

## **CELTIC MYTHOLOGY AND UKRAINIAN LEGENDS: ABOUT THE LEGEND OF MAKITRYNA RAVINE**

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## **КЕЛТСЬКА МІФОЛОГІЯ ТА УКРАЇНСЬКІ ЛЕГЕНДИ: ЩОДО ЛЕГЕНДИ ПРО МАКІТРИНУ БАЛКУ**

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*The question of the presence of the Celts in Ukraine is still debated, despite the discovery of typically Celtic objects and sites on Ukrainian territory. However, it is possible to add to the file the vestiges of Celtic mythology that can be noticed within the rich corpus of Ukrainian legends. Several attempts of this type have already been made in the past. However, we must add that of the legend of the Makitryna ravine, in southern Ukraine, in an area where, a priori, there have never been Celts. The legend in question was collected very late, and some of what it contains offers interesting parallels with Greek mythology. However, its very structure finds an exact parallel in an Irish mythological text. Since there is no known historical connection between Ireland and this part of Ukraine, the source of this story can only be a possible Gallic population, perhaps Galatians in the service of a king of Pontus.*

*Keywords: Celts, mythology, legend, Ukrainian territory.*

### **Celts in Ukraine**

The Celtic presence in the western part of Ukraine has sometimes been difficult to establish, because there has long been confusion between Celts and celtized peoples. Thus, ancient French archaeologists, at the beginning of the 20th century, reported the discovery of Celtic objects in Ukraine (Déchelette 1927, p. 588 and 429, fig. 389; Hubert 1974, p. 521). But these were in fact discoveries from the site of Zarubynsi, on the banks of the Dniro, which gave its name to the first authentically attested Slavic archaeological culture. However, part of the movable material of this culture, and in particular the fibulae, underwent a significant Celtic influence, to the point that its chronology was modeled on that of La Tène (Пачкова 2000).

However, there did exist a Celtic presence in Ukraine, particularly in the southern part of the country, north of the Black Sea and in the Kingdom of Bosphorus where Gauls carried out raids while occasionally serving as mercenaries. Less known to the Western public are the Celtic occupations of western Ukraine, particularly in Transcarpathia, but also in the territory of what was the principality of Halych. The work of Gennadii Kazakevich has provided useful syntheses in this sense (Казакевич 2010; Kazakevich 2010; Kazakevich 2015; Kazakevich 2015b; Казакевич 2023), accompanied by the publication of sometimes extraordinary documents, such as a sword sheath stylistically very close to the Gundestrup cauldron (Kazakevich 2010).

However, there are few discoveries that allow a study of the religion of these Eastern Celts, apart from certain coins discovered in Transcarpathia (Kolniková 2002). In fact, we find on these coins an image of the warrior goddess of the Celts (Kazakevich 2021). However, it is precisely this same warrior goddess that Kazakevich was able to find in the legends of Pohan-Divcha, known in the same region (Казакевич 2016).

### **Celtic mythological motifs in Ukraine**

It was not the first time that this author searched for Celtic mythological motifs in Ukraine (Казакевич 2005). It must be said that the elements of comparison between Ukrainian folklore and Celtic mythology are particularly numerous, and yet still relatively little studied. It has been more than a century, for example, that Bunyak, an evil character known in numerous legends, has been compared, as well as Vij and other similar characters from Ukrainian folklore, to Celtic demonic characters: the Irish Balor and the Welsh Yspaddaden Penkawr (Сумцов 1892; Lajoie 2014; Rakhno 2024).

