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**Citation for published version:**

Lyle, E 2015, 'The Hero Who Releases the Waters and Defeats the Flood Dragon', *Comparative Mythology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1, pp. 1-12. <<http://compmyth.org/journal/index.php/cm/article/view/5>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Comparative Mythology

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# The Hero Who Releases the Waters and Defeats the Flood Dragon

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## Abstract

The hero who releases the waters is the young king of the gods, and I have argued that the dragon who withheld the waters is actually a dragoness who can be identified as the primal goddess, Earth. The hero who defeats this dragon also has attached to him companion stories where he brings about the release of the sun goddess, and defeats a sea dragon. These episodes can be placed in the annual cycle, and it is worth pausing to look at the implications of this. A cosmogonic event takes place once but is experienced annually by means of ritual re-enactment or reference at a specific season and so it is possible to explore their sequence in seasonal terms. The episode of the release of the waters was apparently followed by a battle with a sea dragon, which can be taken as a victory by the hero over the god of the sea. Through these dragon-battles we can begin to explore a sequence of the hero's victories over the old gods that can be related to the cosmogony and to the annual cycle and forms part of the "grammar" of myth.

## Keywords

Arthur, cosmicization, dragon, Herakles, hero, Indo-European, Indra, Laurasian mythology, myth, Perseus, Poseidon, primal goddess, sun goddess, Theseus

## Introduction

The hero of my title is the archetypal hero who makes the world fit for people to live in. It is postulated that one of his great feats is overcoming a dragon so that waters that have been dammed up can flow freely over the earth, and another of his feats is the companion one where he defeats a sea dragon that threatens flood. In one case, he relieves a situation which was one of drought (the world was too dry) and in the other he relieves a situation which was one of threatened destruction by water (when the world would have been too wet). The hero is a cosmicizing force, and belongs to the world-making phase which is related to the young gods and can be identified as their king—the Indra figure.

The hero's adventures occur after the emergence of the universe and I shall first consider briefly that process of emergence as it was conceived anthropomorphically. Michael Witzel's insight that there is a "grammar" of myth (2000–1: 54; 2008: 264; 2012: 16) will be found valuable in this connection. He

proposes that the “grammar” may be found in sequence and has dealt at length with the idea of the cosmogonic sequence occurring in an extensive sweep of cultures that he has called Laurasian.

### **The origin story**

Witzel has laid a foundation for taking a cladistic approach to myth (2012: 17, 68, 74–75), and I think this approach is very promising, and that it will eventually be feasible to explore myth’s world-wide connections by this means. I suggest, however, that a more detailed morphology is required before this can be done effectively, and I shall offer an extended form of part of his proposed Laurasian story line as found in the Indo-European context. I am aware of the importance of being able to relate to different cultures that may have treated the components differently and of the fact that a broad connection will sometimes be possible where a more detailed one will not. I think, however, that it is better to specify particulars within the broader structural pattern so that these can be brought into the discussion when relevant. It will be seen that I propose a break-down into four separate generation slots where the Witzel list has simply one slot for the set. If components are broken down like this, comparison can be more precise in cases where detailed connections can be made. If detailed connections cannot be made, the generation items can be grouped together and a comparison can be made at the level of the set.

Similarly, when Witzel notes the importance of a stage after the separation of Heaven and Earth when “other actions are necessary to turn the young world into a liveable space (*oikumene*)” (Witzel 2012: 77), I think it is desirable, and perhaps essential, to group these activities and list them in some detail, preferably in an ordered sequence. Again, in some cases when comparison is undertaken the details will coincide while in other cases it will be possible to compare only at the group level. Here, the main revision I suggest takes the form of establishing a group. When the range of items within the group becomes more firmly established, it will probably be found desirable to give the separate components greater prominence. If we regard the provisional mytheme listing initially offered (Witzel 2012: 64) as rather fluid for the present, we should be able through discussion to arrive at optimum statements that can be used with some confidence in the proposed cladistic endeavour.

