myths of the people in and around the former Soviet Union, looks to folktales to understand multiple aspects of a culture. In his opinion, folktales are “the ‘classical literature’ and the entire actual culture of [the people of the Caucasus].”⁴⁶ Since these tales “have been handed down through generations of narrators and listeners”⁴⁷ they are particularly useful to the researcher because “the narrators have unconsciously filtered the material to ensure its relevance to their community.”⁴⁸ When studying the symbolism of color words, Hunt chooses tales

⁴⁶ David Hunt, “Colour Symbolism in the Folk Literature of the Caucasus,” *Folklore* 117 (December 2006): 329.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

featuring “colour references where the narrator could actually choose the colour” because such choices “could well have significance for the narrator and the audience.”⁴⁹ Notably, “green only occurs rarely”⁵⁰ in stories of the Caucasus while “white, black, and red are . . . absolutely dominant.”⁵¹ From the perspective of this study, however, these color words become even more telling when used as descriptors for the animals within the tales.

Hunt notes that “red can be summarized as neither good nor bad, but potent”⁵² and is even connected in some instances with strong poison.⁵³ Yet, such poison is described as being made from red animals, particularly red frogs and red snakes.⁵⁴ With this being said, it would appear the combination of the symbolism inherent in the color word and the symbolism represented by the animal carry even deeper meaning than the color word or animal symbolizes on its own. When labeling a horse blue, which is “a horse that we might call ‘grey,’”⁵⁵ no special symbolism is conveyed through that horse because blue carries no special meaning within Caucasus cultures. With the color word red, however, everything changes. Hunt finds that “the really exceptional legendary

⁴⁹ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 330.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 334.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

horses [of the Caucasus tradition] are generally either red or multi-coloured.”⁵⁶ Red symbolizes power, therefore red animals are powerful. The animals’ attendant aspects are enhanced.

The color word white, which is so often a symbol of the divine, becomes even more evocative when combined with animals that are symbols of the spiritual themselves. This relationship of white-and-animal is not limited to the stories of the Caucasus, either. Hunt’s colleague, J. Hutchings, finds that the meanings of color words in British Isles folktales are “qualitatively similar”⁵⁷ to the meanings of the colors used in Caucasus stories. Perhaps consequently, the White Horse, cut into the chalk hillside in Uffington, Great Britain⁵⁸ became less associated with the cult of the horse-goddess Epona, and grew “increasingly important to the Celts . . . [as] the horse itself gradually assumed a godlike character, associated with fertility and the protection of the dead.”⁵⁹ The horse, already understood as a powerful symbol, is enhanced by being white and an association with Epona is not needed. In a similar vein, J.E. Cirlot notes that “the sacred horses of Greek, Roman, Celtic and Germanic cultures were white.”⁶⁰ All the mystical aspects that are symbolized in the color word white gives more gravitas to the concepts

⁵⁶ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 337.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 330.

⁵⁸ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 349.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1972), 58.

embodied in the animal word, horse.

There are exceptions to this enhancement of the animal symbol by the color word white, however. In his study of Azeri and Turkish folktales, Seyfi Agirel finds that while white usually indicates special, positive qualities, “white may also be used to know something bad [in some tales].”⁶¹ Agirel points to the white ogre which “is considered to be the most dangerous type of ogre.”⁶² Black horses in the Turkish tradition are always considered good or powerful⁶³ despite their color. Agirel encourages readers, though, that the use of black in describing some horses “should not be considered as a contradiction”⁶⁴ to the relevance of the word white as a symbol since “the horse was a highly important animal for the once-nomadic Turkic peoples”⁶⁵ and therefore a positive regardless of its color. An alternative to Agirel’s interpretation may be that in these cases, the symbol of the ogre as well as the symbol of the horse are sufficient to carry the meaning of power, value, and consecration on their own. In other words, some symbols, particularly some animal symbols, may be so powerful within a culture, they do not need another symbol, such as a color word, to modify them.

Hunt’s view of this use of color words in relation to animals is perhaps the most

⁶¹ Seyfi Agirel, “Colour Symbolism in Turkish and Azeri Folk Literature,” *Folklore* 120 (April 2009): 95.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

interesting, though. Working independently of Agirel, Hunt believes that when the storyteller cites a color in the context of a contrasting pair, after the method first outlined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, this is a way to contrast one object or animal against another, rather than the colors *per se*. In this way, Caucasus storytellers emphasize the role of the animal even more. Hunt finds this to be the case particularly in white animal tales.⁶⁶

Commonly, the color words black and white are typically viewed as a contrasting pair. They do not negate each other,⁶⁷ but rather their opposition serves to further amplify the special characteristics already inherent in the animal they describe. In a Georgian story of “divine punishment”⁶⁸ God transforms the raven, which was naturally white, to black “as its punishment for telling lies.”⁶⁹ In this story, both the colors white and black are in play and connote a quantity of information. Both color words symbolize God’s judgment. Because these color words are contrasting, white symbolizes the natural order God devised and acceptance, while black represents its opposite, change because of sin and a curse. Neither color word neutralizes the symbolic meaning of the other, however. The raven, because he is now black, becomes a symbol of the consequences of lying and displeasing God. The black raven’s symbolic

⁶⁶ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 333.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 335.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 334.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

meaning is strengthened and enhanced through having been contrasted to the fictional white raven.

Contrasting color pairs, in essence, create multivalent meaning when modifying animal symbols. The Vaynakh tale of the black snake and the white snake is just such an example. David Hunt relates this tale, writing, “In a Vaynakh legend (the Vaynakh are mostly Moslem), the hunter-hero sees two snakes fighting: the stronger black one was evil, male and Christian, while the weaker white one was good, female and Moslem.”⁷⁰ As a contrasting pair describing the two snakes, black and white carry meanings about good versus evil, male versus female, physical strength versus weakness, but most importantly for those who hear this story, the negative nature of Christians versus the people of Islam.

Additionally, contrasting pairs which enhance animal symbols are not limited to black and white. In the Chinese story of White Snake, which “has evolved since its inception a thousand years ago,”⁷¹ the words white and snake continue to represent the complex transformation of a “frightening demon into a brave young lady”⁷² while the color word green along with animal word snake describes all the complex qualities of White Snake’s friend and companion, Greenie.⁷³ In nearly every contrasting pair,

⁷⁰ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 334.

⁷¹ Zhao Qingge, *The Legend of White Snake*, trans. Paul White and Thomas Shou (Shanghai: Shanghai Press and Publishing Development Company, 2008), 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 9.

however, white is unaffected and its meaning undiminished by the colors that accompany it. The white animal is almost always better, stronger, and supernatural regardless of the color of the animal paired with it.

The White Animal in Myth

By virtue of their color, and often times their species, white animals are exceptional in myth, and therefore, in culture. In Caucasus myth, “the white animal is ‘special,’ belonging to the hunting goddess, or perhaps even being the goddess herself or a daughter of the hunting god.”⁷⁴ The trapping or shooting of white animals is considered a violation of the natural order and quite dangerous for the hunter.⁷⁵ To drive this point home, David Hunt relates an anecdote a colleague told him in 2002.⁷⁶ According to Hunt, “It is widely held in the region of Bad Ischl, where the Austrian Imperial Family had a summer home, that Prince Franz Ferdinand had hunted and killed a white chamois shortly before his assassination at Sarajevo.”⁷⁷

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand often is looked on as the event that sparked World War I, a war that changed the balance of power in the global community and greatly affected the politics, science and even art of the twentieth-century. Of

⁷⁴ Hunt, “Colour Symbolism,” 333.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

course, historians also note that many additional causes led to the Great War. Even if the assassination were the war's only cause, however, it would be impossible to establish a cause/effect relationship between the murder of the Grand Duke and his killing of a white antelope. Yet, what is significant is that the majority of a local population links his untimely death to the power, sanctity, and ruination of a white animal.

For those who believe the myth, the killing of a white animal was the means of Franz Ferdinand's death. Conversely, white animals are also the protectors of life. In Turkish and Azeri folktales, "animals depicted as white . . . are friendly with the heroes"⁷⁸ and in tales where the hero is trapped in the netherworld, "it is the white animal that would lift the hero to the sunny world."⁷⁹ According to some historians, white animals assisted real-life heroes as well. Medievalist Florin Curta states that "on 20 June 1098 at Antioch, the Crusaders were greatly assisted by a vision of St. George, St. Demetrius, and St. Mercurius wearing white armour [sic] and riding white horses accompanied by an army of white knights"⁸⁰ and that this report was popular throughout the fourteenth century.⁸¹ With alleged facts supporting mythic concepts about white animals, it is little wonder white animals are thought to bring aid and assist

⁷⁸ Agirel, "Colour Symbolism," 93.

⁷⁹ Hunt, "Colour Symbolism," 334.

⁸⁰ Florin Curta, "Colour Perception, Dyestuffs, and Colour Terms in Twelfth-Century French Literature," *Medium Aevum* 73, no. 1 (2004): 47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

heroes while, from at least one point of view, to kill a white animal means death. They are special, spiritual, powerful, and sacred.

If white animals are not actually all these things, they are symbols of these concepts and participate in these realities as such. It is entirely plausible, then, that the Devonshire Celts turned to stories of the White Sow during a time of dramatic change. For the Magyars of Eastern Europe, tales of the White Stag would justify the warfare around them. The White Buffalo and all it represented could become an anchor in the changing times of the Lakota. For each of these cultures, myths of their white animals could be more than mere tales. They could be the justification of events.

CHAPTER 4

THE DEVONSHIRE CELTS AND THEIR WHITE SOW

When it comes to the first assertion of this study—that the Celts of Devonshire looked to their myth of the White Sow for justification of assimilation and conversion to Christianity during a time of upheaval and conflict—it may seem difficult to prove. Can the meanings in color and animal symbolism as conveyed through myth really affect a civilization’s social policy? Paul Tillich likely would have answered in the affirmative. He wrote that “meaning is the common characteristic and the ultimate unity of the theoretical and the practical sphere of spirit, of scientific and aesthetic, of legal and social structures.”¹ In the case of the Devon Celts, it is the meaning in their myth of the White Sow that allowed them to adjust to a changing political and social reality.

Such a merging of adapted Celtic myth and social strategy is certainly observable in recent history. In a 2011 article for Britain’s *The Telegraph*, Henry Samuel notes that the Celtic tribe known as the Gauls functioned as a type of mascot for the rebels of the French Revolution of 1789.² The idea of the Gallic Celt became “a new national image as the ‘good savage’”³ and as such, empowered the people of the time. Nearly a hundred years later, Napoleon III appropriated the legendary story of

¹ Paul Tillich, *What Is Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 56.

² Henry Samuel, “Asterix History Debunked but Gaul Myth Will Endure” in *The Telegraph*, November 11, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8884175/Asterix-history-debunked-but-Gaul-myth-will-endure.html> (accessed 13 November 2011), 2.

³ Ibid.

Vercingetorix, a Gallic Celt executed for defying Rome, to inspire his troops.⁴

Vercingetorix and his mythic exploits became “a symbol of French resistance against the Prussian armies in 1870.”⁵ Instead of representing resistance, however, another Celtic myth mingled with public policy to justify compliance with the invading German regime during World War II.⁶ For Vichy France, romanticized Celtic culture became “a symbol for a youth scheme under the Nazi occupation.”⁷ The Celts of Late Antiquity modified their own myths as well, particularly that of the White Sow, to condone a cultural shift in their society.

