

## REFLECTIONS ON THE GODDESS \*DONU

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A prehistoric stream, to which one might give the name \*Donu,<sup>1</sup> has become personified in several Indo-European cultures.<sup>2</sup> In India, she was known as Dānu, mother of the arch-withholder of the waters, Vṛtra.

In the Rigveda, the divine hero, Indra, after a furious battle with Vṛtra,

"smote the serpent [i.e. Vṛtra]  
and released the waters."<sup>3</sup>

Vṛtra was

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<sup>1</sup> The hypothetical forms \*Donu and \*Donuva are, at present, merely rough estimates. No attempt is made to prove the exact Proto-Indo-European terms for the goddess or her tribe.

<sup>2</sup> Descendants of this tribe may have made their way to non-Indo-European homelands as well. Yigael Yadin (1973) argues rather cogently that the originally semi-nomadic Tribe of Dan was adopted as a Hebrew tribe, but was not of Semitic stock. This tribe was related, he believes, to the *Danuna* recorded by the Egyptians and to the people known in Greek mythology as the descendants of Danaüs. If Yadin is correct, then the eponym *Dan* would of course be a non-Semitic one, and the phonology would be Indo-European (or "Danuvian").

<sup>3</sup> Rigveda I.32.1:

*āhann āhim ānu apās tatarda . . .*

All translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

"crushed, his face smashed by breaking"<sup>4</sup>

and he

"lay scattered in many places."<sup>5</sup>

And then,

"She whose son is Vṛtra became one  
whose strength is low;  
Indra bore the weapon down upon her.  
The mother was above,  
the son below.  
Dānu was lying like a cow with her calf."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the male heroic god vanquished the old female monster and her son.

Sometimes, *dānu* cannot be personified; the term is to be translated "trickling liquid" or "dew". At times, it retains the feminine gender, as in the first book of the Rigveda:

"...[for Indra's chosen] trickling liquid richly flows  
beneath the heaven..."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid I.32.6:

... *sām rujānāḥ pipīṣa* ...

<sup>5</sup> Ibid I.32.7:

... *purutrā. . . aśayad vyāstaḥ*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid I.32.9:

*nīcāvayā abhavad vṛtrā putrēndro asyā āva vādhar jabhāra  
ūttarā sūr ādharah putrā āsīd dānuḥ śaye sahāvatsā nā dhenuḥ*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid I.54.7:

... *dānur asmā úparā pīnvate dívaḥ*

Elsewhere, *dānu* has neuter gender:

"May this god Savitr, the Giver,  
Offspring of the Waters,  
richly dispensing the *dew* for us..."<sup>8</sup>

Her son, Vṛtra, was he who "lived with Dānu"; he was  
"smashed" by Indra, who then slew him.<sup>9</sup>

Vṛtra was called *Dānava*:

"Indra, devouring the swallower, slew Dānava,  
snorting against him."<sup>10</sup>

and again

"You, Indra...slaying the Dānava,  
let free the stream of waters."<sup>11</sup>

In book ten of the Rigveda, the *Dānus* are found as a class  
of demons:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid VI.50.13:

*utā syā devāḥ savitā bhāgo no 'pām nāpād avatu dānu pāpriḥ*

<sup>9</sup> Ibid III.30.8:

*... kṣiyāntam. . . jaghantha*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid V.29.4:

*jigartim indro apajārgurāṇaḥ prāli śvasāntam āva dānavām han*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid V.32.1:

*... indra. . . sṛjō vī dhārā āva dānavām han*

"He smashed the seven Dānus with his strength."<sup>12</sup>

The Indic Dānu was, therefore, personified as a watery female monster, mother of a serpent which was connected with rain-water. Again, she was vanquished by a heroic young warrior-god.

In the Iranian *Avesta*, although Dānu is not cited, mention is made of the *Dānava* tribe, along with other enemies of the Iranians:

"Then they entreated her:  
give us good fortune,  
O good, most strong, Arədvī Sūra Anāhitā,  
so that we may be defeaters of the Turian  
Dānava..."<sup>13</sup>

Dānu's people were thus "the enemy" among the Iranians.

