Mythological Aspects of the ‘Return Song’ Theme and their Counterparts in North-western Europe

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Résumé : *Le thème de la « Chanson du Retour » (ATU 974 « The Homecoming Husband ») est principalement connu par sa plus ancienne variante enregistrée : l’*Odyssée *d’Homère. Ses nombreuses variantes sont largement répandues dans les cultures d’Europe et d’Asie centrale/occidentale. À partir du milieu du* XXe *siècle, une opinion avancée est que le type est hérité d’une tradition indo-européenne commune. Cependant, selon l’étude comparative complète de Viktor Zhirmunsky (1966), l’histoire est plus probablement originaire d’Asie centrale, près de l’Altaï. Dans son analyse, Zhirmunsky identifie deux variantes principales : une version « héroïque » plus ancienne en Asie et en Grèce antique avec un contenu mythologique ; et une version plus récente « romantique » qui caractérise les variantes européennes médiévales et modernes. Cet article vise à identifier et à interpréter d’autres variantes « héroïques » apparaissant dans le nord-ouest de l’Europe, et tente de les placer dans un contexte comparatif plus large. De brefs résumés comparatifs de l’*Odyssée *et de l’épopée d’Asie centrale d’Alpamysh sont fournis, et un réexamen des variantes scandinaves du Moyen Âge met en lumière des versions « héroïques » au sein des saga noroises, jusqu’alors non considérées par les comparatistes. Plus à l’ouest, de par son contenu et sa structure, un conte héroïque gaélique, avec de probables origines irlandaises, se révèle être un exemple supplémentaire de la version «héroïque» en Europe. Pour ce conte, l’influence littéraire de l’*Odyssée*, ainsi que la transmission par le biais de contacts norrois-gaéliques sont peu probables. Fait intéressant, le conte héroïque gaélique contient des caractéristiques structurelles et un contenu mythologique présents dans l’épopée d’Asie centrale mais absents de l’*Odyssée *grecque. Nous concluons par une discussion sur ce que ces faits peuvent révéler concernant les questions géographiques et historiques soulevées par la présence des variantes «héroïques» plus anciennes dans le nord-ouest de l’Europe.*

Mots-clés : *ATU 974, theme de la Chanson du Retour,* Odyssée *d’Homère, Alpamysh, mythologie comparée.*

Abstract : *The ‘Return Song’ theme (ATU 974 ‘The Homecoming Husband’) is most widely known from its oldest recorded variant: Homer’s* Odyssey*. Its numerous variants are widely distributed throughout the cultures of Europe and central/western Asia. From the mid-20th century, one view advanced is that the type is inherited from a common Indo-European tradition. However, according to Viktor Zhirmunsky’s (1966) comprehensive comparative study, the story more likely originated in Central Asia near the Altai. In his analysis Zhirmunsky identifies two main varieties: an older ‘heroic’ version in Asia and ancient Greece with mythological content; and a more recent ‘romantic’ version that characterises medieval and modern European variants. This paper aims to identify and interpret additional ‘heroic’ variants appearing in north-western Europe and attempts to place them in a wider comparative context. Brief comparative summaries of the* Odyssey *and the Central Asian epic Alpamysh are provided, and a re-*

examination of the Scandinavian variants from the Middle Ages brings to light 'heroic' versions from Norse saga literature heretofore not considered by comparatists. Further west, from its content and structure a Gaelic hero tale, with probable origins in Ireland, is revealed to be an additional example of the 'heroic' version in Europe. For this tale, influences from the literature of the Odyssey*, as well as transmission through Norse-Gaelic contacts are shown to be unlikely. Interestingly, the Gaelic hero tale contains structural features and mythological content present in the Central Asian epic but absent from the Greek* Odyssey*. We conclude with a discussion of what the evidence may reveal concerning the geographical and historical questions raised by the presence of the older 'heroic' variants in northwestern Europe.*
Keywords : *ATU 974, Return Song Theme, Homer's* Odyssey*, Alpamysh, Comparative Mythology .*