Similarly, a vestige of the fighting tree motif, known by version B of *The Death of Cú Chulainn* in Ireland, or *Cad Goddeu* in Wales, remains in some legendary versions of the Battle of Poltava. However, this pattern is also known in Scandinavian countries and in northern Germany (Lajoie 2012, p. 218–220). Some *dumy*, reporting the death of a Cossack and his confrontation with black birds, find also an obvious parallel with the Irish story of the Death of Cuchulainn (Lajoie 2012, p. 210–211). In Podillia, a legend collected in 1845 by the Pole Lucjan Siemieński is very clearly close to the Welsh myth of the Twrch Trwyth (Lajoie 2022). And if we go further back in time, we see that even a founding legend as famous as that of the «call to the Varangians», attested for the first time in the *Primary Chronicle*, a text written in Kyiv, has an exact parallel in medieval Irish stories (Nikolayev 2012).

### The legend of the Makitryna ravine

It is quite likely that other motifs of Celtic mythology will be discovered in the legends of Ukraine. In this article I would like to present one which is found in a legend which was collected in 1978 from residents of Mykolaiv. Here is the text, with an English translation:

This legend takes place within an important corpus of pseudo-historical stories relating to the struggle between the Cossacks on the one hand, and the Turks and Crimean Tatars on the other. Although sometimes recent, these legends often recycle much older mythological motifs.

Між Прищепівкою та Братським, по правому березі річки Костуватої, є невелика, але глибока Макітрина балка. У тій балці стоїть широка гранітна скеля. А в тій скелі видовбана ступа. Багато хто, наткнувшись на ту скелю, дивується:

– Хто ж видовбав цю ступу?

А діди розповідають, що справа була така. Давним–давно жили по Мертвоводу і аж до Бугу вільні козаки. Нічій владі не корилися, нікому данину не платили. І от задумали їх завойовати турки. Рушили проти них військом незчислимим. А козаки з усьог степу зібрали у Кам'януватській слободі своє військо та й вирішили битися за рідну землю і свою волю на смерть, а турків не пустити. От вирушили вони ворогам назустріч і здибали їх неподалік села, над річкою. Стоять сила проти сили. А турецький паша, що роз'їжджав поперед своїх яничарів, гукає:

– Гей, козаки! Виставляйте будь-якого свого воїна проти нашого Махамуда, хто з них кого поборе – тієї сторони і закон буде. Наш верх візьме, то ви нам будете данину платити, а як ваш переможе, то підемо ми назад і сто років у ці краї не будемо потикатися. Згода чи ні?

– Згода! – гукнули із свого боку через річку козаки.

Але кого ж послать проти турчина? Визвався мірошник Микита Орел.

– Постою, – сказав, кинувши шапкою об землю, – за всіх вас, любі братчики. Не поступлюся бусурманину.

Був Микита стрункий, як птах. Бігав – коня переганяв. А як треба жорна накувати, то

Between Pryshchepivka and Bratskyi, on the right bank of the Kostuvata river, there is a small but deep ravine called Makitryna. There is a wide granite rock in that ravine. And there is a trough hollowed out in that rock. Many people, having come across that rock, are surprised: – Who hollowed out this trough? And the grandfathers say that it was like this. A long time ago, free Cossacks lived along Mertvovod and all the way to the Bug. They did not obey anyone's authority, they did not pay tribute to anyone. And so the Turks decided to conquer them. An innumerable army marched against them. And the Cossacks from all over the steppe gathered their army in Kamianuvatska Sloboda and decided to fight for their native land and their liberty to the death, and not to let the Turks go. So they set out to meet the enemies and hunted them down near the village, above the river. Force against force. And the Turkish pasha, who was riding ahead of his janissaries, shouted:

– Hey, Cossacks! Put any of your warriors against our Mahamud, who of them will defeat whom – on that side and the law will be. If ours prevails, then you will pay tribute to us, and if yours wins, then we will go back and will not stumble into these lands for a hundred years. Agree or disagree?

– Agreed! Cossacks shouted from their side across the river. But who will be sent against the Turks? The miller Mykyta Orel was called out.

– I'm fasting, he said, throwing his hat on the ground, for all of you, dear brothers. I will not yield to the infidel.