Dānu bears a similar name in Irish mythology, obviously borrowed, where she is Danu or Donu, eponym of the mythical folk, the Túatha Dé Danann,<sup>14</sup> the "people of the goddess Danu". We are told that

"It is Danu [who is] mother of the Dé..."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid X.120.6:

*á darṣate śávasā saptá dánūn . . .*

<sup>13</sup> *Avesta* V.73:

*āaṣ hīm jaiḍyən avaṣ āyaptəm dazdi.nō  
varuhi səvište arədvī sūre anāhite  
yaṣ bavāma aiwi.vanyē dānavo tūrḡ. . .*

<sup>14</sup> The Túatha Dé Danann were earlier known as the Túatha Dé Donann: cf. Knott and Murphy (1966): 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* VI.366K:

*is i in Danand sin mathair na ndee.*

The *Túatha Dé* were very learned in the healing arts and in magic. For example, when their king, Nuada, lost an arm in the First Battle of Mag Tured, Diancecht the doctor and Credne the craftsman fashioned a silver arm and hand which functioned as well as if they were flesh. But Diancecht's son, Miach, not satisfied with this,

"put...joint to joint,  
and vein to vein  
of his hand  
and heals it  
in three times nine days."<sup>16</sup>

Further, when the sons of Mil came to Ireland to attack the *Túatha Dé*, the latter protected themselves at first by means of Druid magic:

"Their Druids and their poets  
recited poems against them  
so that the Sons of Mil  
saw that they were only sods of the bog  
and of the mountain."<sup>17</sup>

Then,

"The Druids threw magic winds after them,  
so that the lower part of the sea-gravel

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid VII.310R<sup>1</sup>:

*dorat. . .alt fri halt 7 feith fri feith dia laim dair,  
7 icaid fri teora nomaidhi*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid VIII.414:

*con ro chansat a ndruideseom 7 a filid  
airchetla dóib, conacatar-ni bátir fóit móna 7 sléibi*

was put upon the upper part of the sea."<sup>18</sup>

The chief of the Túatha Dé, Manannan mac Lir, who had an interest in maritime affairs, was described by Cormac in his Glossary (900 CE) as god of the sea.<sup>19</sup> Another chief, the Dagda, "good god", had a daughter, *Brigit*, who was worshipped as a goddess of poetry and wisdom. It is evident that this "ancient folk" represented euhemerized gods or spirit folk to the later Irish people. Thus the Túatha Dé were, in the minds of the Irish, a magical, ancient, most likely pre-Irish folk, described in a part of their mythology which tells of their earliest origins. They were a folk which had to be fought by the later Irish.

That the Túatha Dé Danann represent a people at least as old as the time of unification of the Celts is made evident by similarities between the names of their heroes and those of characters found in the Welsh Mabinogi.<sup>20</sup> The Irish sea-god Manannán can be identified with the Welsh Manawydan; the Irish Nuadu was probably the Welsh Nudd, and the Irish goddess Danu was the Welsh Dôn.<sup>21</sup>

One Welsh poem describes

"[a warrior] of promise,  
wise as Dôn."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid VIII.415:

*focherdsat na druidhi gáetha druidhechta na ndegaidh  
co tochradh in murgriain n-íchrach for úachtar in mara*

<sup>19</sup> Cormac, Glossary in Knott and Murphy (1966) 105:

*inde Scotti et Brittones eum deum vocaverunt maris.*

<sup>20</sup> For the name Mabinogi vs. the earlier presumed Mabinogion, v. Ford (1977): 1.fn.1.

<sup>21</sup> Knott and Murphy (1966): 105; Ford (1977): 89, 112.

<sup>22</sup> Book of Taliesin XXXVI.10:

*. . . dylaw adaw doethaw don*

In this same book, the young poet Taliesin sings his history to the king of Wales, claiming that he was

"called a cunning man  
in the court of Dôn."<sup>23</sup>

The court of Dôn is not described here, but it is likely that medieval trimmings were added to a sketchy "history" of Dôn.

The goddess \*Donu may be found in the Greek realm as well as the Indo-Iranian and the Celtic, but, as often happens in Greece, her gender has been skewed, and the myth altered so that it appears in two strains. In the first, \*Donu became the parent of the Greek Danaïds, albeit a male.

Among others, the Greek Apollodorus tells the tale of the Danaïds. King Belus had two sons, the twins Aegyptus and *Danaus*. Aegyptus became king of Egypt, and to him were born fifty sons. Danaus became king of Libya, and his many wives bore him daughters, who were called the Danaïds. Upon Belus' death, the twins quarreled over their inheritance, and Aegyptus proposed, in conciliation, that the fifty princes marry the fifty princesses. Danaus, suspecting a plot, fled from Libya to Argos, having prepared a ship for himself and his daughters.