The theme of the Return Song describing the husband's return from a long series of trials and adventures to find his wife about to be married to another man is one of the most durable and widespread of epic themes known to us. In its written and oral forms it is found throughout Europe and as far east as Central Asia. It has provided entertainment to countless audiences of listeners over many generations, to a vast reading public in numerous languages, and the materials for an immense literature of scholarly commentary spanning more than two millennia. It is still most widely known in its literary form from Homer's *Odyssey*, but also appears in the folk narrative traditions of a wide distribution of cultures in Europe and Asia. The work of Lord and Parry has demonstrated that Homer's epic may well have been orally composed initially rather than originating as a written composition. As well as being the oldest attested version of the theme, the *Odyssey* is also one of the lengthiest, and its importance in the classical world cannot be overemphasized. Accounts of papyri from Ptolemaic Egypt and of the contents of libraries from that time provide reliable indications that it was surpassed only by the *Iliad* in its influence and popularity among the reading public.[1] There is compelling evidence from later oral tradition that the theme, revered among the Greeks, was carried by them over great distances in ancient times. In South Asia the 15th century Baluchi epic of the hero Šey Murīd is very likely descended from a version brought eastwards during the campaigns of Alexander the Great.[2] Later, the advent of literacy and the spreading of literary tales in medieval western Europe provided some scope for the diffusion of the Homeric version.

1. Casson, 2001, p. 54.
2. Badalkhan, 2004.

The Return Song Theme and the *Odyssey*

From the early 20th century, the emphasis on interpretations of Homer based primarily on the materials and methods of comparative philology has broadened to include an effort by folklorists to situate the Greek epic within a wider narrative context. Drawing on oral variants of the story from a large distribution of language groups, comparative research has revealed a coherent theme characterized by a consistent structure and content, and truly international in its scope. The numerous variants are listed by folktale scholars as ATU 974 'The Homecoming Husband' in Uther's international folktale classification. The tale type is given by Uther in summary:

In the absence of her husband (lover) who is far away on a journey (in prison), a woman is forced to choose another husband. The first husband (disguised, as beggar) returns (with supernatural help, carried during a deep sleep, warned by a dream) on the wedding day and discloses his identity to his wife (by a ring well known to her), is recognized by domestic animals (horse, dog), or answers the woman's questions correctly (concerning features of the house or birthmark:). The revenge on the rival follows.[3]

The above comparison-based summary, so similar to the story of the *Odyssey,* has survived in written and oral forms as folktale, legend, and song from medieval times, and is well-established in western Europe (Germany, Italy, France), as well as in the Slavic areas, Hungary, Romania and parts of central Asia.[4] Given the popularity and the respect surrounding the *Odyssey* in the ancient world, some scholars have regarded the variants of the story appearing outside of Greece from the Middle Ages as derived from Homer's epic. Methodical comparisons of the folk variants carried out during the 20th century no longer support this position, and the current view is that the origins of *Odyssey*, together with variants of the theme from Europe and beyond, are to be found in an ancient travelling international folktale.[5] In support of this is the evidence showing the extent to which the story can vary from one tradition to the next, as well as the great variety of traditions in which it occurs.

As a result of researches by Albert Lord, Milman Parry, and more recently, John Miles Foley, much attention since the 1930s has focused on the South Slavic epic traditions of the story. In addition to the light thrown by such work on the processes of oral composition, a clearer understanding of the structure of the story, and of the relationship between the South Slavic and Homeric traditions, has emerged. The structure posited by Lord as characterizing the 'story pattern' underlying these and related traditions consists of a progression of five ordered

3. Uther 1, 2004, p. 607-608.
4. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 276.
5. Tolstoi, 1934, p. 265, 274; Hansen, 2002, p. 207; Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 277.

elements: 1. Absence 2. Devastation 3. Return 4. Retribution 5.Wedding.[6] It is a story-pattern that has shown a remarkable stability, spanning centuries and extending over a large geographic area and multiple folklore genres.[7] Foley's 1987 article offers a fruitful explanation from what comparisons of variants have revealed. In his view, the Return Song theme is a powerful example of an epic conveying a body of psycho-historical knowledge that is shared, though not often explicitly articulated, within a culture. In this sense, it functions - as do many narrative folktales - as a map or pattern for personal psychic development, charting the steps of psychological growth throughout one's life.

In addition to belonging to the same international tale type, the Greek and South Slavic traditions are regarded by scholars as having a particularly close relationship, and indeed they share a number of unique features.[8] Both begin not with the first part of the logical story sequence, but *in medias res*: the returning husband in his disguise offers up a deceptive tale; an animal or female relative dies of shock at his return; and the captive hero is released at the intervention of a goddess or a woman.