Mykyta was as slender as a bird. He ran – he overtook the horse. And when it was necessary to grind the millstone, he did not call anyone

нікого не гукав на поміч. Сам зніме, винесе з млина, накує, а потім занесе й поставить на місце. Мав козак силу незвичайну. От вийшов він поперед козачих лав, а від турків йому назустріч Махамуд суне. Ростом у два сажні. Зійшлися це чудовисько та козак-мірошник, схопилися. Не може Микита звалити велетня, але й сам не подається. А турчин все намагається козака підняти, від землі відірвати. Бо як відірве, то вже переможе. Як він його не смикає, здається, ось-ось відірве, а рідна земля тримає козака за ноги, не випускає.

– Мало каші з'їв, турче, – гукають, регочучи, козаки.

– Давай на завтра боротьбу перенесемо.

Микита погодився, бо теж упрів. От турчин повернувся до своїх і розповів:

– Не можу подолати, бо кажуть он козаки, що я мало каші з'їв. Варіть мені побільше каші!

Ну, турки взялися, видовбали у скелі ступу, натовкли пшона і наварили аж три пуди каші. Наївся їхній Махамуд та й вийшов проти козака. Боролися, боролися, а рідна земля тримає міцно, не дає турчину його відірвати. Знову регочуть козаки:

– Мало каші з'їв! Кишка тонка!

Знов відклав турчин боротьбу, вимагає від своїх:

– Наваріть ще більше каші!

До півночі товкли пшоно, наварили аж п'ять пудів. З'їв її Махамуд, вийшов боротися, бачить – і ще не бере. Тримає козака його рідна земля. Знову чує регіт: «Мало каші з'їв!»

Розізлився турчин, ще раз відклав боротьбу і давай гримати на своїх:

– Ледарі! Я вам славу здобуваю, а ви мені каші лінітеся наварити багато! Варіть, скільки я здужаю з'їсти!

Цілу ніч товкли турки пшоно у кам'яній ступі-довбанці, наварили сім пудів каші. Їв її, їв Махамуд, аж відвертало. Піднявся з повнісіньким животом. Посунув на козака, мов гора. Схопив ж його, натужився з усієї сили, щоб відірвати від землі, та й лопнув. А турки пішли назад і сто років на Мертвовод не потикалися. Лише залишили по собі пам'ять: – ступу в скелі у Макітриній балці. Там вона є і досі (Іоаніді 1985, с. 184–185).

for help. He will remove it himself, take it out of the mill, bake it, and then bring it in and put it in place. The Cossack had unusual strength. So he went out in front of the Cossack ranks, and from the Turks Mahamud came to meet him. He measured two fathoms tall. This monster and the cossack miller came together and grabbed each other. Mykyta can't bring down the giant, but he doesn't give up either. And the Turk keeps trying to lift the Cossack, to tear him off the ground. Because if he tears it off, he will already win. No matter how hard he pulls it, it seems that he is about to tear it off, and his native land holds the Cossack by the legs and does not let him go.

– You didn't eat much porridge, Turk, the Cossacks shout, laughing.

– Let's move the fight to tomorrow.

Mykyta agreed, because he was also ready. Then the Turk returned to his people and told: – I can't overcome it, because the Cossacks say that I didn't eat enough porridge. Cook me more porridge!

Well, the Turks got down to business, hollowed out a trough in the rock, pounded millet and boiled as much as three puds of porridge. Their Mahamud was full and went out against the Cossack. They fought, fought, but the native land holds fast, does not allow the Turks to tear him away. The Cossacks roar again:

– He ate too little porridge! His intestine is thin!

The Turk put off the fight again, demanding from their own:

– Boil more porridge!

Until midnight, millet was pounded, as many as five puds were boiled. Mahamud ate it, went out to fight, sees that he still doesn't take it. The Cossack is held by his native land. He hears laughter again: – He ate too little porridge!