The “grammar” of myth has temporal depth. In human terms, the passage of time is marked by the generations, and Witzel draws attention to a sequence of humans as well as gods. He comments that Laurasian mythology makes use of the human experience of directly knowing members of only a few generations “to explain the development of the world and its governing forces, the deities” (2012: 427, cf. 576 n. 24). Similarly, I have shown (2012: 39–46, 116–117) that the human and divine sequences in the Indo-European context can be seen to match each other closely, and that in both cases there is a four-generation capsule which contains both the living generation of people and the equivalent young gods (the *Devas*, in Indian

terms) and a contrasted group consisting of the three preceding generations and the equivalent old gods (the Asuras).

In the light of the Indo-European complex I have been exploring, I propose an expansion of part of Witzel's Laurasian list. The story line of the Laurasian type as presented by Witzel (2012: 64) contains the following items in the relevant section (Table 1):

- 4 (Father) Heaven / (Mother) Earth and their children  
(4 or 5 generations / ages)
- 5 heaven pushed up (and origin of Milky Way)
- 6 the hidden sun light revealed
- 7 current gods defeat and kill their predecessors
- 8 killing the dragon (and use of heavenly drink), fertilization of the earth

Table 1. *Components 4–8 in Witzel's provisional list of major mythemes in Laurasian mythology.*

These items in Witzel's list are preceded by three non-anthropomorphic ones, but the sequence of anthropomorphic beings runs from his fourth item, and it is this sequence that gives the four-generation pattern that can be studied in the Indo-European context. The gods in my proposed listing (Table 2) are identified in Indian terms.

- 4 First-generation divinity. Generation 1.
- 5 Emergence of a second-generation divinity. Generation 2.
- 6 Emergence of other divinities that complete the set of gods of the cosmic levels (the Asuras), and conflict among the old gods. Generation 3.
- 7 Emergence of the young gods (the Devas), including the hero-king (Indra). Generation 4.
- 8 The cosmicizing actions of the hero (cf. Witzel 7). These include: (a) propping up heaven (= Witzel 5), (b) releasing the waters withheld by a dragon so fertilizing the earth (= Witzel 8), (c) defeating a water dragon so preventing flood, and (d) releasing the young sun goddess from captivity (= Witzel 6).

Table 2. *Lyle list of mythemes corresponding to the Witzel list in Table 1.*

### **The hero's release of the waters**

I have related "the cosmicizing actions of the hero" to Witzel's component 7: "current gods defeat and kill their predecessors". The only beings that existed before the young gods were the old gods identified with the cosmic levels, so that, if we follow the logic of this cosmic sequence, the "dragon" that is the opponent of Indra in his attempt to release the waters must be identifiable as one of the old gods, and I have argued that this dragon is the goddess, Earth (Lyle 2012: 105–107). The creature is simply named *Vṛtra* (obstruction) in the *Ṛgveda*, and the sole

function of Vṛtra is to signal the state of things that precedes the life-giving release of the waters. Indra's action results in this release of the waters.

Witzel highlights the importance of this cosmic event and places it in context (2012: 78):

[T]he new earth is not yet ready for living beings. It has to receive moisture, whether water or the blood of a primordial creature. In many traditions, it is the latter. The primordial gods' children, the Greek Titans, Indian Asuras, or Japanese Kuni.no Kami (gods of the earth), are depicted by their younger and victorious cousins, the Olympian gods, the Indian Devas, and the Japanese Ama.no Kami (heavenly gods), as monsters who have to be slain or at least subdued (for the time being, for a year). Most prominent in these fights is the slaying of the primordial dragon by the Great Hero, a descendant of Father Heaven. In India it is Indra who kills the three-headed reptile just like his Iranian "cousin" Fraētaona kills a three-headed dragon and their distant counterpart in Japan, Susa.no Wo, kills the eight-headed monster (Yamata.no Orochi). ... [I]t is only after the earth has been fertilized by the dragon's blood or water released by him that it can support life.