Such close parallels together with a host of others drawn from the theme's greater geographic area have led to speculation as to whether an original international folktale, in addition to being of great antiquity, was inherited from Indo-European times.[9] Comparatists studying the *Odyssey* have long been aware that certain of its formulaic phrases are also present in other Indo-European language traditions, notably the *Rig Veda*, and appear to derive from a common tradition some 4-5000 years ago. Traces of stories or themes, mostly mythological, from a common Indo-European source have been identified and explored in the works of Georges Dumézil and other comparative mythologists.[10] Yet recent scholarship has produced no convincing evidence that the *Odyssey* storyline or any of its counterparts can be traced back to these specific origins; what we seem to have, ultimately, is a further good example of a 'wandering folktale'. Within this context, a more likely candidate for the *Odyssey* is a group of closely related Central Asian epics recounting the exploits of Alpamysh, summarized below, and recorded mostly during the twentieth century. The evidence suggests that sometime before the formation of the *Odyssey* the story entered the Greek world as a wandering folktale, possibly through Black Sea trade contacts or through Anatolia.[11]

6. in Foley, 1987, p. 96.

7. Foley, 1987, p. 95. Cf. Finnegan's discussion of the structure of folktales (167-169), and the close correspondence with Labov's model for narrative syntax therein comprising orientation > complicating action > evaluation > resolution > coda.

8. Hansen, 2002, p. 206.

9. Badalkhan, 2004, p. 286, 290; Foley, 1987, p. 95; Jamison, 1999, p. 228 *et passim*.

10. Littleton, 1973, esp. Chs. 3,4.

11. M.L. West, 2007, p. 437-440.

Wider Comparisons: 'Heroic' and 'Romantic' Forms

The most incisive contribution to the understanding of the Return Song theme as an international folktale was provided in the 1960s by Victor Zhirmunsky[12] in his analysis of the distribution of variants of ATU 974, and his conclusions serve as a useful point of departure for our purposes of historical comparison. Zhirmunsky regards the 'eastern' versions of the story, primarily comprising the Central Asian epics and the *Odyssey,* with the striking parallels they share, as fundamentally 'heroic' in their orientation.[13] Their central theme is 'the heroic struggle of a king in exile against his enemies, who in his absence have taken his house and his wife and have usurped power in his homeland'. By contrast, 'western' versions of 'The Return of the Husband' are characterised as 'novelistic and romantic' in character, where the youthful hero takes leave of his wife and later at her wedding feast reveals his identity through any one of a number of devices.[14]

'Romantic' Variants

The earliest example dates from the early 10th century CE, and the story appears in a variety of genres of medieval narrative in Europe. Qualities such as faith and fidelity are emphasized; typically, the husband returns from the Crusades, and it is possible that the type gained currency in medieval Europe by this association. Additional frequent features are the agreement by the couple covering a period of seven years; detention of the husband abroad; learning of the upcoming wedding from a herd or peasant; disguise as a beggar, pilgrim or minstrel; an altercation while entering the venue of the wedding feast; recognition by means of a song, a ring or a physical mark; and either punishment of or reconciliation with the rival, depending on the circumstances. It is predominantly such 'western' versions that we find described and listed under ATU 974 in the ATU classification index, as well as in the entry for the type in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* .[15] Well-known examples of this 'romantic' variety are to be found in the medieval *Gesta Romanorum* (no. 193) and Caesarius of Heisterbach. It appears in the British Isles most notably in the ballads 'King Horn' and 'Sir Orfeo', and in 20th century Scottish Gaelic tradition in two geographically separated variants.[16]

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12. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 275-277, 284.
13. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 278.
14. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 275-277.
15. Holzapfel, 1990, p. 702-707.
16. McLaughlin, 1975, p. 305-306; Reichl, 1994; Scottish Gaelic variants from late 19th century Perthshire (Stewart Murray, 2009, p. 162-165), and from a Gaelic singer recorded in Nova Scotia by the writer in 1978 (for texts and discussion see Seathach, 2014).

‘Heroic’ Variants

Let us now turn to the heroic variants and what an examination of them may reveal of the early history and development of the Return Song. The likely Central Asian origins suggested for the central theme of the *Odyssey*, noted above, would have to have stemmed from cultural contacts at an early period and over a considerable geographical distance. A more detailed look at each of these traditions will bring out the close parallels on which the conjecture is founded, and which shed additional light on the tale’s early development.

