

# Global Research Study Irish Mythology Familiarity Study

Does Ireland and its Diaspora  
know its Myths?

Results of a 2019 Global Study



# Why do did we do this study?

We learn from scholars that Ireland has successfully preserved the richest store of myth and its associated tradition of any country north of the Alps.

Ireland has *“by far the most extensive and diverse vernacular literature in medieval Europe”* (Kim McCone – Pagan Past and Christian Present).

The country has received and developed, since its earliest inhabitants, some 9000 years ago, at least four major bodies of myth.

Of particular interest is to understand the knowledge of the earliest bodies of Myth. This is those of the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. This is a period Harvard Scholar Marija Gimbutas calls *“Old European”*. When she visited in 1989 she commented:

*“Old European monuments stand here in all their majesty. In its legends and rituals, this country has preserved many elements which in other parts of Europe have vanished long ago. Much that stems from pre-Indo-European times .... is still very much alive in Ireland .... the ancient spirit of Ireland is closer to the Old European”.*

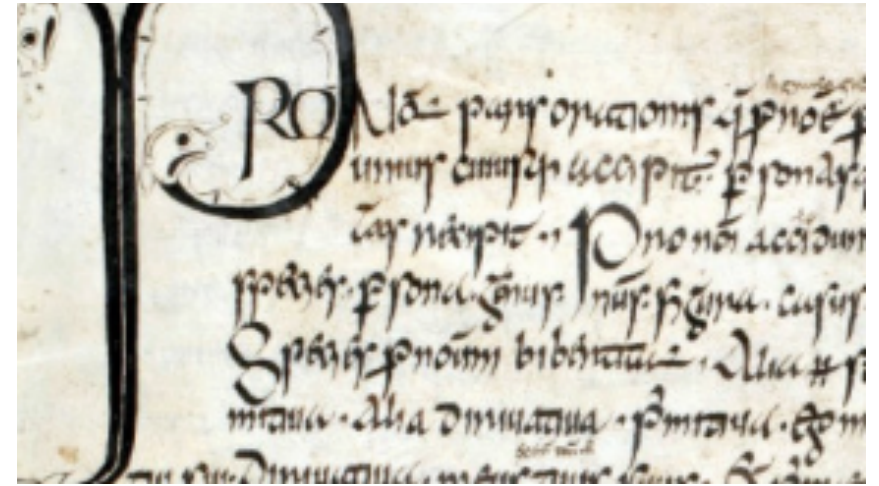


# Why do did we do this study?

Bard Mythologies has worked with these mythologies and the public for 25 years. We wanted some empirical evidence from the Irish Diaspora:

- The Degree of Knowledge of these Myths
- What elements of the Mythology are familiar
- How they acquired this knowledge
- The Extent of the interest in knowing more about the myths

We, at Bard, could then suggest some implications especially in regards to the little known areas



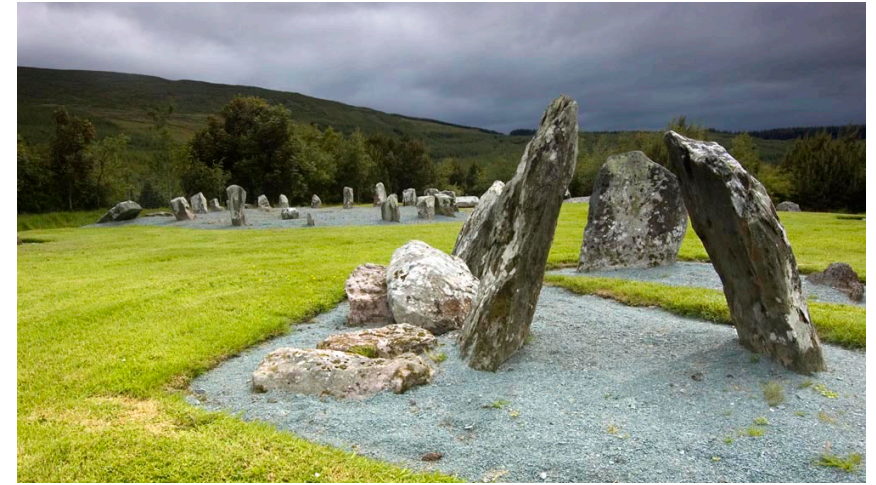
## How we conducted the Research? Who did we ask? What did we ask them?

Bard Mythologies carried on a global survey with the Qualtrics Company. Qualtrics are internationally renowned for their on-line software survey tools and the Global panels they are able to recruit.

Qualtrics recruited 275 respondents all of whom confirmed an Irish heritage or roots. The survey respondents were from four countries (Ireland, USA, UK and Australia).

The Survey involved 44 questions that were designed to gauge the level of interest, familiarity and understanding of the myths primarily through the Irish Mythological characters at the core of the key myths.