As noted in this passage, the Indo-European form of the dragon may have three heads. When Indra destroys the monstrous creature, named Trisiras or Viśvarupa (West 2007: 260), the three heads have important roles in the story since there is a triple emergence from them after Indra's victory. This emergence results when the heads are cut off by Indra, or by the axe of a woodcutter acting on his behalf. In one version, found in the *Mahābhārata* (van Buitenen 1973–, Books 4 and 5 (1978): 203; 5 [49] 9.35) from the mouths of the severed heads "there came forth heathcocks, partridges, and sparrows, in all directions", while in another version, from the *Bṛhaddevatā* of Saunaka, the heads themselves become birds: "The head which had drunk Soma became a heathcock; the head which had drunk wine became a sparrow; and that with which he had eaten food became a partridge." (O'Flaherty 1975: 71). I have elsewhere argued that a triple emergence in this cosmic framework is a form of the birth story of the young sun goddess and her twin brothers (2012: 101-109, 111), and I shall treat it as such in this discussion. This specific Indian case can be interpreted as a veiled statement of the birth of the Ásvins (perhaps paired as connected with secular food and drink) and a third being, the goddess (perhaps connected here with the sacred soma). However, leaving that specific interpretation aside, we can note that it is when heads are removed that emergence can take place, and a Greek parallel is provided by the decapitation of Medusa which results in the emergence of Pegasus and Chrysaor. In the Greek context also, it is possible to point to the simultaneous hatching of Helen and her twin brothers, the Dioscouroi, from the egg laid by Leda after she conceived by Zeus when he had taken the shape of a swan (Gantz 1993: 321). My understanding in connection with the present narrative is that the container which holds the three young gods, and from which they simultaneously emerge, is the dragon, and that this dragon is the primal goddess. The defeat of this dragon results in both the

release of the flow of waters, and also the birth of the young goddess and her twin brothers.

Since events in the cosmogonic series are recalled annually in the course of the ritual cycle, this gives us the opportunity to examine mythic events from two different angles. Both Hanns-Peter Schmidt (1968) Michael Witzel (2007) have concluded that there are two separate dragon stories in the Ṛgveda, one relating to the release of the sun and the other relating to the release of the waters (cf. West 2007: 261), and Witzel has in some contexts placed the “releasing the waters” at midsummer (e.g. 2007: 204, 216–220). This is partly at least because it is named in connection with the mid-day pressing of soma and this ritual action might be projected by correspondence onto the middle of summer. However, it should be noted that the pressing of the soma gives only a threefold sequence of morning, mid-day, and evening and, when there are only three points marked out in the day, they can only give a general indication of points within the entire year. Witzel has also been interested in showing how an earlier dragon narrative was transformed “into a Western Central Asian (Bactrian) myth of releasing the waters of the late spring snow melt by the rivers of Afghanistan” (2004: 601). Similarly, Harry Falk (1998: 87) had already explored the Vedic release of the waters in relation to different places and periods noting that, “In the West, it is the rivers in spring which may fail to swell, and, in the East, it is the rain around the summer solstice on which everything depends.” Witzel also speaks of the monsoon rains (2007: 217). There is clearly some diversity, but it can be argued that the basic idea is the releasing of the waters of a spring so as to nourish the earth and that, although rain might also be involved, it would not be at the centre of the stories. That is, we would be dealing primarily with terrestrial and subterranean, rather than celestial, waters (cf. Green 2003: 89-152).

The release might sometimes be associated with the day strongly connected in Europe with a dragon myth—St. George’s Day, that corresponds to Beltane (1 May) in the Celtic calendar and marks the beginning of summer pasturing. The Croatian scholar, Radoslav Katičić, in *Die Hauswirtin am Tor*, speaks of the rushing waters in the spring or well that serves as a door between the halves of the year (2003: 83–84). He speaks of “the golden key with which, according to Slavic belief, the earth is opened in the spring” (2003: 82, n. 98; my translation) and, drawing on Russian song, he states (78) that: “The bees have to bring a golden key from beyond the sea with which the winter is locked and the summer unlocked. The year appears here divided into two parts, summer and winter.” He also notes specifically that St. George’s sword acts like a key to open the fertility cycle of the year when he strikes off the dragon’s head (81–82).