Joseph Campbell advised against mistaking the symbolism of myth for literal fact and actual events,⁸ and this chapter will do neither. Instead, the following will focus on what the myth of the White Sow and its many symbols meant to the inhabitants of the Devon coast in Late Antiquity and the purpose these symbols served. A short sketch of the history of the Celtic people and their subsequent contact with other cultures will be studied. Parallels between the amalgamation of Christian and Celtic themes in the myth, and the hybridization of Celtic and other cultural themes in other instances will be examined. Finally, the symbolism in the myth itself, from the craft Brannoc is said to

⁴ Samuel, “Asterix History Debunked,” 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Campbell, *Thou Art That*, 7.

have sailed to reach Devon, to the meaning of the color of the sow he found there, will be discussed within their cultural contexts. First, however, one must consider the myth of the White Sow itself.

Shirley Toulson concisely relates the Devon story in her book, *The Celtic Year: A Month-by-Month Celebration of Celtic Christian Festivals and Sites*, writing,

The legend is that Brannoc came to Devon from Brittany, sailing around Land's End in a stone coffin, which is probably a good way to describe the frail craft, ballasted with stone, which undertook that journey. Many such boats must have been wrecked on the Cornish rocks. Brannoc, however, came safely ashore and responded to the vision that bade him to establish a church at the place where he found a white sow with a litter of piglets.⁹

From this point, one can study the Celts.

A Brief History of the Celts

With “a distinct vocabulary of art-images”¹⁰ that is recognizable today on everything from tea towels to graphic tattoos to the intricate stonemasonry decorating churches such as New York’s Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, the ancient tribes known as the Celts “were a race rather than a nation.”¹¹ Though ethnically and linguistically related,

⁹ Shirley Toulson, *The Celtic Year: A Month-by-Month Celebration of Celtic Christian Festivals and Sites* (Rockport: Element Books, Incorporated, 1995), 61.

¹⁰ Jonathan M. Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 43.

¹¹ G. Roth and P.M. Duval, “Celtic Lands: Myth in History,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 335.

these bands never formed a single, unified political body.¹² Still, Celtic lands, populated by individual clans, extended from Asia Minor, through the middle of Europe and into the western part of the continent.¹³

Scholars believe the Celts originated in Germany sometime before 800 BCE¹⁴ and developed into two successive, broadly-defined cultural groups. These groups are named for the archaeological sites where the distinctions between them first became evident to twentieth-century researchers.¹⁵ The first group is the Hallstatt Celts, who lived in Central Europe from c. 750 to 600 BCE.¹⁶ The second group, or La Tène culture, dates from c. 500 to 100 BCE.¹⁷ Archeological evidence indicates it was La Tène Celts who moved into western Europe and the British Isles.¹⁸ They reached Britain during the eighth century BCE.¹⁹

The ancient Greeks coined the term Celt, or *Κελτοί*,²⁰ to describe the peoples

¹² Roth and Duval, "Celtic Lands," 335.

¹³ Wooding, "The Idea of the Celt," 40.

¹⁴ Roth and Duval, "Celtic Lands," 335.

¹⁵ Wooding, "The Idea of the Celt," 43.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹ Roth and Duval, "Celtic Lands," 347.

²⁰ Wooding, "The Idea of the Celt," 40.

living to the west and north of their own city-states.²¹ The Romans modified the Greek word *Κελτοί* and called the people “Celtae,”²² but used words such as “Galli”²³ and “Galatae”²⁴ synonymously.²⁵ As a result, the Celt-occupied lands that spread across areas of present-day Spain, became known as Gaul.²⁶ Dáithí Ó HÓgáin, author of *The Celts: A History*, credits the writings of Timagenes of Rome²⁷ with recording for history that “the population of Gaul—as of the Celtic territories generally—must have been descended both from earlier peoples and from the Celts who had migrated there.”²⁸ Similarly, the Romans viewed “at least part of the population of Britain—that closer to the coast—as an extension of the population of Gaul.”²⁹ The inhabitants of Devon, therefore, on the south coast of Britain, were definitively Celtic in Roman times and Late Antiquity. The Celts of Britain, Wales, Scotland, the Isle of Man, and Ireland are referred to as insular Celts.³⁰

²¹ Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” 40.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dáithí Ó HÓgáin, *The Celts: A History* (Wilton, Cork: The Collins Press, 2002), 24.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” 49.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

Gradually, Celtic culture faded “by reason of conquest, absorption or extinction”³¹ across Europe—except in the British Isles. There, Jonathan Wooding, a theologian at the University of Wales, Lampeter, asserts that insular Celtic language, art, and other characteristics survived not because the British Isles were a hotbed of Celtic high culture, but because this region was at the fringe of Roman conquest.³² Simply put, the insular Celts were too remote to feel the full force of Rome’s influence.

In recent decades, a new wave of scholarship—and of scrutiny—has focused on the “idea of the ‘Celt’”³³ in what Wooding describes as a “multi-disciplinary assault.”³⁴ A major point of contention centers on whether the use of the term Celt is an appropriate descriptor for the insular people of Late Antiquity,³⁵ their relationship to Christianity, or any present-day religious movement.³⁶ In *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, Mark Atherton cuts to the heart of the matter. He posits that “perhaps more than any other movement in today’s [Catholic] Church, the Celtic movement is inexorably linked to issues of

³¹ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 335.

³² Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” 50.

³³ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

ethnicity, location and national identity.”³⁷ Certainly ethnicity, location, and identity are central to the Celtic myth of the White Sow and why not? These issues were central to insular Celtic peoples and the growing Christian movement a millennium ago. After all, as Wooding notes, “speculation on the common distinctiveness of the Irish and British churches goes back to the time of Bede [in the eighth century].”³⁸

The Celts’ Myths and Symbols

Many of the Celts’ regional myths are lost to time since their tradition was an oral one.³⁹ As a result, facts about their gods are few and far between.⁴⁰ Almost two thousand years ago, however, the Romans invading Gaul considered the Celts’ gods to be ancient at that time.⁴¹ Their myths and rituals centered on the gods embodied by natural features like mountain tops, rivers and other bodies of water, as well as trees and groves.⁴² The “strange body of spiritualist philosophers, physicians and naturalists, called Druids”⁴³ perpetuated these traditions until the late sixth century.⁴⁴ Records from

³⁷ Mark Atherton, “Preface” in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), x.

³⁸ Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” 51.

³⁹ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 335.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 338.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 347.

the Roman administration in Gaul “noted that druids would travel to Britain for further study.”⁴⁵ Throughout that time, the insular Celts revered Dana or Donu, a mother-goddess, and her mate Bilé or Beli. The exploits of their children, the Tuatha De Danann or “people of the goddess Dana,”⁴⁶ were at the heart of their epic poetry, some of which survives as the Cycle of the Beyond and the Ulster Cycle.⁴⁷ One insular tribe situated to the northeast of the present-day Scottish border were called the Votadini,⁴⁸ which means “those subject to the father.”⁴⁹ Dáithí Ó HÓgáin, author of *The Celts: A History*, believes the tribe’s name is “a designation which must refer to worship of the ancestor-deity.”⁵⁰ According to Roman sources, the Gallic Celts considered themselves to be descendants of their mother goddess herself.⁵¹

Where the native Gallic and Roman cultures came into contact with one another, some god or god/goddess pairs arose. *Larousse World Mythology*, edited by Pierre Grimal, credits this to the “two tolerant polytheisms”⁵² of Rome and the Gallic Celts. In other words, neither the Celts nor the Romans viewed their pantheon as exclusive,

⁴⁵ Wooding, “The Idea of the Celt,” 49.

⁴⁶ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 347.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁴⁸ Ó HÓgáin, *The Celts*, 191.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 340.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 336.

opening the door to syncretism. Over time, the Celtic gods merged to varying degrees with the Roman pantheon.⁵³ Of their many “characters, gods and heroes”⁵⁴ some are echoed in Arthurian legend.⁵⁵ Not all these amalgamated gods and heroes were anthropomorphic, however. Some had animalistic aspects.

For modern researchers, “manifestations [of some of the Celtic gods] in the form of animals” prove the Celtic culture’s great antiquity.⁵⁶ As noted in the previous chapters of this study, Andre Varagnac, Pierre Grimal, and Joseph Campbell see animals among the first ways human beings conceptualized the divine. As Campbell describes it, animal symbols were a primary “focus of awe.”⁵⁷ Such long-held conceptualizations did not fade away over night. Despite an influx of ideas, and a period of “assimilation or association,”⁵⁸ after the Roman conquest of Gaul and Britain, animals as symbols of the divine endured in Celtic culture. Consequently, a new “anthropomorphic pantheon grew up alongside the native deities of ‘natural’ and animal origin.”⁵⁹

⁵³ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 347.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 351.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 336.

⁵⁷ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*, ed. Eugene Kennedy (Novato: New World Library, 2001), 3.

⁵⁸ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 336.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 340.

Animal symbols therefore remained important in Celtic culture, from the bull and trio of cranes which became associated with the god Esus⁶⁰ to the stag's antlers apparently growing from the head of the king-like deity Cernunnos.⁶¹ On the continent, at the headwaters of the Seine, Celts left figurines of people carrying dogs as offerings for the goddess Sequana.⁶² Elsewhere in the Celtic world, dogs were depicted as "companions of mother goddesses."⁶³ The specific meanings of these animal symbols are lost, but the meanings of other animal symbols are clear. For instance, to the insular Celts, dogs were "believed to have magical healing qualities."⁶⁴ The hero Cuchulainn, a central figure in the epic poems of the Ulster Cycle, is literally named the Hound of Culann⁶⁵ for taking the place of Culann's watchdog, which he had killed.⁶⁶ The mythic hero, symbolized by the watchdog, is a primary element in the poem *Tain Bo Cuailgne*,⁶⁷ or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, in which another animal symbol, the bull of

⁶⁰ Roth and Duval, "Celtic Lands," 340.

⁶¹ Ibid., 345.

⁶² John McInnes, "Celtic Deities and Heroes," in *Mythology: The Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, ed. C. Scott Littleton (New York: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2007), 261.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 271.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 268.

Ulster,⁶⁸ is in danger of being stolen by an enemy kingdom.

Rather than healers, however, the “red-eared hounds of Annwn,”⁶⁹ were considered “harbingers of death.”⁷⁰ Here, the dog as animal symbol is enhanced by color symbolism. Just as David Hunt’s findings regarding color symbolism in the folktales of the Caucasus indicate definitive meaning in color words in general, and a connotation of strength in the color word red specifically,⁷¹ the outcome of a comparable survey by J. Hutchings reveals that color meanings in British Isles’ folk literature are “qualitatively similar.”⁷² Essentially, unlike the dog figurines given as gifts to Sequanna, Annwn’s hounds are powerful agents of death because of their red ears. Arguably, the symbol of the dog as the bringer of death, enhanced by the symbolic meaning inherent in the word black, continues in more recent English literature, from the terrifying red-eyed beast of Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and to the Grim of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

All in all, Celtic myth of Late Antiquity points to the adaptability of the Celtic people. Their symbols changed in the face of invasion, taking on characteristics borne by the newcomers, yet remaining recognizably their own. As Paul Tillich noted, “Like

⁶⁸ McInnes, “Celtic Deities and Heroes,” 268.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 261.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ David Hunt, “Colour Symbolism in the Folk Literature of the Caucasus,” *Folklore* 117 (December 2006): 333.