The survey was conducted in March April 2019. Results available and analysed June/July 2019. Report Summary shared September 1<sup>st</sup> 2019



# What were the main outcomes of the Study?

## **Interest in the Myths**

Overall, interest in learning more about Irish Mythology is high, with over 80% of respondents expressing interest in obtaining more information about the Myths. Respondents overwhelmingly described the stories that they were familiar with as “interesting” and “wonderful”, although there is a distinction about how these stories are viewed. 70% of Irish respondents disagreed that these myths were part of a comic Ireland image, (leprechauns, little people), where as 59% of US respondents felt they were.

## **Familiarity with the Stories**

However, overall the familiarity with these stories is very low, with only a select few such as Cú Chulainn, Children of Lir, Fionn Mac Cumhall receiving relatively high levels of recognition. Of the 14 key characters in the Myths reviewed, on average over half of respondents answered “not familiar at all” with even poorer numbers with the diaspora’s familiarity, the UK respondents having the most favourable numbers of that group.

## **Familiarity with the Cycles of Myth**

There are four cycles of Irish Myth: Mythological, Ulster, Fenian, King. There is a relatively high level of recognition of the Ulster (CúChulainn) and the Fenian (Fionn MacCumhall). There is very little familiarity with the Mythological (except when the Children of Lir is included in the Cycle) and the King Cycle (Cormac MacAirt),

# Where did respondents first learn about the Irish Myths?

Most encouraging given Ireland's long history of oral storytelling is that 46% of the diaspora first came across these stories through their parents, and strikingly, 33% of Australians read about the stories in their own time, which shows a thirst for knowledge about their Irish heritage.

<b>Ireland</b>	learned at school	52%	<b>UK</b>	learned at school	16%
	learned from parent	32%		learned from parent	51%
<b>United States</b>	learned at school	52%	<b>Australia</b>	learned at school	13%
	learned from parent	15%		learned from parent	40%

# Some Propositions about Irish Myth

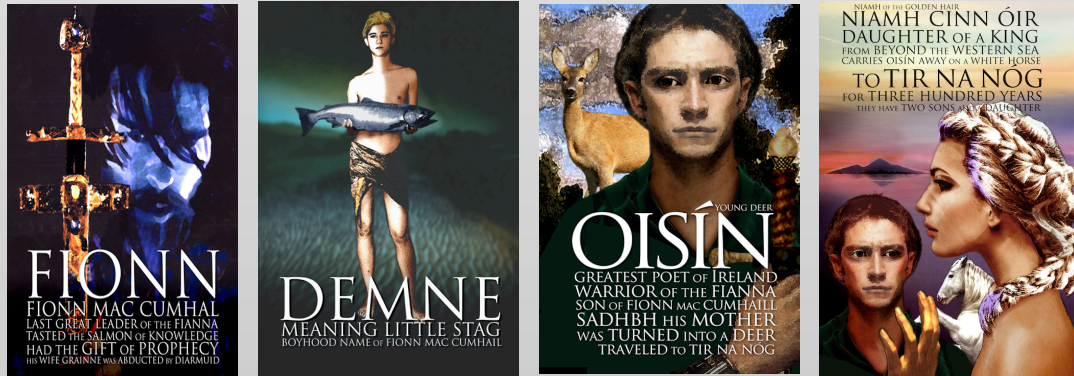
The Proposition	Agree	Disagree	Don't know enough to comment
These myths are part of a rich wisdom tradition of the people that we have forgotten.	71%	4%	25%
Ireland on its Independence was too influenced by British Institutions, Culture and Traditions.	61%	11%	28%
The Irish Myth could be a source of Inspiration to the Ireland of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century.	66%	7%	27%
The Ancient Irish had a different way of looking at the world.	79%	3%	18%
Ireland was a centre of Wisdom and Inspiration in the 5 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> centuries and could be that again.	58%	13%	29%
The Catholic Church saw these stories as pagan and were to be replaced by the correct Christian Stories	86%	8%	6%