The following summary of Homer’s *Odyssey* given below for purposes of comparison, is based on that provided for the same purposes by Hansen:[17]

> Odysseus takes leave of his wife Penelope, their infant son Telemachos, and his kingdom of Ithaka, to join the ten-year war at Troy, saying that if he does not return by the time their son can grow a beard, Penelope is free to remarry. After the fall of Troy, determined to return to his kingdom, he spends a further eventful decade of wanderings and adventures; these include a visit to the Underworld under the direction of the enchantress Circe, and seven years confined on an island with Calypso in her mythically decorated cave. Eventually, longing to return home, and following an intercession by the goddess Athena, he is magically transported back to Ithaka in the ‘intelligent ships’ of the Phaeacians, vessels that were supernaturally swift, could find their way safely to their destinations without pilots or rudders, and could read men’s thoughts. On his arrival, he learns that suitors have been wooing Penelope and consuming his wealth for three years, while Penelope has waited faithfully. In the guise of a beggar Odysseus craftily extracts the necessary news from his loyal swineherd, then reveals his true identity to his son Telemachos, now grown. Odysseus visits the palace in his disguise; he is ritually mocked for his appearance at a feast by the suitors; he engages in a round of boxing with the local Irus, and learns from Penelope that the time is fast approaching for her to consider remarrying. Penelope is taken in by Odysseus’ disguise and misleading personal history, but his elderly nurse recognizes him from an old scar. Penelope tells him of her intention to hold a contest among the suitors where the one who can string Odysseus’ great bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe-heads arranged in a row will marry her. Odysseus alone succeeds, and then reveals his identity. All of the suitors are slain; Penelope subjects Odysseus to a final test based on knowledge only shared by them – the construction of their marriage-bed – and the kingdom is restored.

17. 2002, p. 205-206; cf. 1997, p. 446-451.

In addition to the surface theme of *nostos* ('return'), the story of Odysseus' exile, like many another tale, can be regarded as containing layers of significance, often corresponding to its historical development. Prominent among these are Odysseus' wanderings in the Underworld and the background they provide to the central theme. From as early as the late 19th century it has been suggested that Odysseus' wanderings, as symbolized by his visit to Hades, his confinement by Calypso ('the Concealer') in her cave, his sojourn with Circe, and his visit to the mysterious island of the Phaeacians, are all closely associated with, if not based on, the mythological theme of a voyage through the Underworld and the realm of the dead.[18] Tolstoi (269) provides the interesting observation that as a result of his journey Odysseus is the only one in the epic whose physical appearance, because of his disguise, has so changed that he is unrecognizable to those closest to him. We find the same detail reproduced in numerous and widely distributed oral versions of the story, lending weight to its centrality. Indeed, the contribution of parallels from outside the Homeric canon has been pointed out by Lord (1960, 158) in his remark that the *Odyssey* 'must be understood in terms of other songs that are current'. One such tradition of particular importance to understanding the spread and history of the story pattern in Europe and Asia is that of the 'heroic wooing' (*Brautwerbung*) of Penelope, from outside the Homeric canon. The legend, which has come down through Apollodoros (3.10.8,9) and Pausanias (3.12.2), recounts how the kings of Greece, Odysseus among them, gathered in Sparta to compete for the hand of Penelope. Odysseus won the footrace, and ever resourceful, advised Tyndareus, in exchange for his help, on how to avoid strife among the remaining suitors. For comparatists, as we shall see below, it suggests the possibility that in earlier variants of the Greek story, the return of Ulysses was preceded by an earlier episode involving a bridal contest.

The Alpamysh Epics and their Earliest Settings

So far as is known, the origins of the epics or hero-tales of Alpamysh mentioned above are in Eurasia or Central Asia.[19] They form a part of the traditions of the Turkic peoples, and have been recorded over a vast territory extending from the Altai in the east to the Aegean; they may well be the oldest epic tales surviving in that language group.[20] The stories have come down in various forms: as a folktale, a heroic tale, as alternating prose and verse ('prosimetric'), and as a

18. Schambach and Müller, 1885, p. 396, cited in Tolstoi, 1934, p. 269-270; cf. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 282.