⁷² Ibid., 330.

living beings, [symbols] grow and die.”⁷³ Faced with a choice between life and death, the Celts clearly chose life for their symbols, and consequently, for themselves. Such assimilation sets a precedent for the details in the later myth of the White Sow.

The Celts and Christianity

While Roman invasion brought a wealth of new ideas to the Celts, this was only the first wave of change. Christianity followed on the Roman pantheon’s heels, bringing with it its own symbols. Just as the Celts adopted and adapted Roman mythic elements, they did the same with Christian symbols. According to Jean Markale, author of *Celtic Civilization*, Christianity reached Britain’s shores “probably about the year 200 (though the earliest Christian inscriptions found there date from the middle of the fourth century).” Some Celts embraced the Christian religion right away and were active in its hierarchy soon after. As Markale notes, “The council Arles in 314 was attended by three British bishops, including Eborius.”⁷⁴

Pelagius, a Christian monk and “one of the boldest thinkers of his day,”⁷⁵ was born in Britain c. 360 CE.⁷⁶ Leaving his homeland for Rome, he met one of the men who would become pivotal to the early Christian movement, Augustine. About that

⁷³ Paul Tillich, “The Meaning of Symbol,” in *The Essential Tillich: An Anthology of the Writings of Paul Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (New York: Macmillan Publishing Group, 1987), 42.

⁷⁴ Jean Markale, *Celtic Civilization* (London: Gordon and Cremonesi, Limited, 1978), 138.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

time, Pelagius also formulated his own doctrine, which would become controversial in the larger Church, but embraced in the British Isles. In summing up Pelagius' ideas, Markale writes,

The essence of Pelagian doctrine is that there is no such thing as original sin. Being created mortal Adam was subject to concupiscence. Human nature has not been corrupted, the will of man is unimpaired and he is capable of doing good when he wills it. Baptism washes away no original sin, since none exists, but only the actual sins committed by those receiving the sacrament [sic] 'Grace' denotes only those natural good things God gave to man, particularly his freedom⁷⁷ According to this doctrine, then, man has complete freedom.⁷⁸

This doctrine echoes ideals Markale and others consider elemental to Celtic pagan tradition, namely that there is no such thing as sin and that personal freedom is paramount.⁷⁹ As a result, Markale notes scholars often view Pelagius' doctrine as an effort "to syncretize Christian teaching with druidism."⁸⁰ He argues, however, that "Pelagianism is not druidism."⁸¹ Still, it is "very clearly Celtic in its leanings."⁸² Perhaps most importantly, though, Markale asserts that Pelagianism, with its Celtic undertones, is "distinctly anti-Mediterranean"⁸³ by virtue of its focus on the

⁷⁷ Markale, *Celtic Civilization*, 139.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

individual.⁸⁴

Rather than being wholly anti-Mediterranean, however, the acceptance of Pelagianism in Britain mirrors the Celtic acceptance of the Roman pantheon at the time of Rome's invasion of Gaul and the British Isles. Just as Cernunnos' antlers and human form reflected an acceptance of Roman theology in combination with an older animal symbol of the divine, Pelagius' response to Christianity supports the theory that the Celts reacted to foreign ideas in their midst by modifying their own myths and symbols. As history can attest, however, Augustine and Jerome sought to have Pelagius' doctrine condemned by the Christian Church. They succeeded in 416 CE.⁸⁵ Yet, the damage so to speak was done—at least in Britain. By this time, “Britain was now firmly Christian, if a little Pelagian.”⁸⁶

Pelagianism, though, was not the only intersection between Celtic sensibility and the new ideas carried by Christianity. As Diana Leatham notes, at the time of the fall of Rome, “monasticism had emerged from the deserts; had spread from the eastern fringes of the Mediterranean; and taken root in Italy, Africa and Gaul.”⁸⁷ Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Leatham asserts a “close kinship between Egyptian and Celtic

⁸⁴ Markale, *Celtic Civilization*, 139.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸⁷ Diana Leatham, *They Built on Rock: The Story of How the Men and Women of the Celtic Church Carried Light to the People Who Dwelt in the Dark Ages* (Glasgow: The Celtic Art Society, 1948), 18.

hermits”⁸⁸ existed in the early fifth century. Early stories of saints with animals seem to originate in this Celtic/Egyptian connection. Sulpicius Severus, “a contemporary of Palladius,”⁸⁹ learned from “his friend Postumianus newly returned to Gaul after three years travel in North Africa”⁹⁰ that while human visitors were decidedly unwanted,⁹¹ religious hermits in the desert often welcomed the company of animals during their seclusion.⁹² By the eighth century, Celtic Saint Cuthbert reportedly “soothed the speechless distress of a pair of repentant ravens who had vowed to steal no more.”⁹³ Cuthbert’s ravens are part of “a long, lively chain of lions, wolves, deer, cows, hares, horses, bees, monsters, whales, bears, foxes, squirrels, otters, cocks, mice, and even flies—all converted . . . by the kindness of Christians”⁹⁴ and bring to mind events in the lives of the much-later Italian Saint Francis of Assisi and South American Saint Martin de Porres. Perhaps it is not at all surprising, then, that given the time and place, Saint Brannoc should be associated with a Celtic animal, the White Sow.

Overall, Cuthbert’s association with animals in the 700s perhaps reflects a general move connecting Celtic Christian saints to traditional Celtic stories of nature.

⁸⁸ Leatham, *They Built on Rock*, 14.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Jean Markale notes that for the Celtic tribes converting to Christianity, “history becomes inseparable from legend”⁹⁵ after Saint Germanus sends Patrick to Ireland in 432 CE.⁹⁶ The following incident joins an instance of a Celt’s conversion to Christianity to the broader Celtic tradition of reverence for all that nature symbolizes:

After the Battle of Gabra at which the Fenians were finally disbanded, Cailte, one of their leaders, met Saint Patrick at Dumberg and was converted by him. He then followed [Patrick] across Ireland telling stories of the old days as he went. These tales were collected to the curious work known as *Acallam na Senorach* (Colloquy of the Ancient Men), in which all the old legends about lakes, forests, mountains, rivers, kings, druids and so on were brought to light once again.⁹⁷

Here, the sacred symbolism of the Celts, namely bodies of water, groves, and high places, are placed on a par of sorts with concepts of the divine brought by invading Christianity. Cailte’s conversion perhaps is made acceptable because he accompanies Patrick and speaks of the old ways just as Patrick preaches about the new. Both are presented, and to an extent, both are equal. In this way, both are combined.

The Celts and the Saxons

Christianity’s new ideas about the spiritual were not the only pressure the Celts faced in Late Antiquity, however. At the time of the Roman invasion of Britain in 43

⁹⁵ Markale, *Celtic Christianity*, 141.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

CE, the Celts of the Devon and Cornwall coasts were known as the “Dumnonii”⁹⁸ or “‘people of the deep’, *i.e.*, people far away”⁹⁹ while the neighboring tribe, the Dobunni,¹⁰⁰ were not only a different clan, but also surrendered to Rome right away.¹⁰¹ The Devon Celts were further isolated by the Saxon invasion of Wessex in 584 CE,¹⁰² and perhaps it is a sense of isolation that led to the mythic detail of Brannoc’s arrival by boat around this time. In any case, intensive, intermittent raids plagued the Devon Celts until 815 CE when Egbert of Wessex launched a “prolonged campaign”¹⁰³ against them. Nearly twenty-five years later, the descendants of the Celts of Devon found themselves “caught between Norse raiders and Saxon pressure.”¹⁰⁴ They combined forces with the Norse in an effort to thwart the Saxons, but were beaten in “a bloody battle”¹⁰⁵ and their land fell to Saxon rule.¹⁰⁶

All the while, Christianity, its symbols and myths were embraced in other regions of the British Isles. Atherton notes that “many of the most celebrated of the holy

⁹⁸ Ó Hóigáin, *The Celts*, 181.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 220.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 230.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

men and women of Britain and Ireland lived in the fifth and sixth centuries . . . [and] their hagiographies were composed in the seventh century and much later.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, Christian saints of Celtic ethnicity arose and were revered during this time of conflict with the Saxons. As a result, Celtic symbols of spiritual meaning naturally would be in danger of falling to the wayside. This did not happen, however. Tillich asserts that “[symbols] die because they can no longer produce response in the group where they originally found expression,”¹⁰⁸ yet symbols such as the White Sow lived on. The meaning of the White Sow, therefore, remained significant to the Devon Celts while other Celts embraced Christian ideals and while they were under threat of Saxon invasion.

Mark Atherton’s work supports this theory. In his article “Saxon or Celt? Cædmon, ‘The Seafarer’ and the Irish Tradition,” he writes that “Celtic ideas and ways of thinking could have passed into the religious literature of England.”¹⁰⁹ For proof, Atherton offers the history of Hilda, the Abbess of Whitby, under whose authority Cædmon had his mystical encounter and became a poet, composing and singing praises to God. At a time when not just Romans, but Irish Celts brought Christianity to Britain’s shores, Hilda “had been influenced by the Roman mission of Paulinus from

¹⁰⁷ Mark Atherton, “Introduction,” in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 6.

¹⁰⁸ Tillich, “The Meaning of Symbol,” 43.

¹⁰⁹ Mark Atherton, “Saxon or Celt? Cædmon, ‘The Seafarer’ and the Irish Tradition,” in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Mark Atherton (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 80.

Canterbury but later, when the alternative dynasty of King Oswald and Oswiu came into power, she was also on friendly terms with the Irishman Bishop Aiden from the Ionan mission.”¹¹⁰ This, according to Atherton, indicates Hilda “was in a position to be influenced by both Irish and southern English ecclesiastical centres [sic] . . .”¹¹¹ In short, Hilda and her community were likely affected by both foreign, Roman thoughts and symbols as well as Celtic interpretations of those ideas. Surely, caught between other cultures and their own, the Devon Celts did the same.

Atherton also observes that “the anonymous Old English homilists felt freer to adapt images and themes from the insular and Hiberno-Latin texts they knew and admired.”¹¹² As his prime example, he cites “the bird in the hall”¹¹³ metaphor. Found in the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as the Old English poem ‘The Seafarer,’ plus in the much-later work *The Rainbow* by D.H. Lawrence, and in a new way in Seamus Heaney’s recent poem “Bone Dreams,” descriptive language of “the flight of the bird is evocative, almost poetic”¹¹⁴ and reminiscent of “insular-style,” that is to say Celtic, works.¹¹⁵ In these examples, the bird imagery and its flight is sharply

¹¹⁰ Atherton, “Saxon or Celt,” 82.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 95.

¹¹³ Ibid., 96.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 92.

contrasted to “the image of the hall [which] is the epitome of Anglo-Saxon society, the symbol of government, patronage, and social stability.”¹¹⁶ To drive this point home, Atherton states that Late Victorian and Edwardian culture definitely saw Celt and Saxon ideas and identities as polar opposites.¹¹⁷ He cites E.M. Forester’s *Howard’s End* and the juxtaposition of his characters as the “prosaic Saxon” or the “visionary Celt,”¹¹⁸ symbols in their own right that were profoundly meaningful to Forester’s socially-striated readership.¹¹⁹ In every sense, then, the bird in the hall paradigm supports the notions that animal symbols do convey Celtic ideas which have merged with concepts from outside the culture, and that animal symbols in Celtic myth have social and political overtones. This role of myth is not surprising since, historically, Celtic religious tradition “occupied an important place in the state.”¹²⁰ This is reflected in epic poems such as the Ulster Cycle’s *Tain Bo Cuailgne*¹²¹ or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* which suggests among its many themes that greater reverence was due to the druids than to the king.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Atherton, “Saxon or Celt,” 80.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 356.