He found the city of Argolis suffering from a drought, and he told his daughters to appease Poseidon, the water deity, so that he might bring a source of water to them. The Danaïd Amymone appeased the god so well that, in gratitude,

". . . Poseidon revealed to her  
the springs at [the river] Lerna."<sup>24</sup>

So the Greek avatar of the Donu-goddess too has watery

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid XVI.26:

*Rym gelwir kyfrwys yn llys don*

<sup>24</sup> Apollodorus, *Atheniensis Bibliothecae* II.1.4:

. . . αὐτῆ Ποσειδῶν τὰς ἐν Λέρνῃ πηγὰς ἐμήνυσεν.

influence; the Danaïds also invented the art of sinking wells.<sup>25</sup>

Aegyptus sent his sons to Argos, begging that they be allowed to marry the Danaïds; Danaus refused, and the princes laid seige to Argos. Since there was no source of water within the city, Danaus was forced to capitulate; the weddings were performed, but Danaus gave daggers to his daughters, and they

"killed their bridegrooms  
[on their wedding night]  
as they slept."<sup>26</sup>

According to Apollodorus, the Danaïds were purified at Zeus' command. But, the Roman poet Horace tells us that because of their misdeeds the Judges of the Dead have condemned them to the endless task of carrying waters in perforated jars:

". . .their cask, empty of water  
which passes away through the bottom. . ." <sup>27</sup>

Hence, the Danaïds were connected with the aqueous element of the goddess. Their descendant, *Danaë*, was a

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<sup>25</sup> Strabo, Geography VIII.6.8:

. . . φρεάτων . . .

ἃ ταῖς Δαναΐσιν ἀνάπτουσιν ὡς ἐκείνων ἐξευρουσῶν . . .

"...wells...which they ascribe to the Danaids,  
believing that they discovered them..."

<sup>26</sup> Apollodorus, Atheniensis Bibliothecae II.1.5:

αἱ δὲ κοιτωμένους τοὺς νυμφίους ἀπέκτειναν

Cf. Ovid, Heroides XIV.

<sup>27</sup> Horace, Odes III.11.23-28:

*inane lymphae dolium fundo pereuntis imo...*

great-great granddaughter of Danaus.<sup>28</sup> Danaë's father, Acrisius, imprisoned her because an oracle had told him that she would bear a son who would kill him, and by keeping her in prison, he hoped to keep possible progenitors away from her. However, mere walls were no match for the powerful, and rather inventive god, Zeus, who visited Danaë in a shower of gold and impregnated her. Acrisius, still hoping to forestall the fates,

"putting his daughter and her baby [Perseus]  
into a chest,  
cast it into the sea."<sup>29</sup>

The two survived, however, and the hero, Perseus, accomplished many feats, including that of slaying the *female sea monster* which Poseidon sent to devastate the land of Philistia. Perseus thus saved the monster's prey, the princess, Andromeda.<sup>30</sup> Again, the myth has been altered; Danaë was a heroine, the mother of Perseus, instead of the vile female sea monster whom Perseus slew.

Although \*Donu's two elements, her water-aspect and her monster-aspect, were divided in Greece into a diachronic myth, yet again the theme is of a young male hero killing a female monster who is connected with water.

Epic tales in other areas show similar themes. The Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, a hero who aided the people of the Danes, slew a monster who had been troubling them. The monster, Grendel, was similar to the Indic *Vṛtra*, but Grendel did not withhold the waters; he was *of* the waters. Grendel was finally slain in heroic fashion. Upon his death, his mother became justifiably angry, and she attempted to wreak vengeance upon her son's murderer. She, too, was overcome, however, by the heroic Beowulf:

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<sup>28</sup> Apollodorus, Atheniensis Bibliothecae II.2.2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid II.4.1:

... τὴν θυγατέρα μετὰ τοῦ παιδὸς εἰς λάρνακα βαλὼν  
ἔρριψεν εἰς θάλασσαν.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid II.4.3.

"The Scylding (i.e. Danish) warrior...  
 angrily struck her"  
 [with his sword so that]  
 "it grasped her hard against her neck  
 and broke her vertebrae...  
 she fell to the floor."<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the legend of *Beowulf* incorporates the aqueous element, the female monster, and the rather gory details pertaining to the monster's slaying. The name of Grendel's mother had been forgotten by the time of the heroic Anglo-Saxons, so she was called, simply, *Grendles mōdor*, "Grendel's mother."<sup>32</sup> But one is strongly reminded of the slain Dānu and Vřtra lying "like a cow with her calf", and perhaps this monster without a name, *Grendles mōdor*, may have been the forgotten \*Donu.