19. My thanks to Karl Reichel for providing references and suggestions for this section and throughout

20. Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, 1969, p. 292-293.

sung verse epic.[21] From the variants available,[22] the social context is clearly tribal, particularly at the centre of the story's territory, and variants have been shown to reflect the history and social evolution of the various Turkic regions.[23] What Reichl terms the 'common Turkic version' he believes appeared sometime around the 11th century;[24] Zhirmunsky places the initial formulation of the epic in the Altai region some 3 to 5 centuries earlier.[25] Reconstruction in this case is not easy, considering the gaps in the recorded history of Central Asia. In any case, the parallels with the *Odyssey* outlined below are that much more remarkable when we consider the passing of well over a millennium between the probable time of the Alpamysh epic's emergence in the Altai and the 20th century transcriptions made in central Asia; it is an impressive witness to the strength and tenacity of the story pattern.
The most widely-known version is an Uzbek sung epic printed in 1939. It exceeds the *Odyssey* slightly in length, consisting of some 14,000 verses and dating back as far as 1500 CE.[26] A lengthier, more detailed summary of performances taken down from the Uzbek singer in the 1920s is provided by Reichl.[27]
The story is in two parts: a heroic wooing; and the return of the hero, resulting in recovery of the bride and of the hero's restoration to leadership of the tribe.[28]

> Alpamysh and Barchin, the offspring of two chieftain brothers in the Kungrat tribe are 'betrothed in the cradle'. The brothers fall out and Baisary departs with his daughter Barchin to the territory of the Kalmucks, where her beauty attracts suitors. Barchin, given a six-month period of grace, announces a contest for her hand consisting of horse-racing, archery, and wrestling, and sends word secretly to Alpamysh. With his magic, winged steed and the help of a loyal friend Alpamysh triumphs in the contests, marries Barchin and returns with her to his tribe.
> The second part opens with Alpamysh and his warriors setting out to aid Barchin's father, who is being mistreated by the Kalmuks. The company of warriors is intercepted by a witch accompanied by comely maidens, and they attend a feast. In the ensuing drunken sleep all are done away with by the Kalmuks with the exception of Alpamysh, who alone survives because he is invulnerable to weapons. His magic sleep lasts for

21. Reichl, 1992, p. 160-161; 2000, p. 21-36.
22. Zhirmunsky, 1966; Reichl, 1992, p. 333–353.
23. Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, 1969, p. 314-318.
24 Reichl, 1992, p. 350.
25 Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 274.
26. Summarized by Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 268-269.
27. 1992, p. 161-164.
28. Zhirmunsky and Chadwick, 1969, p. 293; cf. Reichl, 1992, p. 164.

> seven (or more) days, during which time he is confined underground in a dungeon or pit. He spends seven years in captivity in the Kalmuk dungeon until he catches the fancy of the daughter of the Shah. She helps him make his escape on his horse, and Alpamysh defeats the Kalmuks, appointing a new shah. In the meantime the leadership of the Kungrat tribe has been usurped by Alpamysh's half-brother Ultan, who routinely mistreats Alpamysh's relatives, leaving them destitute as he pursues an unwilling Barchin, even going so far as to prepare their wedding feast. Upon returning from his long absence Alpamysh learns of this from an old shepherd who recognizes him by a birth-mark; Alpamysh disguises himself in the shepherd's garments and goes to the wedding feast, where, unrecognized, he sees for himself the state of his tribe and tests their loyalty. In the archery contest only he can draw the great bow that was once his. Still incognito, he then enters into an exchange of barbed improvised quatrains with the usurper's mother, and kinder ones with Barchin. He sees that Barchin has remained faithful, his identity is revealed, and together with those loyal to him he defeats his half-brother Ultan and his followers. The Kungrat tribe, after an appropriate epic feast, is reunited under his rule.

The similarities with the main story of the *Odyssey* are clearly evident. The most dramatic of these is the contest with the bow which only the hero can string.[29] A further episode held uniquely in common is the recognition of the hero by an animal (Odysseus's old dog Argos, and an old camel from his sister's herd who rises, scenting the returning Alpamysh) before he reveals his identity at the banquet. There is as well the maltreatment of the hero's family, including his son, by a usurper. Further clear parallels are found in other traditions: the bride/wife putting off the eager suitors by using a period of grace, or the completion of a piece of weaving, as a delaying tactic; the hero's identification by those close to him from a distinctive mark on the body; both heroes being confined in underground places for various lengths of time, and aided in their escape by a woman (the Shah's daughter aids Alpamysh, with South Slavic parallels) or a goddess (Athena), who had been to some degree in charge of their fate. Alpamysh's means of transport is his magic winged horse (*tulpar*), who in some variants pulls him out of his underground dungeon by means of its tail; shortly after he is freed from Calypso's cave, Odysseus is swiftly transported home to Ithaca on the supernaturally guided, 'intelligent' ships of the Phaeacians. The