¹²¹ McInnes, “Celtic Deities and Heroes,” 268.

¹²² Roth and Duval, “Celtic Lands,” 356.

Through the Myth of the White Sow

When it comes to the White Sow as a symbol embodying Celtic and Christian ideas about spiritual and socio-political matters, Karen Jankulak, Director of Arthurian Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter as well as a part-time lecturer in the university's Department of Welsh, asserts that perhaps too much has been made of swine as a pagan symbol in what are essentially Christian stories.¹²³ After all, as she notes, pigs "inhabit wasteland"¹²⁴ which "makes them ideal for . . . marking out unclaimed territory"¹²⁵ as the White Sow does for Saint Brannoc in the Devonshire myth. It is the pig's practicality, Jankulak believes, that may make the animal an ideal feature in these kinds of myths, rather than as symbols with any important meaning. Additionally, since Saint Brannoc is not the only Celtic saint with attendant swine, she sees "a borrowing"¹²⁶ between hagiographies rather than the sow/boar/piglet acting as indicator of an "inherent 'Celticity' of the motif."¹²⁷ Tales of sow/boar/piglet encounters, she believes, illustrate "distinct affinities with non-hagiographical Celtic literature"¹²⁸ as

¹²³ Karen Jankulak, "Alba Longa in the Celtic Regions? Swine, Saints and Celtic Hagiography," in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 281.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 280.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

well, and in her article “Alba Longa in the Celtic Regions? Swine, Saints and Celtic Hagiography” she makes a fascinating connection between these myths and their previously unnoticed relationship to classical works, specifically the *Aeneid*.¹²⁹

Still, “animal helpers form a broad category”¹³⁰ and have played a role in myths and stories of saints since the Celts encountered the Egyptian monastic tradition during Roman rule.¹³¹ These animals include cows and oxen¹³² as well as swine, plus many other wild and domestic species. A female wolf is said to have saved Saint Ailbe from death when he was left on a hillside as an infant,¹³³ a pair of stags supposedly pulled the cart bearing the wounded Saint Tewdric to the well at Tintern,¹³⁴ and tradition says Saint Brigid, Abbess of Kildare, “owned a cow which would give milk sufficient for her needs at any time.”¹³⁵

The first written account of a saint’s encounter with swine is Saint Paul Aurélien’s biography, penned by Wrmonoc in 884 CE.¹³⁶ Devon custom, however, and the website sponsored in part by the Church of England identify 550 CE as the date

¹²⁹ Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 281.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹³¹ Leatham, *They Built on Rock*, 14.

¹³² Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 279.

¹³³ Toulson, *The Celtic Year*, 221.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³⁶ Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 273.

Brannoc met the White Sow.¹³⁷ Though any structure that may have been built in that year is long gone, the present church building “dates from the Norman period,”¹³⁸ specifically the thirteenth century,¹³⁹ and is said to be situated on the site where worshippers first gathered in 550 CE.¹⁴⁰ A roof boss featuring the sow and her piglets, and presumably Norman as well, commemorates the establishment of the church¹⁴¹ along with carved end-caps on “magnificent pews . . . introduced at six intervals between 1560 and 1593.”¹⁴² These are newly restored after a “recent catastrophic fire”¹⁴³ and are a testament to the importance of the White Sow myth to the residents of this Devon town through the last thousand years and even today, if not in Late Antiquity.

Jankulak notes that the founding of a church after a swine encounter is a familiar event in the hagiographies of several Celtic saints.¹⁴⁴ In these accounts, as in the myth of Saint Brannoc and the White Sow, the saint searches for a site to establish a

¹³⁷ History of St. Brannock’s Church, “Brannoc,” Church of England and the Parish of Braunton, <http://www.brauntonchurch.org/page29.html> (accessed 14 March 2012).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Toulson, *The Celtic Year*, 62.

¹⁴² History of St. Brannock’s Church, “Brannoc,” Church of England and the Parish of Braunton, <http://www.brauntonchurch.org/page29.html> (accessed 14 March 2012).

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 272.

church.¹⁴⁵ An angel appears and instructs the saint to watch for “one or more domestic pigs or wild swine.”¹⁴⁶ There is a subsequent encounter with the animal or animals, and the saint founds a church in that place.¹⁴⁷ In these stories, swine are “signs of God’s will.”¹⁴⁸ These myths exist throughout the insular Celtic world, from Ireland to Scotland to Wales, and are even found in accounts of some saints in Brittany, which is Saint Brannoc’s traditional point of debarkation.¹⁴⁹ In some instances, stories from Cornwall and Devon “digress considerably from the pattern”¹⁵⁰ in that the sow or boar leads to a plot of land that will be donated,¹⁵¹ but this not the case with Saint Brannoc and his White Sow. Another variation is found in the story of Saint Cadog, where a swan is as important to the story as the requisite boar.¹⁵² If the swan ever connoted a symbolic meaning for those who told the tale, however, that meaning is now lost, though in other Celtic myths swans were transformed human beings.¹⁵³ Pigs, on the other hand “had a

¹⁴⁵ Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 272.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 275.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 272.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 273.

¹⁵² Ibid., 276.

¹⁵³ McInnes, “Celtic Deities and Heroes,” 263.

particular significance for the Celts, who associated them with the Other World.”¹⁵⁴

Also, “in Irish and Welsh traditions, swineherds, despite their servile occupation, have great gifts of prophecy, giving them curious status in courtly society. In short, pigs, and particularly sows, were thought to be possessed of wisdom that humankind did well to heed.”¹⁵⁵

While Jankulak is resistant to the idea of swine as symbol in these myths, several of these stories, including the account of Saint Brannoc and his White Sow, feature well-known and often-analyzed symbols, namely a sea voyage and a craft sometimes described as a “stone coffin.”¹⁵⁶ The boat, particularly in the case of Saint Brendan and his legendary voyage, is often viewed as being “symbolic of the imperfection of the body of the community”¹⁵⁷ and is “a simple retarding factor in the voyage to an ‘unfallen’ place.”¹⁵⁸ Mark Atherton sees “exile on the sea as an equivalent to the traditional hermit’s desert.”¹⁵⁹ Saint Patrick is said to have ordered Macc Cuill to sea in a rudderless boat to repent of his sins.¹⁶⁰ This language and these symbols are

¹⁵⁴ Toulson, *The Celtic Year*, 62.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Jonathan M. Wooding, “Fasting, Flesh and the Body in the St Brendan Dossier,” in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 164.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Atherton, “Saxon or Celt,” 93.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

clearly meaningful to the people in a political context as well since the 891 Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a political document rather than a religious one, reports that “three Irish holy men arrived at the court of King Alfred having set themselves adrift in a boat without oars or rudder.”¹⁶¹ Surely then, with these symbols playing an important role in the message of the myth, the White Sow is a symbol as well.

Jankulak, however, rules out swine as symbol because of the use—or lack thereof—of color words as symbol in many of the myths. She observes that frequently the animal’s coloration is omitted,¹⁶² but when mentioned, the color “is always some variation on white.”¹⁶³ She argues, then, that the pig’s white description does not communicate a meaning of “otherworld, Celtic (that is, pagan) nature”¹⁶⁴ since the ears and feet typically are not red as they are in the myths of supernatural animals. Perhaps she is thinking of Anwnn’s mystical hounds, the red-eared dogs that are intrinsically linked to death. Yet, this use of red and white may be a case in which the tenets of Claude Lévi-Strauss apply.

In the myth of Anwnn’s dogs, the color word red is part of a Lévi-Strauss contrasting pair. The dogs’ bodies are uniform color and the ears are red.¹⁶⁵ In another

¹⁶¹ Atherton, “Saxon or Celt,” 93.

¹⁶² Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 277.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ McInnes, “Celtic Deities and Heroes,” 261.

myth featuring dogs, “nine white hounds”¹⁶⁶ belong to Da Derga, literally named “Red God.”¹⁶⁷ Da Derga will claim the life of High King Conaire and Conaire will meet this foretold fate “despite various omens such as three riders in red on red horses.”¹⁶⁸ In these myths, white and red are a contrasting pair. The symbolic meaning of one of the color words sheds light on the meaning of the other. Since red is the word most closely linked with death, white symbolizes the paranormal but nothing sinister, and therefore could still be symbolic when modifying the swine of the saints’ tales. In other words, the sow/boar/piglet’s color does not prevent it from acting as a symbol in and of itself.

Summary

By the end of her article “Alba Longa in the Celtic Regions? Swine, Saints and Celtic Hagiography,” Karen Jankulak poses an extremely interesting thought. She suggests that perhaps pigs were not the original creatures spoken of in the myths about church founding.¹⁶⁹ In “the earliest vernacular Life of St. Brigit,”¹⁷⁰ which appears based on an older Latin text, the saint cares for sheep.¹⁷¹ Yet in the later, colloquial

¹⁶⁶ McInnes, “Celtic Deities and Heroes,” 261.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 263.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 281.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

version, the livestock are said to be pigs.¹⁷² Jankulak suggests this change provides much to ponder—and she is right. Perhaps the sheep were changed to swine to better symbolize an idea that is now lost.

Like the metaphorical bird in the Saxon hall, the White Sow is the nexus between Celtic ways of thinking, the foreign ideals of Christianity, the traditional Celtic way of life, and imposing social and political pressures. It is very likely the Roman invasion of Gaul, and the accompanying Roman pantheon, made adaptations of their myths and symbols acceptable to the Celtic people. By altering their mythic concepts further, all that is Celtic, and all that is symbolized by the White Sow, could co-exist with Saint Brannoc and the foreign ways of thinking he represented. For the Devon Celts, coexisting with and perhaps converting to Christianity during a time of pending Saxon invasion is made all right by the endurance of a Celtic symbol and all it represents. For the Devonshire Celt, assimilation was no longer a loss because the myth of the White Sow modeled the process and endured.

¹⁷² Jankulak, “Alba Longa,” 281.

CHAPTER 5

THE MAGYARS AND THEIR WHITE STAG

Not long after the myth of Saint Brannoc and his encounter with the White Sow first entered the annals of recorded history, the Magyars seized lands that would become present-day Hungary. An aggressive warrior society by many accounts, their myth of the delicate and extraordinarily beautiful White Stag affected their culture for centuries to come. This dichotomy between warfare and peaceful beauty married in a single myth is the basis of this study's second theory. In essence, the Magyars' myth of the unattainable white Miracle Stag enabled them to justify warfare and conquer lands occupied by other peoples. To test this idea, this chapter will review the history of the Magyars and their emergence from the steppes of Russia as well as examine their primary myths and symbols. These will be set against the historical context of Magyar culture and conflict. To begin, however, this paper will present three versions of the myth of the White Stag.