Elements of the myth of \*Donu may well be borrowed from an earlier Accadian myth, which recounts the birth of the Babylonian gods from the primordial waters, Apsu and Tiāmat,<sup>33</sup> and the battle between these younger gods and their progenitors for supremacy. Apsu fought the younger god of wisdom, Ea. The

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<sup>31</sup> Beowulf 1563-68:

*yrringa slōh,*  
*þæt hire wið halse,*  
*heard grāpode,*  
*bānhringas braec. . .*  
*hēo on flet gecrong.*

<sup>32</sup> Beowulf 1538 *et passim*.

<sup>33</sup> To the Accadian *Tiāmat* cf. Hebrew *tehōm*, "sea, underground waters"; v. Pope (1955): 63. The myth of the dragon-goddess Danu shows similarities to other Semitic hero/dragon myths, besides that of *Tiāmat* and Marduk. Thus, among the Canaanites, the hero-god *Ba'al* slew the dragon, *Tannîn* (e.g. Ugaritic Manual 'nt Col.III) as Yahweh did the multiheaded Leviathan (e.g., Hesiod, Theogony 821 ff). Gordon (1961): 201 cites what may be the earliest attestation of the myth: a seal cylinder from Mesopotamia, dating to the third millennium BCE, showing heroes vanquishing a seven-headed monster.

latter was victorious, and Apsu's widow, Tiamât, attempted to avenge her husband's death. She fought Ea's son, Marduk, but the latter slew her; he

"loosed an arrow;  
it split open (lit. "broke") her stomach."<sup>34</sup>

The arrow

"plundered her inner parts. . .<sup>35</sup>  
(Marduk) captured her  
and extinguished her soul."<sup>36</sup>

So the young male hero vanquished the powerful old female monster. The Accadian myth is similar to the Indo-European myths, but in the latter the female monster avenges her son instead of her husband.

Although the myth of the female water monster is somewhat limited in geographical scope, watery remnants of her name are found throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Several rivers bear the name of \*Donu to this day.

The earliest written records of \*Donu as river name appear in Latin. For example, in his history of the Gallic war, Julius Caesar (102-3/15/44 BCE), in describing the Hercynian forest, stated that it

"...began at the borders of the Helvetians  
and the Nemetians and Rauratians,

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<sup>34</sup> Enūma Elish IV.101:

*is-suk mulmul-la ich-te-pi ka-ras-sa*

<sup>35</sup> Ibid IV.102:

*u-šal-liṭ lib-ba*

<sup>36</sup> Ibid IV.103:

*ik-mi-ši-ma nap-ša-taš u-bal-li*

and led from the area of the Danube river,  
to the borders of the Dacians and Anartians..."<sup>37</sup>

In the Geography, the Greek geographer Strabo (64/63 BCE-21 CE) describes the *Danube* as a part of the river *Ister*:

"The Marisus River flows through  
[the country of the Dacians]  
into the *Danuvius*,  
on which the Romans used to convey their gear  
for war."<sup>38</sup>

Strabo adds that the "Danuvius" is what the Romans used to call the upper part of the river which flowed through the country of the Dacians, while the lower part of the river, which flowed past the country of the Getae, was given the name *Ister*.<sup>39</sup>

The name has appeared in various Slavic languages, as Old Church Slavic *Dunav'*, Russian *Dunaj*, Serbo-Croatian *Dŭnav*, Ukranian *Dunáj*, *Dunaveć*, and West Russian *Dunavec*. The Ossetic *Don* bears the same name. In fact, the Soviet Union is replete with Danuvial water-names: the *Dnieper*, *Donets*, and *Dniester* all have names built upon this stem.