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29. Archery contests are a feature of the oral traditions of heroic societies and are associated elsewhere with weddings. For Hittite, Egyptian, and Indic parallels see Morris 1997, p. 621; Jamison, 1999, p. 243-265; M.L. West 2007, p. 433, 439-440; Lyle, 2008, p. 361.

'double plot' of the Alpamysh epic may well be an archaic feature of this heroic version of the story, if we accept the importance of the wooing by Odysseus in Sparta found in traditions outside of the Homeric canon.
There are earlier variants of the Central Asian epic that are of some importance to the wider context of comparison that interests us. In his survey of the history and spread of the Alpamysh epic, Zhirmunsky[30] draws attention to a modern Altaic variant that he regards as retaining the most archaic stages of the story:

> Alyp Manash is a son of Baybaraq, a hero in the Altai. He reads in the book of prophecies of the name of his bride-to-be, a beautiful girl whose eager suitors have until then all been put to death. Although already married, Alyp Manash mounts his horse, and sets out on his quest to woo her, crossing a river with the ferryman who expresses sorrow for him and with whom he leaves a life token. As he approaches the home of the prospective bride, his horse stops to warn him, but Alyp Manash ignores it and the horse flies away. He then falls into a deep sleep. When the bride's father learns of his arrival, he sends an ogre after him, but the ogre, frightened at his great size, returns. The bride's father then sends out an army, but Alyp Manash is invulnerable and their weapons bend like blades of grass when used against him. Finally, the bride's father has a deep pit excavated to a depth of 90 fathoms and Alyp Manash, still asleep, is thrown in. After nine months, he awakes and manages to send a message via a wild goose to his new relatives, who respond by sending a close friend of his to rescue him. Through a perceived slight, however, the friend fails to carry out the rescue and Alyp Manash remains confined in his prison. His horse, who is been residing in heaven as a star, descends to help him, but is not strong enough to pull him out with his tail. Instead, he goes in search of a magic golden foam that will increase his master's strength enough to liberate him. This is duly obtained and Alyp Manash, once free, slays the ogre, the prospective bride and her father. Alyp Manash and his horse then transform themselves, each assuming an ordinary, shabby appearance. They encounter the ferryman again, who informs him that his bosom friend has deceived his close relatives and intends to marry his wife. Arriving at the wedding feast, Alyp Manash exchanges songs with his wife as a means of testing her loyalty, and then when this is expressed, the false friend transforms himself into a crane and leaves by way of the hole in the top of the yurt. Alyp Manash takes up his iron bow and looses an arrow at the crane, grazing it. His return is marked by a wedding feast.

30. 1966, p. 272-273; cf. Reichl, 1992, p. 333-351.

In his discussion of the imagery of the tale, Zhirmunsky emphasizes the symbolism drawn from mythology. The bride's homeland is a place of no return at the end of the world, 'where Sky and Earth draw together' - in other words, a realm of the dead - reached by crossing a sizable river with its own Charon. The shape-changing recalls shamanic beliefs, prevalent among peoples to the east of the Altai, and the deep pit where he is confined evokes the Underworld, whose champions are his adversaries. On the basis of the comparison of these and other Central Asian variants, Zhirmunsky reconstructs what he believes to be an outline of the earliest form of the story:

> A hero is born possessed of superhuman strength and invulnerability, and carrying a distinctive birthmark that reveals his distinguished lineage. His first deed involves shooting with a miraculous bow, and he comes into possession of the magic horse. In the first part of the double plot, he sets out, accompanied by his steed, on a quest for a bride who lives in a far-off place separated by water. Arriving humbly disguised he wins her in a contest (often consisting of three events). Various champions attempt to abduct her. He recovers her and takes her home. In the second part, the hero falls into an enchanted sleep and is held underground/in the Underworld for seven years. At home his wife is carried off by rivals. With magic help the hero escapes, returns home as his wife is about to be wed. The sequence of events with the disguise and wedding feast largely replicate those in the first part. The hero then reveals his true identity and defeats his rivals.[31]

Heroic Variants in Norse Traditions

The entries for northern Europe under ATU 974 'The Homecoming Husband' in Uther's 2004 classification, in addition to being overwhelmingly of the 'romantic' variety are also noteworthy for the apparent scarcity of the theme in modern song and narrative in Nordic traditions when compared to those of Continental Europe and the British Isles.[32] A search of the *Motif-index of Folk Literature,*[33] however, yields a more complete picture. The references

31. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 284-285.