Turning back to the Ṛgvedic pair of the dragon myths involving the release of the sun goddess and the release of the waters (to which is attached the birth of the sun goddess and her twin brothers) we can see that, if they are to form a coherent pattern, the “release of the goddess” must occur at a later point in the cosmogonic narrative. Witzel has carefully noted that the goddess exists before her release (2002: 3); the full winter story is one of the disappearance and re-appearance of the sun goddess while the summer story treats her birth.



## The defeat of the sea dragon

Studies of the R̥gveda have not, so far as I am aware, brought to light among its hymns any traces of a story of the defeat of a sea dragon but this story is vividly present elsewhere in the Indo-European context. Again, as with the “release of the sun goddess” and the “release of the waters” stories, it is necessary to distinguish as separate narratives materials that have sometimes been treated simply as variations on a single story. It is particularly difficult to make the distinction in the case of the “release of the waters” and the “prevention of flood” pair of stories, since they both have a water theme that may lead to their fusion in source material as well as in the scholarship.

The point about the difference between the two stories with a water theme can be made through Witzel’s comment on Indra and the dragon-slaying that releases the waters (2012: 150-151): “The Indo-Iranian myth, however, lacks the Old Japanese episode of freeing a young woman from the clutches of the dragon.” In the Susano.o story from Japan aspects of the “release of the waters” and the “prevention of flood” are found together (Lyle 2012: 109–110), and the rescue of the young woman that is present there is a key element of the “prevention of flood” story and does not belong with the “releasing of the waters”. The story of Susano.o’s fight with the dragon has been correctly classed as a story of the Perseus and Andromeda (or “sea monster”) type to which it predominantly belongs (Uther 2004: 1.174–85), although it has features, including the emergence of a weapon, which tie it to the “releasing of the waters” form.

According to the Japanese myth, an eight-headed dragon had previously eaten all the daughters of a couple except one and now demanded that the last of the daughters should be given to him to eat. The hero, Susano.o, comes along just in time to save the young woman from her fate. The story is well-established in Japanese mythology with a version in *Kojiki*, dated 712 CE, and three full variant versions in *Nihon Shoki*, dated 720 CE (Philippi 1969: 88–90; bk 1, ch. 19; Aston 1896: 52–58). I shall quote from a much later folktale version which was taken down in Japan by John Francis Campbell from the telling of his young Japanese assistant, Massanao. Campbell had seen a picture painted on wood that represented the legend and made a drawing of it (Figure 1), which he describes in this way (1876: 1.326–327): “Eight round china vases, breaking waves and the sea; a weird tree, and a storm of wind and rain driving at the man; eight heads, like the head of the dragon of the fountain [which Campbell had previously drawn].” Part of the story as told by Massanao and recorded by Campbell runs as follows:

The man got eight pots full of *sake*, and set them by the shore, and the girl behind them. He hid himself behind a rock. The Dragon came out of the sea, and put a head into each *sake* pot and drank till he was drunk. When he was drunk the man came and cut off all the eight heads. Then he chopped up the dragon; five inches (here my squire measured with his thumbs) was the biggest slice left when he had done. When he cut the tail (observe, he had but one tail) he found a long sword ... .

The legendary sword is so special that it was regarded as part of the imperial regalia of Japan, and, as a symbol of royal power, it can be compared with the thunderbolt of Zeus, the *vajra* of Indra, and the hammer of Thor. This weapon is understood to be the phallus of the sky god (Lyle 2012: 110), which was plucked from the dragon in the “releasing the waters” episode and not in that of the rescue of a young woman from a sea monster. The weapon, however, makes a connection between the two episodes. The hero acquires it in his earlier encounter with the water-releasing dragon or a comparable event and is able then to use it when he meets the sea dragon, as discussed in the next section.

### **The sequence of the two dragon fights on a water theme in terms of the hero’s weapon**

According to the interpretation offered here, when the sky is separated from the earth, the phallus of a god of the above is left embedded in the primal goddess. This is an instrument of power. It is useless while it is contained in the body of the earth and it is also obstructing the flow of life-giving water. Now comes the hero, and two of his feats are tightly connected with this situation. In the first he gains his weapon and in the second he employs it.