The Turk got angry, once again postponed the fight and let's thunder on our own:

– Lazy! I get you fame, but you are too lazy to cook a lot of porridge for me! Cook as much as I can eat!

All night, the Turks pounded millet in the stone trough, boiled seven puds of porridge. He ate it, Mahamud ate it, it was disgusting. Got up with a full stomach. He pushed the Cossack like a mountain. He grabbed it, strained with all his strength to tear it off the ground, and it burst. And the Turks went back and did not touch Mertvovod for a hundred years. They only left behind a memory: – a trough in the rock in Makitryna Balka. It is still there.

### Antaeus and Alcyoneus

The first mythological motif that appears clearly in this story is that of the giant who remains invulnerable as long as he is in contact with the earth. This is the case of the miller Mykyta Orel, who

fighters in the ranks of the Cossacks. The story even specifies: this is his «native land» (рідна земля).

This point finds interesting parallels in Greece, with the myths of Antaeus and Alcyoneus, which could be a copy of one another. Antaeus is a giant, son of the Earth, who is invulnerable as long as he is in contact with her. He takes the opportunity to challenge and kill anyone who passes through his country. When Heracles arrives, he lifts the giant and manages to defeat it by suffocating it while holding it in the air (Pindar, *Isthm.* iv. 52 (87) sqq., Diodorus Siculus, iv. 17. 4; Pausanias, ix. 11. 6; Philostratus, *Imagines*, ii. 21; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*, vi. 285 sqq.; Ovid, *Ibis*, 393–896; Hyginus, *Fab.* 31; Lucan, *Pharsal.* iv. 588–655; Juvenal, *Sat.* iii. 89; Statius, *Theb.* vi. 893; etc.).

Alcyoneus is also a giant, who reigns over Pallene. According to the pseudo-Apollodorus, Heracles came to fight him, but the giant remained invulnerable as long as he touched his land. So the hero pulled him out of Pallene and was then able to defeat him (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, i, 34).

This is pattern D1833 from Stith Thompson's motif index: «Magic strength by touching earth», which however only gives as an example that of Antaeus. Until now, this motif was only known in Greece. Moreover, it seems relatively recent: it has only been attested since the Hellenistic era and perhaps even only in the Roman era in the case of Antaeus (McPhee 2022, p. 116–123), as in that of Alcyoneus (Vielle 1998).

The structure of the stories, in Ukraine and Greece, remains very similar. An invader, sometimes accompanied by an army, must fight a giant bound to the earth. In Greece, the invader is Heracles, a hero: the giant is therefore defeated by separation from the earth. In Ukraine, the invader is a Turkish champion, who cannot have a positive aspect: it is therefore he who is defeated by the giant, who remains inseparable from the earth.

The presence of a Greek mythological motif in southern Ukraine is obviously not surprising, given the number of historically attested Greek colonies, with populations that have persisted to the present day.

### The Dagda embassy

There is, however, another motif present in the Ukrainian legend which prevents it from being seen as a pure borrowing from Greek mythology: that of the trough dug in the ground in order to cook porridge. This is only found in one other place in the world: in Ireland, in a text dating from the 11th or 12th century, but recycling elements from the 9th century, the *Cath Maige Tuired*, or *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* \*. This fundamental text of Irish mythology relates the struggle between the gods, the Tuatha de Danann, and the Fomore demons who took possession of the island.

Before starting the fight, the god Lug chooses to send the Dagda, local equivalent of the god of the storm, to the Fomore camp in order to spy on them and delay them (ed. Gray 1982, §88). The Dagda accepts, and when he arrives there, he asks for a truce, which is granted:

Luid íerum an Dagdae go loggfort na Fomore & cunge cairde cathai forrai. Dobreth dó amal conanoic. Degníther lite dó lasna Fomori, & ba dia cudbiud ón, oir ba mór serc litten laisium. Nos-lintar core cóecduim an ríog dóu a ndechotar cetri ficet sesrai do lemlacht & a cubat cétnai de men & béoil. Doberthar gabair & cóerig & mucau indtie, & nos-combruihiter lei. Nosedórtiter a nderc talman dóu, & atbert fris noimbérthau fair bás mono tomledh ule; ar dáig ná berud écnach Fomore co rocaithed a síidh.