Adam Makkai, editor of *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag': The Poetry of Hungary*, published to commemorate the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the founding of that nation, looks to the long literary tradition of his compatriots for accounts of the White Stag. In his view, the myth of the White Stag begins in Asia with two high-born men:

The great Oriental King, Nimrod, had two sons, Hunor and Magor. They went hunting one day and saw a creature that was snow white and had golden antlers—it was both female and male, 'hind' and 'stag.' It lured them farther and farther into the West, where the hunting grounds were richer and the land more fertile. The sons of Hunor became the Huns,

and the sons of Magor became the Magyars, the Hungarians.¹

Miklós Molnár, author of *A Concise History of Hungary*, views the Magyars' "mythical journey to the new homeland"² differently, and as a result, cites a variation of the tale. Through "collective memory"³ and details "documented in the *Gesta Hungarorum*, lost in its original version but recorded in later chronicles,"⁴ Molnár's Hunor and Magor are not the offspring of Nimrod, but are the sons of two Scythian kings, Gog and Magog.⁵ Perhaps for those telling this variant it is important that the heroes of the story be cousins rather than brothers. In any case, while hunting, they spot a stag.⁶ Molnár cites no mention of its color. Following the animal until they are lost near the Azov Sea adjacent to the Black Sea, but struck by the beauty and abundance of the area, Hunor and Magor stay. On another hunting expedition, they take women as prisoners and, discovering the daughters of the Alain prince Dula among them, make these two their wives.⁷ After a time of prosperity, the Azov region becomes crowded

¹ Adam Makkai, "Introduction," in *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag': The Poetry of Hungary*, ed. Adam Makkai (Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur, 1996), xiii.

² Miklós Molnár, *A Concise History of Hungary*, trans. Anna Magyar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

and they go in search of new lands,⁸ presumably the area that was to become Hungary. By this account, Attila the Hun and the later ruling class of Hungary are their descendants.⁹

Molnár posits that this version splices “the very likely memory of an abode near the Azov Sea with the improbable legend of a family connection with Attila’s Huns.”¹⁰ For Makkai, on the other hand, the white Miracle Stag led the Magyars to the site of today’s Hungary where they arrived in the year 896 CE, not to a dimly-remembered settlement by the sea. From this point, Makkai’s telling of legend continues, noting that “some people could see the miraculous creature flying in the air. They saw the stag with the huge golden antlers between which it carried the Sun and Moon.”¹¹

With the peoples’ conversion to Christianity in 1000 CE, “once again the ‘Miracle Stag’ appeared. It had burning candles on the tips of its antlers—it was, in fact, a living cathedral of the very messenger of the Virgin Mary and of Jesus Christ himself.”¹² Makkai views this as an amalgamation of “ancient Oriental Shamanism blended with the Christianity of Europe.”¹³ Yet, in this variation, the Magyars’ myth of

⁸ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 11.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Makkai, “Introduction,” xiii.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

the White Stag might serve a similar purpose to the Devon Celts' account of the White Sow by combining traditional views with new Christian ideas and thereby making change acceptable without sacrificing traditional ideals. Historian András Gergely notes, however, that among the Magyars there was little resistance to the coming of Christianity.¹⁴ Rather, the only opposition was a political power struggle as “semi-barbarian chieftains, who had nominally converted to Christianity”¹⁵ clashed with future king, saint and Christianity's champion, Stephen.¹⁶ This evidence that such political concerns occupied the forefront of Magyar culture, while the mythos of Christianity was not an issue, strengthens the assertion that the myth of the White Stag served the Magyars in their political policy concerns.

A Brief History of the Magyars

The Magyars are a mystery. Little is known about them prior to their settlement in Eastern Europe and their subsequent conquering of the Carpathian basin at the dawn of the Middle Ages. The name Magyar does not appear in written records before 830 CE.¹⁷ As late as 862 Carolingian documents note that Magyar horsemen, “who had been

¹⁴ András Gergely, “Early Feudalism: The Kingdom of the Árpáds (1000-1301),” in *A Companion to Hungarian Studies*, ed. László Kósa (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999), 115.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 10.

unknown before,”¹⁸ launched a surprise raid on Frankish territory.¹⁹ Long before this, though, the Magyars inhabited the Ural region, specifically “western Siberia.”²⁰ Linguists tracing the development of the group that gave rise to the Magyars’ ancestors date their emergence as a distinctive group to about 2000 BCE.²¹ The Magyars split from that body in about 500 BCE.²² Their specific ethnic make-up and the exact route of the nomadic travels that brought them to the Carpathians are unclear,²³ although their lexicon picked up Iranian and Turkish-Bulgar words along the way.²⁴ Magyar descendents speak Hungarian, which as a language “belongs to the Ugric subgroup of the Uralic family of languages,”²⁵ or more specifically “Finno-Ugric.”²⁶ This tongue is not related other Germanic, Romance, or Near Eastern languages,²⁷ yet is linked to languages spoken far to the north of their eventual settlement, namely Finnish and

¹⁸ Charles R. Bowlus, *Franks, Moravians, and Magyars: The Struggle for the Middle Danube, 788-907* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 236.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ Adam Makkai and Earl M. Herrick, “A Note on the Hungarian Language: Provenance, Spelling, and Pronunciation,” in *In Quest of the ‘Miracle Stag’: the Poetry of Hungary*, ed. Adam Makkai (Chicago: Atlantis-Centaur, 1996), xxvi.

²⁶ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Estonian.²⁸

Throughout Late Antiquity and into the early Middle Ages, the Magyars “must have been militarily formidable.”²⁹ Molnár draws this conclusion based on the vast area the Magyar territory covered from the Russian steppes, through the Ukraine, and into the Carpathian region,³⁰ as well as accounts from the court of Byzantine Emperor Leo the Philosopher, who contracted with the Magyars to defend his holdings from invaders.³¹ Likewise, Carolingian king Arnulf of Carinthia relied on Magyar support when he invaded Moravia.³² In league with other groups or on their own, the Magyars “attacked Moravia on several different occasions, Bulgaria . . . Italy . . . and Bavaria, under the pretense of making peace”³³ over a period of fifteen years.³⁴ By 850 CE, the Magyars had established the city of Etelköz near the Volga or the lower Danube Rivers, though its exact location is not known currently, and were no longer under the dominion of other kingdoms.³⁵ As they moved into the Carpathian basin, “the country was a kind of crossroads of peoples and military marches, divided between eastern Franks, the

²⁸ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Bowlus, *Franks, Moravians, and Magyars*, 235.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 10.

Moravians, the Bulgars and what was left of the Avars”³⁶ as well as home to a “significant Slav population.”³⁷

From that time at the dawn of the Middle Ages to the end of World War I, “Hungary’s history unfolded in the Carpathian basin; then it was confined with a smaller territory, that of today’s Hungary.”³⁸ The borders of modern Hungary were drawn under the directive of the 1920 Versailles-Trianon Peace Treaty that marked the conclusion of the Great War.³⁹ Adam Makkai, writing with Earl M. Herrick, calls this treaty and its resulting realignment of territory a “tragedy”⁴⁰ since about one third, or approximately five million, Hungarian-speakers live in lands that once belonged to Hungary⁴¹ but now fall outside the country. As a result, the “majority of Hungary’s leading poets were born outside of today’s Hungary.”⁴² To Makkai’s mind, these writers who are cultural Hungarians but live in other nation-states due to political intervention are the keepers of his people’s primary myth, the white Miracle Stag.

³⁶ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁹ Makkai and Herrick, “Note on the Hungarian Language,” xxvi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Magyar Myths and Symbols

“It is difficult,” writes Aurélien Sauvageot, author of the chapter “Finland-Ugria: Magic Animals” in *Larousse World Mythology*, “to obtain a clear idea of Uralian mythology in the period when the Uralian peoples still formed a unit.”⁴³ Consequently, identifying original Magyar myths and symbols is a challenge. The late development of the individual languages within the Uralian group, combined with the early, undocumented departure of some cultures from their common root, mean information about their earliest myths, symbols, and rituals is scanty.⁴⁴ The Uralians, being nomadic, “maintained more or less constant contact with many other peoples”⁴⁵ and so knew of the beliefs of other groups “even in very early times.”⁴⁶ As a result, “each race of Uralian origin developed its own more or less composite mythology.”⁴⁷

Perhaps Adam Makkai best captures this idea of a composite mythology when he asserts the Magyars “were shamanists and warriors who terrorized Europe for over a century”⁴⁸ before growing into the Hungarians of more recent history. Sauvageot notes that researchers have been able to pinpoint fundamental elements of Uralian mythology

⁴³ Aurélien Sauvageot, “Finland-Ugria: Magic Animals,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 423.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Makkai, “Introduction,” xiii.

and that shamanism was certainly central to it.⁴⁹ Shamanism itself, however, “was not native”⁵⁰ to them and may have been adopted from Siberian peoples.⁵¹ Regardless of the origin of these elements, however, the “ancient Hungarians,”⁵² or the Magyars, incorporated the fundamentals of shamanism into their rituals:

. . . believed in the power of sorcerers, who followed certain procedures and performed certain rites in order to enter into communication with spirits from both heaven and hell . . . They could leave their own bodies and fly up into the sky or down below the earth. They could also be embodied in different animals: birds, serpents, or magic stags, for example.⁵³

Among other motifs, hunts for elk, reindeer, or stags figure prominently.⁵⁴ These creatures often escape their pursuers, leaping away, even into the heavens where they become constellations.⁵⁵ Some specialists in Hungarian Studies, however, view Magyar magical stag myths as “reflected totemism”⁵⁶ meaning the deer motif originally communicated the peoples’ common familial or tribal relationship to outsiders, but was adopted—and adapted—by the Magyars at some point in their pre-history. If this is the

⁴⁹ Sauvageot, “Finland-Ugria: Magic Animals,” 423.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 429.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 426.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 429.

case, the motif is likely of Turkish derivation.⁵⁷ Hungarian Studies experts base this theory on the fact that Hunor and Magor's mother is sometimes said to be Enech, the ancient root of which is identical with the modern Hungarian word *uno* or, in English, heifer.⁵⁸ As a result, the original meaning conveyed by this aspect of the myth may have been that the Magyars viewed themselves as the children of a mother deer.⁵⁹ Not only is such totemism found in the Turkic culture with which the Magyars had contact, but the ancient form of Enech is actually a Turkish word.⁶⁰ It is difficult, then, with the possibility of this link to a "magic hind"⁶¹ myth to determine if the stag motif is original to Magyar/Uralian culture.⁶²

The meanings inherent in White Stag symbolism may have commonalities with other cultures the Magyars are known to have encountered as well. In his article "Colour Symbolism in Turkish and Azeri Folk Literature," Seyfi Agirel compares and contrasts his findings to David Hunt's observations of the symbolism in Caucasus folk literature. Agirel notes that "the Huns, one of the earliest Turkic tribes, associated white

⁵⁷ Sauvageot, "Finland-Ugria: Magic Animals," 429.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

with power and justice”⁶³ in their tales. Additionally, they “also associated the colour white with the West.”⁶⁴ The Huns, though, were not alone in this. As Agirel asserts, “In Chinese culture, white also represents the West, and this appears to be the situation, too, among the Mongols.”⁶⁵ The Magyars were certainly in contact with Turkic tribes and if they adopted any mythic or symbolic elements, they may have adopted these meanings for the color word white.