- 1 The hero plucks out the phallus and thereby gains a powerful weapon and releases the waters. He completes this action by opening a passage for the birth of the sun goddess and her twin brothers.
- 2 The hero uses his weapon to defeat the sea dragon. This feat is typified by attack within the body of the creature; the weapon tears up the monster from the inside.

The connection that I have proposed between the releasing of the waters and the securing of a weapon throws fresh light on the motif where the hero’s first feat is to gain a sword that is embedded in stone or metal, or has been deposited under a rock. In medieval romance, the young Arthur is revealed as king when he plucks out the sword embedded in an anvil which no one else has been able to remove, and this feat has already been equated with that of the young Theseus in lifting a rock and taking out his father’s sword (Littleton and Malcor 1994: 181–193). The hero both demonstrates his capacity by a feat of strength and equips himself for the challenges that lie ahead, one of these being the encounter with the sea dragon.

What is the hero to do when he encounters the huge sea monster? Susano.o resorts to trickery and the dragon consumes the *sake* left out for him and is rendered helpless. This episode brings out the trickster character of the cosmicizing hero, mentioned by Witzel (2012: 79, 138, 146, 180). In North American tradition, the trickster, Coyote, turns himself into an object that lies in the path of the water monster and, once he has been swallowed as intended, he attacks him from within (Fontenrose 1980: 511; Clark 1953: 172–175). This attack from inside the monster occurs in variants of the Perseus and Andromeda story and the parallel story of Herakles and Hesione.



Just after Perseus has slain Medusa, the following adventure befalls him (2.4.3; Frazer 1921: 1.158–161):

Being come to Ethiopia, of which Cepheus was king, he found the king's daughter Andromeda set out to be the prey of a sea monster. For Cassiepea, the wife of Cepheus, vied with the Nereids in beauty and boasted to be better than them all; hence the Nereids were angry, and Poseidon, sharing their wrath, sent a flood and a monster to invade the land. But Ammon having predicted deliverance from the calamity if Cassiepea's daughter Andromeda were exposed as a prey to the monster, Cepheus was compelled by the Ethiopians to do it, and he bound his daughter to a rock. When Perseus beheld her, he loved her and promised Cepheus that he would kill the monster, if he would give him the rescued damsel to wife. These terms having been sworn to, Perseus withstood and slew the monster and released Andromeda.

The word translated monster is *kêtos* and this can be a proper name, Ketos, used for this specific monster. Fontenrose remarks (1980: 291) that “Ketos is theriomorphic flood: according to some sources Poseidon sent both Ketos and a flood against the Ethiopians” (as he does in this passage from Apollodorus) but “clearly either sea monster or flood is sufficient”. The story of Herakles and Hesione is a doublet of that of Perseus and Andromeda. In this case the anger of Poseidon is aroused when Laomedon, King of Troy, refused to pay him what he had promised. Fontenrose made a summary from the various sources of the Hesione story from which the following paragraph is extracted (1980: 347; cf. Ganz 1993: 400–402):

[I]n anger Poseidon sent both a flood and a vast *kêtos* against Troy ... . The Trojans consulted an oracle, some say Apollo's, and were told that they must sacrifice noble maidens to the beast. In due course the turn of Laomedon's own daughter, Hesione, came round; Laomedon proclaimed that he would reward the man who should kill the monster with the immortal horses that Zeus had given him in payment for Ganymedes. Hesione was already bound to a rock on the shore when Herakles came by, saw her, and undertook to fight the monster for the promised reward. Athena helped him, making a high rampart of stone, to which he retreated when the ketos rushed upon him, and from which he leaped into the creature's open maw. He spent three days in the monster's belly, hacking away at his entrails until he killed him. He came forth to receive the cheers of the Trojans.

Fontenrose adds (1980: 348): “The Trojan Ketos is more closely identified with the companion flood than is his Ethiopian counterpart: for it is said that he spewed the floodwaters forth from his mouth or caused the flood by his movement through the sea.” It is no great step to see the flood-monster sent by Poseidon as a form of the sea-god himself. The god does not need an intermediary. He can himself threaten the land and people with flood and demand the payment of the maiden. It is this

level that is appropriate when treating the story as myth concerning the old and young gods.