Gabois íer sin a léig, & ba himaircithe go tallfad lánomain ina lige foro láur na léghie. It é didiu mírionn fordu-rauhotar inde: lethau tindei & cethromthu bloinge.

Is ann adbert in Dagdae, 'Fó bioath ind so má rosaigh a broth an rosaig a blas'. An tan immorro noberid an léig láun ina béolu, is adn adberedh, «Nís—collet a mícuirne', ol in sruith'.

Doberth—sium immorro a mér cromm tar domain an dercu fo derid iter úr & grioan. Dolluid

Then the Dagda went to the Fomorian camp and asked them for a truce of battle. This was granted to him as he asked. The Fomoir made porridge for him to mock him, because his love of porridge was great. They filled for him the king's cauldron, which was five fists deep, and poured four score gallons of new milk and the same quantity of meal and fat into it. They put goats and sheep and swine into it, and boiled them all together with the porridge. Then they poured it into a hole in the ground, and Indech said to him that he would be killed unless he consumed it all; he should eat his fill so that he might not satirize the Fomoir.

Then the Dagda took his ladle, and it was big enough for a man and a woman to lie in the middle of it. These are the bits that were in it: halves of salted swine and a quarter of lard.

Then the Dagda said, «This is good food if its broth is equal to its taste». But when he would put the full ladle into his mouth he said, «'Its poor bits do not spoil it,' says the wise old man».

\* I couldn't find anything similar in Stith Thompson's Motif Index (1955-1958) or in the Berezkin and Duvakin catalog.

cotlud foair íerum ar caitem a litem. Ba méidithir scabol tige a bolc fair, gon tibsíd im sodain na Fomore.

Then at the end he scraped his bent finger over the bottom of the hole among mould and gravel. He fell asleep then after eating his porridge. His belly was as big as a house cauldron, and the Fomoiré laughed at it (ed. and trans. Gray 1982, § 89–92).

When he leaves, the Dagda has difficulty walking, due to the size of his stomach. On the way, he meets a woman, the daughter of Indech, one of the three chiefs of the Fomore. He desires her, but he remains powerless, again due to the size of his stomach. The woman then makes fun of him, before starting to fight with him. She presses him so hard that: «he sank to the hollow of his rump in the ground». Better: «She fell upon him again and beat him hard, so that the furrow around him filled with the excrement from his belly» (ed. and trans. Gray 1982, § 93).

She finally forces him to come out of his hole, «after letting go the contents of his belly», then they make love, leaving their mark on the landscape. Indech's daughter then agrees to change sides and perform a magic act against the Fomore.

This passage has been relatively little studied, and most researchers have focused simply on the struggle followed by the union between the Dagda and the daughter of Indech, neglecting the motif of the porridge in the pit (Oudaer 2021, p. 223). The daughter of Indech has often been identified with the Morrigan, the warrior divinity of Ireland, while the porridge meal has been seen as a faded version of the *aśvamedha*, the ancient Indian royal ritual, of which we know now that it existed in related forms throughout the Indo-European world (Oudaer 2021, p. 223–225, with bibliography).