# Knowledge of the Four Cycles of Myth

Some Familiarity with these Myth Cycles

Almost no Knowledge of these Myth Cycles

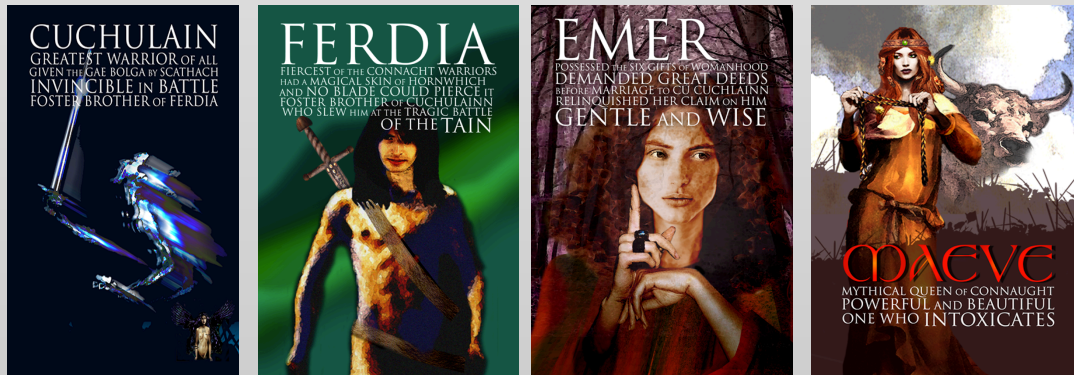
## Fenian Cycle



## Mythological Cycle



## Ulster Cycle



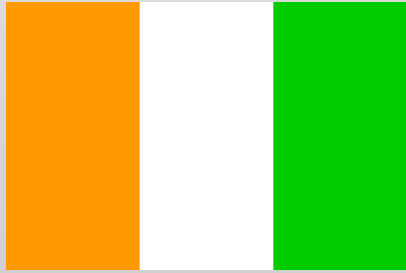
## King Cycle





# Some Interesting Comparative Data

## Irish Myths are part of a Comic Tradition (Leprechauns and Little People)



70% of Irish People  
say they are not



60% of American  
Irish say they are



# Some Interesting Comparative Data

How did the Irish Diaspora first learn about these myths

	Through school		Through parents		In my own time
Ireland	52%	Ireland	32%	Ireland	8%
US	15%	US	47%	US	20%
UK	18%	UK	51%	UK	21%
Australia	9%	Australia	40%	Australia	33%

Which Irish characters are familiar/unfamiliar?

Universally known

**CUCHULAIN**  
GREATEST WARRIOR OF ALL  
GIVEN THE GAE BOLGA BY SCATHACH  
INVINCIBLE IN BATTLE  
FOSTER BROTHER OF FERDIA

**FIONN**  
FIONN MAC CUMHAL  
LAST GREAT LEADER OF THE FIANNA  
TASTED THE SALMON OF KNOWLEDGE  
HAD THE GIFT OF PROPHECY  
HIS WIFE GRAINNE WAS ABDUCTED BY DIARMAID

**LIR**  
LIR OF SIDH FIONNACHAIDH  
CHIEFTAIN OF THE TUATHA DE DANANN  
LOVING FATHER OF THE SWAN CHILDREN

Known in US – Not known elsewhere

**CEASAIR**  
FIRST LEADER TO SETTLE IN IRELAND  
CAME WITH FIFTY WOMEN  
THREE MEN WERE WITH HER: BITH, LADRU  
AND THE WIZARD FIONNTAN  
CEASAIR DIED OF A BROKEN HEART  
WHEN FIONNTAN WENT AWAY

**BALOR**  
OF THE EVIL EYE  
DESTROYING HOSTS WITH HIS POISON  
TYRANT LEADER OF THE FOMHOIRE  
DESTINED TO BE SLAIN BY HIS GRANDSON

Not known anywhere

**AMHAIRGHIN**  
GLUNCHEAL  
WARRIOR & SHAMAN  
AT ONE WITH ALL THINGS  
RECITES A GREAT POEM  
I AM THE WIND...

The character who with the Sons of Mil brought Celtic culture to Ireland?

# Implications of the Study

There are a number of implications of what has been discovered from this study:

## **The Little Known Wisdom Tradition**

There is some awareness of half of what has been described as the “richest store of myth and its associated traditions north of the Alps”. There is almost no knowledge of the other half among the Irish Diaspora.

## **Where is there some knowledge**

The areas of the Mythology that are somewhat familiar are the two warrior traditions: CúChulain, the Tain and the hero within the tribe, and Fionn and the Fianna and the outlaw hero, outside the tribe. These myths certainly played a role in the Celtic Revival and Independence struggle.

## **What are the missing elements of the mythologies - Foundation Stories**

Little known are the two foundation mythologies, the Lebor Gabála, Book of Invasions and the Battles of Moytura. These mythologies contain the Irish Creation Stories – the “people from somewhere else” and echoes of the shamanic and goddess cultures of the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. They also lay out a unique indigenous organizational structure – a mythology of distributed power and the cult of the sacred centre.

## **What are the missing elements of the mythologies – King/Leadership Stories**

Prior to the arrival of the Anglo Normans, the King Stories were very popular (33% of the stories told). Following the Invasion, other stories (rebel/outlaw) became told and the King Stories were barely told (3% in early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

# Next Steps

There was an overwhelming interest in knowing more about Irish Mythology (80% + respondents expressing interest)

What makes sense is surely to ensure a wider knowledge of the two missing, barely known myth tradition

## Mythological Cycle

The Irish Creation Myth  
The Three Wisdoms of the Irish Foundation  
Organizational Structure – distributed power  
Pre-Celtic Goddess Culture

## King Cycle

Foundations of Good Kingship  
Rules on unrestricted power  
How to elect and discuss a King  
Virtues of Kingship

At the same time additional knowledge of the other cycle would reveal

## Warrior (Tain) Cycle

A Critique of the Warrior Tradition  
as more tragic than romantic  
How voices are silenced when the drums of war  
start beating

## Fenian (Fionn) Cycle

Combining warrior and wisdom tradition  
Initiation Rites for young men  
Rites of Passage

Finally, Ireland's myths reveal evidence of a rich pre-Celtic culture, especially that of the Neolithic "Goddess" culture. Some see the arrival of the Celts as a "sad day for Ireland"

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