The poet Lycophron, who alludes to many myths in cryptic terms in his *Alexandra*, tells the story of the rescue of the maiden, first by Herakles and then by Perseus, and in both cases he has the hero enter the monster's belly.

Cassandra prophesies an episode in Troy's history when it will be sacked by Herakles after the king, Laomedon, refuses to give him the immortal horses that he was promised as his reward. Ketos is referred to here as "Triton's hound". Herakles is devoured by the monster and attacks him from inside his body but the heat inside the creature makes his hair fall out. The passage is at lines 31–38 (Mooney 1921: 4–7) and is centred on Herakles:

... that lion whom  
The jaws of Triton's sharp-fanged hound consumed:  
Living he carved its vitals, but, being burnt  
By steam from cauldron on a fireless hearth,  
Dropped to the ground the bristles from his head.

When Lycophron tells the Perseus and Andromeda story, he mocks the sea monster by calling it a *kepthos* (seagull) instead of a *kêtos*. The voracious creature in such stories always gets an unpleasant surprise. Ketos, instead of consuming the virgin whom he intended to eat, swallows a decidedly indigestible hero. Perseus is identified as the son of Zeus who came to his mother, Danae in the form of a shower of gold, and as being able to fly like a bird with his winged sandals. Lycophron's reminiscence of the story of Medusa speaks of her look being able to turn men to stone and recalls that, when Perseus cut off her head, Chrysaor and Pegasus were born from her neck (as weasels were said to give birth from the mouth; cf. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 9.322). When Perseus is called a reaper, the indication is that his weapon is the sickle-shaped *harpe*, which he was given by Hermes. Lycophron, again speaking of a prophecy by Cassandra, draws attention to various features of the landscape including two rocks, and continues (lines 836–845; Mooney 1921: 90–91):

... two rocks, on which that stupid gull  
Leaped, seeking food, when with his jaws he snatched  
No maiden, but the eagle golden-sired,  
The liver-rending hero with winged shoes  
The loathed sea-monster, all its sinews cut,  
Slain by that reaper's razor then shall be,  
Who freed the man and horse born weasel-wise  
From neck of dam whose look can turn to stone,  
And, moulding living men from foot to head  
In statue form, with stone did case them round, ... .

Although the “defeat of the sea monster” story can take a variety of forms, this mode of attack from within seems particularly characteristic of it.

## **Conclusion**

The sea dragon is not simply presented as a threat to the young woman. The threat is to overwhelm the king’s country with water and, at the level of myth, we can see the hero acting to control the cosmic sea god, who takes a more primitive and monstrous shape than the one associated with the Greek god, Poseidon. The danger of flood spreading over the land and drowning the people is averted, and the sea is kept within its bounds. It is argued that the hero’s weapon is the sky-father’s phallus which was hidden within the body of the earth-mother, and that, before he could perform the various feats that lay ahead of him, he had to use his strength both to open up a space from which the world river flows, and to acquire a powerful weapon that would allow him to be victorious in his next fight.

The stories of the Greek heroes give us some insight into the idea of a sequence of adventures and, among these adventures, there are some that can be claimed as derivatives of myth. The individual episodes are diversified and a characteristic mode employed by the hero when he fights the water monster is the attack from within. Study of the detail of dragon fights allows us to postulate a series of events that were mythically regarded as making the world fit for habitation, as outlined in the beginning of this paper.

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to acknowledge the stimulus given by my being invited to speak at the exploratory seminar of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University on “Comparative and Historical Mythology,” on 6–7 October 2010. Much of the material from the paper prepared for that event appeared in Chapter 12, “The Linked Castration and Birth Theme and a Greek Pantheon”, of my book, *Ten Gods* (2012), and the present paper is a development from it. The topic was chosen to relate to the theme of “The Hero” selected for inclusion in the Fourth Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology which was run in association with the seminar.

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