But let's summarize:

The Fomore invaded Ireland  
Lug sends the Dagda towards the Fomore

The Turks invaded Ukraine  
The pasha sends his champion Mahamud against the Ukrainians

The Dagda is forced to eat porridge from a hole dug in the ground  
The daughter of Indech attacks the Dagda

Miller Mykyta Orel attacks Mahamud  
Mahamud is made to eat porridge from a hole dug in the ground

The daughter of Indech makes fun of Dagda  
The Dagda is defeated by being pushed into the earth  
Dagda's belly is so big that it empties under the pressure of the girl

The Cossacks make fun of Mahamud  
Mykyta Orel is invincible as long as the earth holds him back  
Mahamud's belly is so big it bursts

The relationship between the two stories is obvious, even if we notice a game of value inversion: the defeated character belongs to the camp of the invaders in Ukraine, and to the camp of the defenders in Ireland. We also see that the Dagda is forced to eat porridge, under penalty of death, while Mahamud does so following the mockery of the Cossacks and in the hope of becoming stronger. These variations prevent us from seeing the direct source of the Ukrainian legend in the Irish text. On the other hand, we can postulate that there was a common Celtic source to both stories\*.

### The cooking pit

It may seem very difficult to cook porridge in a pit dug in the ground. However, there is a type of structure, well attested by archaeology, which could have made this possible: it is what has long been called «Polynesian oven», and which we now prefer to call «heating stones oven». It is a hole dug in the ground, at the bottom of which hot stones are placed, on top of which the food is cooked. These pits have been known in Europe since the Mesolithic and especially in the Neolithic. Their use, however, disappeared during the Early and Middle Bronze Age.

However, we note their reappearance in Gaul at the end of the Final Bronze Age and during the Iron Age, with 137 sites recorded in Switzerland, southeastern France and occasionally in southern

\* Christophe Vielle proposed to connect Alcyonée with Virādha, a rākṣasa (demon) known in the Rāmāyaṇa, whose characteristic is that it cannot be killed by any weapon «on earth». The heroes Rama and Lakṣmaṇa are forced to master him before they can kill him at the bottom of a pit, therefore underground (Vielle 1998). This could show that a similar tradition may have also existed in ancient India.

Germany. We can therefore speak here of a practice that has become Celtic. However, as the archaeologists who have studied them say: «Vestiges of important collective, even ceremonial, meals, these heating stone ovens seem, in any case, foreign to the domestic and individual sphere» (Pranyies *et al.* 2012, p. 48).

The Ukrainian text only speaks of porridge, but the Irish text specifies that this porridge contained «goats and sheep and swine». However, the Gallic ovens which have been excavated show that they were used for cooking meat (Pranyies *et al.* 2012, p. 27). We can thus see that the two texts may be the late echo, integrated into Celtic mythology, of ritual practices which did indeed exist among the Gauls.

### **Conclusion**

There are still a number of unresolved questions at the end of this article. For example, how can we explain that a motif from Celtic mythology is found in a place which was populated, during Antiquity, by the Greeks and the Scythians, then, during the Middle Ages, by Turkish-speaking populations? However, we can recall once again that many Galatians served as mercenaries with the Bosphorus kingdom. The funerary stele of one of them was even found on the shore of Akhtanizovskii liman, on the other side of the Kerch Strait (Толстикова 1976; Mielczarek 2014, p. 15). Are they behind the legend of the Makitryna ravine?

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### Кельтська міфологія та українські легенди: щодо легенди про Макітрину балку

*Питання про присутність кельтів в Україні досі дискутується, незважаючи на виявлення на території України типово кельтських об'єктів і місць. Проте можна додати до файлу залишки кельтської міфології, які можна помітити в багатому корпусі українських легенд. Кілька спроб такого типу вже було зроблено в минулому. Однак, додамо, що з легенди про Макітрину балку, що на півдні України, на території, де кельтів априорі ніколи не було. Легенда, про яку йдеться, була зібрана дуже пізно, і децю з того, що вона містить, пропонує цікаві паралелі з грецькою міфологією. Однак сама його структура знаходить точну паралель в ірландському міфологічному тексті. Оскільки історичний зв'язок між Ірландією та цією частиною України невідомий, джерелом цієї історії може бути лише можливе галльське населення, можливо, галати на службі у царя Понту.*

*Ключові слова: кельти, міфологія, легенда, українська територія.*

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