Through the Myth of the White Stag

It is in these ideas—that for the Magyars the color word white is representative of the West and that the glorious creature that was both hind and stag is representative of themselves as a people—that this study’s theory about the myth of the White Stag empowering Magyar conquest comes together. Certainly the fabled Hunor and Magor follow the mythic White Stag westward from their father(s) house(s) in the steppes to the coasts of the Azov Sea or the site of Hungary itself. Likewise, when it comes to the historical record, Molnár describes the Magyars’ migration and subsequent military campaigns as moving “ever westward.”⁶⁶ Though not in so many words, even Makkai recognizes the myth as sanctioning Magyar military might. He writes, “In all its

⁶³ Seyfi Agirel, “Colour Symbolism in Turkish and Azeri Folk Literature,” *Folklore* 120 (April 2009): 94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Molnár, *Concise History of Hungary*, 9.

incarnations, the image of the ‘Miracle Stag’ is a perennial symbol of an Oriental people whose destiny it was to become European and to act as the guardians of the West—against the Tartar invasion of the 13th century, the Turkish invasion of the 16th of the 17th, and the Soviet Communist invasion of the 20th century.”⁶⁷

In language identical to Molnár’s, Makkai states that the White Stag as a poetic theme “prances ever westward.”⁶⁸ He notes that “it has appeared in Germany, France, and England.”⁶⁹ Where he sees other nations’ use of the White Stag motif as “giving voice to the poetry of Hungary,”⁷⁰ however, it may be that the others wished the myth to fulfill the same role for their armies that it did for the Magyars over the centuries and justify conquest.

No where is this more apparent than in the French epic poem, *The Song of Roland*. According to Kate Milner Rabb, author of *National Epics*, *The Song of Roland* is to France and French culture what *Beowulf* or *Paradise Lost* are to English.⁷¹ Epic poetry, she believes, “originated among tribes of barbarians”⁷² and *The Song of Roland* “is one of many medieval romances that celebrate the deeds of Charlemagne.”⁷³ It was

⁶⁷ Makkai, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kate Milner Rabb, *National Epics* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 4.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 193.

first written down in or around the year 1096,⁷⁴ but was recited or performed “long before this”⁷⁵ and is based on an actual battle dating to August 778.⁷⁶ Charlemagne’s forces lost in their attempt to seize Gascon land at Roncesvaux at that time,⁷⁷ but the theme of westward military campaign harkens back to the same basic element in the Magyars’ white Miracle Stag myth. Even more so, the passage recounting Charlemagne’s encounter with the White Stag echoes Hunor and Magor’s adventure.

With the close contact between Carolingian kings and the Magyars at the start of the Medieval Period, it is easy to see how Hungarian themes could have made their way into this epic poem. The description of *Roland’s* White Stag is most striking and its similarity to the Magyars’ account is remarkable, even in translation. James Baldwin renders the verses in English, first recounting Charlemagne’s pressing need to reach Italy through the Alps.⁷⁸ The way, though, was difficult and Malagis, a goblin, cast a spell to make the way harder.⁷⁹ As Bishop Turpin prayed for safe transit, however, the heavens opened, the birds sang, the mountains appeared as “gentle slopes.”⁸⁰

. . . while Charlemagne and his peers gazed in rapt delight upon this

⁷⁴ Rabb, *National Epics*, 193.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ James Baldwin, *The Story of Roland* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 64.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

vision, there came down from the mountain crags a beautiful creature such as none of them had ever before seen. It was a noble stag, white as the drifted snow, his head crowned with wide-branching antlers, from every point of which bright sunbeams seemed to flash.⁸¹

Here, the parallels between King Charlemagne and noble Hunor and Magor, the use of the term ‘creature’ in both stories, the comparisons of the animal’s coat to snow, the mention of its magnificent antlers, and the antlers’ golden description are noteworthy in the very least. The fact that the White Stag makes an appearance in a French epic poem glorifying a legendary king and his westward campaign of conquest serves to drive home the point the original Magyar White Stag myth is truly a tale justifying warfare against western neighbors.

Summary

“Hungary’s poets,” according to Adam Makkai, “have been pursuing the ‘Miracle Stag’ for over seven centuries, each according to his or her vision.”⁸² Perhaps this concept of ‘his or her own vision’ is the key to the relationship between the medieval Magyars and their myth of the White Stag as well. By interpreting the symbols within the White Stag myth as justification of their westerly push, the Magyars could be at peace within themselves, if not with their neighbors. In addition, the adoption and adaptation of the White Stag in the French epic *The Song of Roland* certainly speaks to this white animal tale’s power of validation if not the power of

⁸¹ Baldwin, *Story of Roland*, 65.

⁸² Makkai, “Introduction,” xiii.

humankind's selective interpretation. After all, Donald Philip Verene, editor of the essays of Ernst Cassirer, observes that "the symbolizing power of the human world makes possible the ethical."⁸³

If the Magyars used their white animal myth to establish the ethical in a world rife with warfare, and the Devonshire Celts used their white animal myth to describe the acceptable in a world of social and political change, how then did the Lakota use the myth of their White Buffalo at the start of the Modern Age? In the midst of World War II, Cassirer postulated that in the politics of the Modern Age, myth "was no longer a free and spontaneous play of imagination. It was regulated and organized; it was adjusted to political needs and used for concrete political ends."⁸⁴ Did the Lakota, then, reinterpret their white animal myth as the Magyars did, or as the Celts? The next chapter will explore this question and more.

⁸³ Donald Philip Verene, "Introduction" in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

⁸⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 234.

CHAPTER 6

THE LAKOTA AND THEIR WHITE BUFFALO

Hugh Brodie, author of “North America’s Mother Earth, Father Sky” in *Mythology: the Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, writes that “the Native American attitude to the natural world is highly complex.”¹ Indeed, their relationship to the United States government throughout the nineteenth century is complex as well. This chapter will explore the importance of the White Buffalo to the Lakota people during that time—and the possibility that the myth’s symbols and meaning fostered an attitude of rebellion against United States governmental policies in the late 1800s—by beginning with the myth of White Buffalo Woman as told by John Flame Lane Deer, a resident of the Rosebud Indian Reservation, South Dakota, in 1967.²

A general history of the Lakota will follow, along with a canvass of their myths and symbols. Next, this chapter will analyze what was arguably the most intense period of conflict for the Lakota, the years leading to their confrontation with army forces at Wounded Knee. Finally, this chapter will examine the role the myth of White Buffalo Woman may have played during that time, as well as the White Buffalo’s continued role for the Lakota today. After all, unlike the Devon Celts, who are no longer a

¹ Hugh Brodie, “North America’s Mother Earth, Father Sky,” in *Mythology: the Illustrated Anthology of World Myth and Storytelling*, ed. C. Scott Littleton (New York: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2007), 502.

² Richard Erdoes and Alfonzo Ortiz, *American Indian Myths and Legends* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 52.

distinctive group but a parent culture of the modern people of the British Isles and elsewhere, and the medieval Magyars, whose descendents are now the Hungarians after a millennium of cultural adaptations, the Lakota remain a vital culture throughout the United States and Canada. For many within that culture, their myths and symbols are very much alive.

Over a hundred and fifty years ago, though, as the traditional world of the Lakota began to disappear, some like James R. Walker sought to understand their myths, symbols, and rituals within the context of their communities.³ Walker was a physician employed by the United States government and assigned to the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota from 1896 to 1914.⁴ During that time, “the old men instructed Walker in their traditional religion.”⁵ Perhaps most importantly, though, Walker encouraged the Lakota themselves to record their views of their own ways.⁶ He sought their confirmation of the facts he intended to publish, an approach not common among anthropologists of the period.⁷ As a result, his work is considered authoritative⁸ and his method has been followed by others. For Walker, three rituals, the Sun Dance,

³ James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), xiii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁸ Ibid.

the *Hunka*, and the *Tatanka Lowanpi* or Buffalo Ceremony, lived at the heart of Lakota culture.⁹ All involve aspects of the myth of the White Buffalo and White Buffalo Woman. In the mid-twentieth century, Richard Erodes and Alfonso Ortiz followed Walker's example, seeking accounts of Native American myths, legends, and folktales from the people.¹⁰

Erodes and Ortiz' recording of John Flame Lame Deer's recitation of White Buffalo Woman is perhaps the best known. This account is considered the Brulé version,¹¹ the Brulé being a subset of the Lakota.¹² The story begins with the establishment of a time period for the tale. Listeners are told these events occurred "one summer so long ago that nobody knows how long . . ." and that "at that time the Sioux didn't yet have horses."¹³ This could allude a period before the arrival Spanish who introduced horses into the Americas in the sixteenth century,¹⁴ though the mention of time need not be literal. Vine Deloria Jr., professor, activist, and Indian spokesperson, observes that "while the Indians who lived in Central America had extensive calendars,

⁹ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 175.

¹⁰ Erodes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

the practice of recording history was not a popular one further north.”¹⁵ He expands on this, saying, “The western preoccupation with history and a chronological description of reality was not a dominant factor in any tribal conception of either time or history.”¹⁶ This in no way lessens the importance of such stories for the culture, however. As noted in the opening chapter of this study, members of Native American communities distinguish between tales told for entertainment and those about the past.¹⁷ Tales of the past, even about an unspecified period, carry great weight because they are understood to be different than those told solely for amusement.

In the myth of White Buffalo Woman, two young men are sent to hunt for food during a time of famine.¹⁸ From a high place, they spot an approaching person who “was floating instead of walking.”¹⁹ Because of this, “they knew the person was *wakan*, holy.”²⁰ The story continues:

At first they could make out only a small moving speck and had to squint to see that it was a human form. But as it came nearer, they realized that it was a beautiful young woman, more beautiful than any they had ever seen, with two round, red dots of face paint on her cheeks. She wore a wonderful white buckskin outfit, tanned until it shone a long way in the

¹⁵ Vine Deloria Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 98.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stith Thompson, “Myths and Folktales,” in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 173.

¹⁸ Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 48.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

sun. It was embroidered with sacred and marvelous designs of porcupine quill, in radiant colors no ordinary woman could have made. This *wakan* stranger was Ptesan-Wi, White Buffalo Woman. In her hands she carried a large bundle and a fan of sage leaves. She wore her blue-black hair loose except for a strand at the left side which was tied up with buffalo fur. Her eyes shone dark and sparkling, with great power in them.²¹

One of the young men is killed—and reduced to bones—when he lusts after her.²² The other young man, though, is sent to his village to prepare for her.²³ When she joins the people there, she instructs them in many aspects of worship.²⁴ She “show[s] the people the right way to pray”²⁵ and perhaps most importantly, she gives them the “*chanunpa*, the sacred pipe.”²⁶ She teaches them to use it “because through it you can talk to Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery Spirit.”²⁷ Before she departs, she tells the Lakota “that they were the purest among the tribes, and for that reason *Tunkashila* had bestowed upon them the holy *chanunpa*. They had been chosen to take care of it for all the Indian people on this turtle continent.”²⁸

²¹ Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 48.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

White Buffalo Woman cautions the chief never to forget the pipe is holy.²⁹ She promises to return in “every generation cycle.”³⁰ To the people, she says, “*Toksha ake wacinyanktin ktelo*—I shall see you again.”³¹ She then departs:

As she went, she stopped and rolled over four times. The first time, she turned into a black buffalo; the second time into a brown one; the third into a red one; and finally, the fourth time she ruled over she turned into a white female buffalo calf. A white buffalo is the most sacred living thing you could ever encounter. The White Buffalo Woman disappeared over the horizon. Sometime she might come back. As soon as she had vanished, buffalo in great herds appeared, allowing themselves to be killed so that the people might survive. And from that day on, our relations, the buffalo, furnished the people with everything they needed—meat for food, skins for their clothes and tipis, bones for their many tools.³²

According to Joseph Campbell, variations include a version where the White Buffalo Woman brings seed-grain along with the pipe and an adaptation where maize sprouts as milk drips from the udder of the White Buffalo.³³ In at least one account, White Buffalo Woman rolls only three times, and her final transformation is into the black buffalo,³⁴ like those that roamed the Plains. In any case, the visitation by White Buffalo Woman is foundational, the giving of the pipe and rituals are central, and the

²⁹ Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology Volume One: The Way of the Animal Powers* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 225.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

fact that both she and the Lakota are described as “*wakan*, holy”³⁵ or “*lila wakan*, very sacred”³⁶ were vital to Lakota culture in the past and even presently.