Inhabitants of the eastern shores of the Black Sea, the Latvians and Lithuanians, borrowed river water names from the Slavic: in Lithuanian, *Dunōjus*, diminutive *Dunojėlis*, is the term for the Danube. *Dunōjus* may refer to any large stream:

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<sup>37</sup> Julius Caesar, De Bello Gallico VI.25:

*Oritur ab Helvetiorum et Nemetum et Rauricorum finibus  
rectaque fluminis Danuvii regione pertinet  
ad fines Dacorum et Anartium. . .*

<sup>38</sup> Strabo, Geography 7.3.13:

Ῥεῖ δὲ δι' αὐτῶν Μάρισος ποταμὸς εἰς τὸν Δανούϊον  
ὅψ τὰς παρασκευὰς ἀνεκόμενον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι τὰς πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

"sometimes from the sea,  
sometimes from the deep water."<sup>40</sup>

Again,

"over the great sea, over the deep stream."<sup>41</sup>

The Latvian term for a "puddle", and then for a "dirty place", is *daņava*,<sup>42</sup> while *duņavas* is a term for a "little river, source."<sup>43</sup> The etymology of these terms is unclear, however, since they also seem to be connected to *duņains*, "dirty". But the river name in Latvian may be connected to that of a folk character, a "female spirit whom one has seen at the witching hour in the middle of the night":

"Duņa, Duņa, the guardian of the night  
frightens the horsemen."<sup>44</sup>

In Central Europe the Anglo-Saxons knew the river as the *Donua*, referring to

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<sup>40</sup> Cited in Fraenkel (1965): I.111:

*už mariu, už Dunojēliu.*

<sup>41</sup> Ibid:

*par didžias marias, par Dunojēļi.*

<sup>42</sup> Mülenbach (1923-25): I.438.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid: 518.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid:

*duņa, duņa, izbiedēja pieguļnieka jājējiņu.*

"...the other side of the river Donua..."<sup>45</sup>

The Donua, in Modern English, became known as the Danube.

In summary, one may deduce that there was a prehistoric, probably Neolithic tribe, which inhabited an area near a watery place, perhaps a river or stream. This water became personified as a feminine deity, and the goddess gave her name to the tribe. The tribe was probably not Proto-Indo-European but one with which the Proto-Indo-Europeans came in contact early on. The reflexes of the goddess \*Donu refer to a monstrous creature, usually an enemy, and a very powerful one. The Irish Túatha Dé Danann were, in myth, a very ancient folk with more than mortal powers. The Indic Dānu was a demon, whom Indra of necessity slew, but Dānu was also called "consort of Mitra and Varuṇa",<sup>46</sup> the great Indic gods, and this "marriage" reminds one of that between the pre-Indo-European Hera and the Indo-European Zeus. In legends and myths of other cultures, the pre-Indo-European goddess, either named for \*Donu, or connected with \*Danu's tribe, and at times *opposed* to the \*Danuva, regularly takes on the shape of a monster, one usually linked with the water, whom a young hero slays in rather morbid fashion. Thus the tribe and its deity were subdued by the Indo-Europeans.

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<sup>45</sup> Orosius [VI].XXXII-I.1 f<sup>v</sup> 25-26:

*On ðpre healfre þære ie Donua.*

<sup>46</sup> Rigveda I.136.3:

*. . .dānunas patī. . .mitras tayor varuṇo. . .*

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**WOMEN'S WORK AND WORDS:  
SETTING THE STAGE FOR STRIFE IN MEDIEVAL IRISH  
AND ICELANDIC NARRATIVE**

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This inquiry began with the question of whether there might have been a complementary, non-Christian source for medieval western European misogyny, a substratum, to use a linguistic image.<sup>1</sup> Early medieval Ireland and Iceland offered a rich textual base for examination. Some heuristic leads were a possible origin in Irish and Norse culture in pagan times, a more distant source in their common Indo-European heritage, or in the incomplete resolution of a confrontation between the societal organization of Old Europe and the invading archaic Indo-European culture. Or might a non-Christian misogyny have had a more banal and fundamental origin in *la condition humaine* and the differences between the sexes? The corollary question which arose is whether this animus was perhaps shared on both sides, misogyny matched by misandry, gender-specific misanthropy. Early Irish heroic tales and Icelandic sagas have no lack of scenes of strife and contention. How in these viricentric European societies and in media seemingly controlled by males do women and men relate to each other in these scenes? Can we penetrate the question of misogyny by trying to determine how and why women were portrayed in these times and these texts as deserving of male enmity, the offender perhaps condemning the offended? What are some of the reasons, objects, modes, and means of female participation in this antagonism?

As a conceptual grid on which to plot this inquiry can be imagined a pair of axes, where one groups female actors, not always agents, in categories arranged according to a rather superficial conception of power, say from goddesses through supernatural females, queens, wives and widows to beggar women, remembering that power must always be evaluated in the context of its real or potential application (see the append-