A Brief History of the Lakota

Archeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Lakota and other Native Americans crossed into the North American continent as successive waves of “hunting tribes”³⁷ via an exposed land mass in the Bering Sea³⁸ from c. 80,000 BCE to 7,000 BCE.³⁹ This history makes the American Indian ethnically different than other North American peoples, namely “Aleuts and Eskimos.”⁴⁰ Until the modern era, the Native Americans were linked to the Stone Age in ways many other cultures no longer were⁴¹ through living a hunter/gatherer existence that was often nomadic. By the mid-eighteenth century “the Sioux were the dominant tribe from Minnesota to the Rockies and from the Yellowstone River to the Platte, with millions of buffalo to sustain them and thousands of horses.”⁴² They were “comprised of three divisions, the Lakota or

³⁵ Erdoes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 232.

Teton-Wan, the Dakota, and the Nakota,”⁴³ though Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner, editors of the latest editions of Walker’s work, stress that such divisions were and are “English convention.”⁴⁴ Amongst themselves, the name Lakota can refer to all Sioux.⁴⁵

Traditionally, the Sioux refer to their people as *Ikche-Wichasha*,⁴⁶ or “the Real Natural Human Beings.”⁴⁷ Erodes and Ortiz characterize the Lakota as “hard-riding, buffalo-hunting Plains Indians . . . the people of Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, this description of the Lakota of the past meets with an observation of the Lakota in the late twentieth century. Erodes and Ortiz write that “[the Lakota] worship Wakan Tanka—Tunkashila, the grandfather spirit—pray with the sacred pipe, go on vision quests involving a four-day-and-night fast, and still practice self-torture (piercing) during the sun dance, the most solemn of all Plains rituals”⁴⁹ at least through the 1970s.

Long before their move to the Great Plains the Lakota inhabited the “South

⁴³ Erodes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 517.

⁴⁴ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, xxv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Erodes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 517.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Atlantic slope”⁵⁰ along with the Iroquois. Linguistic markers indicate these two tribes may be distantly related.⁵¹ Joseph Campbell notes that the Lakota lived near the headwaters of the Mississippi River during the 1600s,⁵² but “were driven to the Plains when their neighbors, the Ojibwa, acquired firearms from the French.”⁵³ The late 1800s is now looked upon as the period of greatest conflict for the Lakota, and indeed for all Native American peoples of the central United States. As Campbell writes, “The stunning three decades from 1860 to 1890 were, for every one of the Plains tribes, an irretrievable disaster.”⁵⁴ Erodes and Ortiz describe this period in Lakota history:

Originally friendly to the whites, the Lakota fought hard when they were finally forced to defend their ancient hunting grounds. They defeated General Crook at Rosebud, and annihilated Custer on the Little Bighorn. They fought their last battle against overwhelming odds, and in the face of quick-firing cannon, at Wounded Knee in 1890.⁵⁵

The Lakota are far from extinct, however. Unlike the descendants of the Celts who now belong to a variety of countries, or the medieval Magyars who grew into modern Hungary, the Sioux are very much a nation today. In the twenty-first century, Sioux such as Charlotte Black Elk, great-granddaughter of the legendary Black Elk and

⁵⁰ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 232.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Erodes and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 517.

an activist for the safeguarding of sites sacred to the Lakota like the Black Hills,⁵⁶ and Anthony Guy Lopez, an expert regarding federal Indian law,⁵⁷ still pursue their traditional lifestyle and work to defend their culture.

Lakota Myths and Symbols

When considering the myths and symbols of the American Indian, Joseph Campbell believes “an important distinction”⁵⁸ exists “between the mythologies of Old Stone Age tribes inhabiting the great animal plains of postglacial Europe, Siberia, and North America, and those of the jungles of the tropical equatorial belt, where plants, not animals, have been the chief source of substance, and women, not men, the dominant providers.”⁵⁹ Consequently, for indigenous North Americans, “survival without animals would have been impossible.”⁶⁰ On the Great Plains, “meat, skin, bone, sinew, feather and ivory supplied almost all the essential needs of daily existence.”⁶¹ As a result, a “body of practical know-how was underpinned by a rich fund of myth, legend, songs

⁵⁶ Huston Smith, *A Seat at the Table: Huston Smith in Conversation with Native Americans on Religious Freedom*, ed. Phil Cousineau and Gary Rhine (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 59.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁸ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Brodie, “North America’s Mother Earth,” 512.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

and rituals, which placed a hunter's actions in context."⁶²

Relating to the natural world—particularly the world of animals—“was essential”⁶³ for the Lakota and all other American Indian peoples. As a result, M. Bouteiller, author of “North America: Spirits of Good and Evil” in *Larousse World Mythology* sees a “principal common denominator”⁶⁴ between the myths of Native Americans in “the very active role assigned a body of protective or evil spirits.”⁶⁵ Bouteiller recommends viewing Native American myth through the lens of structural anthropology as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁶⁶ With Lévi-Strauss' tenets in mind, Bouteiller forms a straight-forward view of American Indian myth:

Native American mythology follows symmetrically constructed patterns in which protectors are contrasted with monsters, heaven with earth, the living with the dead, male with female, ‘nature’ (hunting, wild crops and raw food) with ‘culture’ (maize-farming, cooked food and prepared food-stuffs). Aware of these contrasts, North American mythology attempts ultimately to mediate between them⁶⁷

Additionally, Bouteiller suggests readers of Native American myth be aware of and recognize “regional variations.”⁶⁸ This means some motifs and symbols may be more

⁶² Brodie, “North America's Mother Earth,” 512.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ M. Bouteiller, “North America: Spirits of Good and Evil,” in *Larousse World Mythology*, ed. Pierre Grimal (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 449.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 455.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 449.

meaningful in some subcultures, and even nonexistent in others.

In general, for example, Hugh Brodie notes that for Native Americans “some animals—notably the buffalo, eagle and bear—had powerful spirits that could help people or harm them according to how they were treated.”⁶⁹ Indeed, for American Indians past, and even for some in the present, “all creatures are under the control of a guardian spirit . . . understood either literally, as the father or mother of every animal in a particular species, or figuratively, as the species’ collective spirit, comprising the souls of all its individuals.”⁷⁰ This dual nature, if it is indeed a dual nature, is evident in the concept of Lakota’s White Buffalo Woman and her relationship to the very real buffalo of the Plains. Eroles and Ortiz explain, writing, “Though she first appeared to the Sioux in human form, White Buffalo Woman was also a buffalo—the Indians’ brother, who gave its flesh so the people might live.”⁷¹

While tales of women who possess dual natures as animals abound in world culture, White Buffalo Woman stands apart. First of all, White Buffalo Woman “is the dominant figure of [the Sioux’s] most important legend.”⁷² This differs from the

⁶⁹ Brodie, “North America’s Mother Earth,” 512.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Eroles and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 47.

⁷² Ibid.

Melusine tales of the European Middle Ages and the “animal-wife tales”⁷³ of Japan which gained widespread popularity with *Yuzuru*, or *Twilight Crane*, a play by Junji Kinoshita produced in 1949.⁷⁴ In neither case are these myths central to their cultures. Secondly, other women-as-animal tales usually involve a “connubial relationship—or cohabitation.”⁷⁵ This is certainly not the case with White Buffalo Woman as the young man who lusted for her was struck down for his desire. Finally, other such stories usually end with an “irreparable separation”⁷⁶ between the animal woman and her human being. An important feature of White Buffalo Woman’s story, however, is that she vows to return to the Lakota people in “every generation cycle.”⁷⁷

Furthermore, there is a direct connection between White Buffalo Woman of myth and the primary symbol essential to Lakota culture: the pipe. Campbell calls the pipe the “symbol of [the Lakota’s] concord with the universe.”⁷⁸ In the words of Crow Dog, a medicine man who spoke with Eroles and Ortiz, “This holy woman brought the sacred buffalo calf pipe to the Sioux. There can be no Indians without it.”⁷⁹ In the

⁷³ Fumihiko Kobayashi, “Is the Animal Woman a Meek or an Ambitious Figure in Japanese Folktales? An Examination of the Appeal of Japanese Animal-Wife Tales,” *Fabula* 51, no. 3/4 (2010): 235.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 225.

⁷⁹ Eroles and Ortiz, *American Indian Myths*, 47.

celebration of the Sun Dance, one woman of the tribe represents White Buffalo Woman and conducts certain rituals in memory of giving of the pipe and their traditions.⁸⁰

Certainly, this speaks to the importance of the myth of White Buffalo Woman. After all, the symbols within the myth were at the core of not just ritual but identity for the Lakota.

Through the Myth of the White Buffalo

Though the United States government of the nineteenth century was “only the latest of a long line of colonizers, starting with Europeans who arrived in the 16th century, determined to convert the indigenous peoples of North America to Christianity and ‘civility,’”⁸¹ the government’s impact on the Lakota Sioux and other tribes has been devastating and enduring. With the Dawes Severalty Act of 1877 and the newly formed Office of Indian Affairs,⁸² the United States government began a systematic plan to restructure Lakota society by pressuring them to “see themselves first as individuals, not as members of some corporate entity.”⁸³ It is this view of American individuality versus the Indian corporate body that many experts see as the heart of the United

⁸⁰ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 225.

⁸¹ Thomas Biolsi, “The Birth of the Reservation: Making the Modern Individual among the Lakota,” in *American Nations: Encounters in Indian Country, 1852 the Present*, ed. Frederick E. Hoxie, Peter C. Mancall, and James H. Merrell (New York: Routledge, 2001), 110.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

States/Native American conflict.⁸⁴ As a result, the culture—and the myths, symbols and rituals—of the Lakota Sioux fell under direct attack in the mid-1800s. For nearly seventy years, the Lakota “[resisted] white encroachment” through various means including an armed rebellion led by the legendary Crazy Horse in the 1870s, to their eventual loss at Wounded Knee in 1890⁸⁵ which effectively crushed Lakota resistance. Throughout this period, however, myth sustained the fighting spirit of people. Yet, contrary to the thesis of this study, the myth of White Buffalo Woman was not the driving force of their insurgency.

Crazy Horse, “never participated in any of the social dances so thoroughly enjoyed by the Sioux.”⁸⁶ This would include the Sun Dance and its enactment of rituals said to have been brought to the people by White Buffalo Woman herself. Despite any lack of importance White Buffalo Woman may or may not have had to Crazy Horse and his supporters, though, by the twentieth century, Vine Deloria Jr. states that “there can be no doubt that religion played a critical, if unarticulated, role in the Indian movement.”⁸⁷ By Indian movement, he means primarily the rise of protestors, activists, conflicts and activities from the late 1960s through the 1990s, such as the 1973

⁸⁴ Biolsi, “The Birth of the Reservation,” 112.

⁸⁵ Richard G. Hardorff, *The Surrender and Death of Crazy Horse: A Source Book about a Tragic Episode in Lakota History* (Spokane: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1998), 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁷ Deloria, *God Is Red*, 39.

occupation of Wounded Knee,⁸⁸ and by religion he presumably means myth and ritual. Deloria sees myth as “the revelation that establishes the tribal community or brings to it the sacred pipes, the sacred arrows, the sacred hats, and other sacred objects.”⁸⁹ This revelation, or myth, “is a communal affair in which the community participates but in which no individual claims exclusive franchise.”⁹⁰ Myth in general, therefore, is clearly a key in bringing about actions that assert the rights of the group. What, then, did this mean for the myth of the White Buffalo and White Buffalo Woman in the late nineteenth century?

Today, the methods used during that period to strip the Native Americans of the Great Plains of their culture and sense of community are well-known. Tactics included forced removal to government-established reservations, food rationing and the removal of children to boarding schools, but also involved a kind of human cataloguing in the forms of “character appraisals, the development of blood quantum and genealogies as markers.”⁹¹ All in all, “these and other tools [had] a profound effect on Lakota life.”⁹² Heather Cox Richardson, author of *Wounded Knee: Party Politics on the Road to an American Massacre*, explores some motivations for these governmental programs. In

⁸⁸ Deloria, *God Is Red*, 21.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Biolsi, “Birth of the Reservation,” 110.

⁹² *Ibid.*

part, she posits the devastation of the Lakota, and the attack at Wounded Knee, were brought about by political concerns as President Benjamin Harrison, a Republican Congress and the Republican Party rushed to secure votes in time for 1890 and 1892 elections.⁹³ Faced with waning popularity in the wake of the Civil War,⁹⁴ Democrats' rallies encouraging working men and women to move west,⁹⁵ and anti-Wall Street sentiment stoked by activists like Mary Elizabeth Lease,⁹⁶ the Republicans in power allegedly rushed Western lands into statehood,⁹⁷ and planned to divide Dakota Territory into two states to maximize whatever Republican votes could be had.⁹⁸

In the face of such adversity, the myth of White Buffalo Woman, the rituals of the sacred pipe and the ceremonial dances celebrating these things were not, in fact, enough to bolster the Lakota, urge them to cling to their communal identity, or encourage them to fight for their way of life. This hardly may be surprising as Good Seat, a resident of the Pine Ridge Reservation at the turn of the twenty-first century who had lived through this period of upheaval, told James Walker, "The white men have

⁹³ Heather Cox Richardson, *Wounded Knee: Party Politics on the Road to an American Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

made [Indians] forget that which their fathers told them.”⁹⁹ Another myth, however, did rise to fill all these roles. Through the Ghost Dance, Native Americans hoped to bring about an “immediate regeneration of the earth, with the disappearance of the White Man and the resurrection of both the buffalo and all the Indian dead.”¹⁰⁰

Historians credit the rise of the Ghost Dance to “the visions of Wovoka, a Paiute of Nevada, in 1889.”¹⁰¹ Campbell identified three factors as influencing Wovoka. These include “Paiute myths of the aging and regeneration of the earth; the teachings c. 1870 of Tavibo, an earlier Paiute prophet; and certain echoes of the Christian eschatological expectation that stemmed chiefly from the Mormon community in Utah.”¹⁰² Heather Cox Richardson states that “the [Ghost Dance] and the political maneuverings of the Harrison administration dovetailed to create a crisis.”¹⁰³ Campbell concurs, tracing a direct connection between the Ghost Dance and the U.S. offensive against approximately three hundred Lakota men, women and children at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890.¹⁰⁴

Earlier that year, General Crook, whom the Sioux looked on as a fair-minded

⁹⁹ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 70.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 232.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Richardson, *Wounded Knee*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 232.

representative of the United States government,¹⁰⁵ died. At that point, the Sioux “gave up on earthly aid and turned to another world for assistance.”¹⁰⁶ Not long after, Wovoka came to the notice of Lakota leaders.¹⁰⁷ With its message of renewal, his Ghost Dance was a powerful ritual, in part because dancers held hands with one another.¹⁰⁸ A rarity in Lakota circles though common to the Paiute, this aspect rekindled a sense of community among the people.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the centrality of the buffalo, already a major symbol for the Lakota, brought hope to them.¹¹⁰ Finally, participants fell into trances, an experience usually sought privately in Lakota culture, and revived to tell of what they believed they had seen in their visions,¹¹¹ again fostering a sense of community. These elements, according to Richardson, “gave the dance enormous power”¹¹² and appeal for the Lakota.

As word of the new myth and ritual spread to Lakota communities assigned to reservations, government agents became concerned as people assembled to share

¹⁰⁵ Richardson, *Wounded Knee*, 118.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 123.

¹¹² Ibid.

information and to dance.¹¹³ The Lakota neglected the new work the government had assigned to them, namely farming crops,¹¹⁴ to perform the ritual. Even as interest in the Ghost Dance waned, newspapers stirred up white settlers in the area with accounts of the movement.¹¹⁵ When Sitting Bull, Sioux leader, was arrested and then shot to death while in army custody,¹¹⁶ his supporters became certain the government intended to exterminate them all.¹¹⁷ They grew eager to move their people to a defensible location¹¹⁸ while Army leadership intended to disarm the Native Americans¹¹⁹ emboldened by Wovoka's message to hide weapons and to break up the faction perpetuating the Ghost Dance,¹²⁰ thereby stopping the rebellion it supported. In the end, in a conflict over the search for hidden weapons within the Native American encampment at Wounded Knee, the Seventh Cavalry opened fire on the band, killing many outright and hunting down fleeing survivors.¹²¹

With the massacre at Wounded Knee, "Indian resistance [to the United States

¹¹³ Richardson, *Wounded Knee*, 125.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 247.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 263.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 254.

¹²¹ Ibid., 273.

government's policies] was broken."¹²² Myth, however, has re-emerged as a touchstone bolstering the Lakota in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From 1972, Deloria notes that "Indians in their respective tribes began a serious revival of their religious traditions,"¹²³ including dancing the Ghost Dance.¹²⁴ Even the myth of White Buffalo Woman is not exempt from this resurgence, due in part to the widely-publicized 1994 birth of Miracle, a white buffalo calf.¹²⁵ In a telephone interview with *Chicago Tribune* staff writer Richard Wronski, Lakota medicine man Floyd Hand described Miracle's birth, saying "The second coming of Christ is like this; that is what is happening."¹²⁶

Summary

While the myth of the White Buffalo clearly did not empower the Lakota Sioux to resist the harsh policies of the nineteenth-century United States government, another Native American myth and its attendant rituals certainly did. If only for a short time, the Ghost Dance brought hope to the people, and strengthened a sense of identity in the Lakota who tried to shelter at Wounded Knee. After years of confrontations and events such as the killing of Sitting Bull, it was this sense of communal identity and the

¹²² Richardson, *Wounded Knee*, 283.

¹²³ Deloria, *God Is Red*, 39.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Welcome to Miracle's Website, "white buffalo," Stephanie M. Schwartz, <http://whitebuffalomiracle.homestead.com/index.html> (accessed 22 March 2012).

¹²⁶ Collections, "Chicago Tribune white buffalo," *Chicago Tribune*, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1994-09-11/news/9409110217_1_floyd-hand-lakota-sioux-native-americans (accessed 25 March 2012).

resultant possession of firearms that placed the Lakota in direct conflict with the Seventh Calvary at that encampment in December of 1890. The hope of the Ghost Dance, though, faded into the Native American Church, also known as Peyote religion, which reached its height in popularity in the mid-1970s.¹²⁷ Campbell and Deloria each see the Peyote movement as a reaction to the loss of the buffalo herds and the tragedies after the Ghost Dance period.¹²⁸ In a way that the Devon Celts' White Sow and the Magyars' White Stag have never done, however, the Lakota's White Buffalo and the myth of White Buffalo Woman have re-emerged as a vital part of the contemporary culture. Now a touchstone for many twenty-first century Lakota, White Buffalo and White Buffalo Woman are again symbols of holiness and hope.

¹²⁷ Campbell, *Atlas of World Mythology*, 233.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSIONS

This study began with the question journalist Bill Moyers once posed to renown mythology scholar, Joseph Campbell, “Why myths?”¹ In simple answer, by studying the cultural contexts, symbols and functions of myths, one studies the “human condition as such.”² Myths, according to Roland Boer, “can be revolutionary as well as reactionary”³ for governments large and small, but first and foremost, they affect individuals directly and through their governments. Campbell himself asserts that “mythology reinforces the moral order by shaping the person to the demands of a specific geographically and historically conditioned social group.”⁴ This is certainly the case for the white animal myths examined here. As the Celts, the Magyars, and the Lakota came together, their myths validated their cultures’ plans for warfare, assimilation, and rebellion.

For the Magyars of medieval Europe, their myth of the White Stag may have once harkened back their fabled origins as children of Enech, or perhaps a deer mother. It may have memorialized their unrecorded journey across the Eurasian steppes in the footsteps of the heroic Hunor and Magor. In any case, the myth of the White Stag surely justified the expansion of their kingdom. In the words of Mircea Eliade, symbol within

¹ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 1.

² Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 174.

³ Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 23.

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor*, ed. Eugene Kennedy (Novato: New World Library, 2001), 5.

myth pinpoints “the ‘limit-situations’ of man.”⁵ History suggests that with the westward-seeking White Stag to lead the way and shape their policies, the Magyars saw few limits.

Eliade also posits that symbol within myth “keeps the cultures ‘open.’”⁶ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the history of the Devonshire Celts. Separately and corporately, the Celts of the Devon coast could look to their myth of the White Sow and see a symbol of the old, Celtic way survive interaction with a representative of new, foreign ideology. At a time when they faced increasing isolation as well as political and social pressure from incoming Saxons, Norse, and Christians of various ethnicities, the myth of the White Sow made assimilation all right and enabled the survival of their cultural heritage through story, art and the Celtic Catholic tradition.

For the Lakota of the nineteenth century, however, the Ghost Dance, rather than their white animal myth, offered hope in the face of a destroyed way of life and an oppressive U.S. government. Within some bands of the Lakota, leaders and individuals alike were strengthened by the meaning of the Ghost Dance. They chose rebellion because of this myth and refused to give up their freedoms in the weeks leading to the clash at Wounded Knee. Now, in the twenty-first century, some Lakota leaders and individuals are guided by myth again. For them, recent events serve as a reminder of the meanings of the White Buffalo and White Buffalo Woman myth. It is too soon to tell

⁵ Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 174.

⁶ Ibid.

what may come of this, but considering all the Lakota have survived, it is very likely Eliade will be proved correct again. Myth, or more specifically its basic element, symbol, sustains culture⁷ and for the Lakota the White Buffalo may contribute to their continued existence.

All in all, myths—and more specifically white animal myths—are more than mere stories, folktales, or legends. They are more than personal beliefs. They can and do influence political policy. Their powerful meanings, spelled out in symbols, have shaped the world and will undoubtedly continue to do so long into the future. In the end, this may be the ultimate answer to Moyers' question, "Why myths?"

⁷ Campbell and Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, 1.

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