32. In his migratory legends classification Christiansen (1992) cites only ML 8005 'The Soldier's Return' from Norway, belonging to the 'Western' variety. A small number of similar Swedish variants are listed by af Klintberg, 2010, p. 412. The same applies to Ireland, despite its wealth of oral tradition: besides the orally based manuscript variant mentioned below, under the tale type AT 974 Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen (1963) list a single example from Donegal that on examination appears to be at best tenuous.

33. Thompson, 1955-1958; s.v. N681. 'Husband (lover) arrives home just as wife [mistress] is to marry another', *et passim.*

provided to the medieval saga literature furnish examples, which, unlike their neighbouring European counterparts, are decidedly heroic in character. Four such stories are to be found in Books 1 and 7 of the Danish history *Gesta Danorum*, written in Latin, from around 1200. The first accounts concern King Halfdan:

> In Book 7 is the account of Sygrutha, a princess of Götaland, being courted by a suitor of inferior background. Halfdan is consulted, and advises her father to pretend to consent while he himself deals with the situation. He appears among the guests at the celebration as a 'man of superhuman size' in a 'hideous disguise', and seats himself beside the prospective bridegroom whom he roundly insults, forcing him into a sword confrontation and slaying him in the hall.[34]
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> Later on in Book 7 is an episode presumably derived from a similar heroic variant but this time with the familiar bipartite structure, in which Halfdan expresses an active interest in Gurith, but is rebuffed by her as not being of sufficient standing. He extracts a promise from her not to share her bed with any man until she has received certain tidings of his return or his demise. With a view to winning her hand, Halfdan undertakes to demonstrate for all to see his prowess as a warrior, faring forth as far as Russia and gathering an impressive number of exploits to his name, including the slaying of his own half-brother Hildinger. In the meantime Sivar of the Saxons begins to pursue Gurith, who now secretly prefers Halfdan due to the fearsome reputation he has accrued, thus effectively allowing him to prevail in the bride contest. Gurith prevaricates by imposing conditions on Sivar that he must consolidate his power within Denmark, but Sivar circumvents these by the placing of bribes, and a betrothal is agreed. Upon hearing of this, Halfdan hastens back from Russia and quietly places his men in strategic locations for the wedding celebration. He enters the palace unrecognized, and faces Gurith, addressing her in cryptic verse. Gurith replies in verse that she has waited long and faithfully, and before she has finished her reply Halfdan has cut down Sivar and most of the Saxons present, and his retainers take care of the rest.[35]

The story in Book 1 of King Gram following his war against the Finns provides a simple one-part version of the heroic variety:

> King Gram is engaged to Signe, daughter of the King of the Finns. While he is away on a war expedition he is informed that her father has

34. Saxo Grammaticus, 1996, p. 207.
35. Saxo Grammaticus, 1996, p. 222-225.

> betrothed her to Henry, King of Saxony. Gram abandons all and hastens secretly to Finnmark to find the wedding already underway. Disguised in rags, he enters the hall as a healer, and takes his place among the poor at the table. At the height of the revelries, he comes forth with a bellicose song and follows it up by slaughtering the bridegroom along with many of the guests, and abducting Signe.[36]

A further version, recounting the courtship and marriage of King Hading, can be seen to consist of two episodes on the heroic pattern that we've seen above, here incorporating the widespread motif of the ring as a token of identification for the returning husband:

> Upon learning that Regnhild, daughter of a king Hakon, is to marry a giant, the warrior Hading journeys to Norway and disposes of the unwanted suitor. The princess does not know her rescuer. She tends him as he is covered with wounds from the combat, and in order that she might later identify him she inserts a ring into a wound in his leg. When her father grants her free choice of a husband[37] she examines the men present at the banquet and finds the ring. She and Hading marry

Interestingly, the episode immediately following describes Hading's journey through the Underworld, 'one of the most detailed accounts of a visit to the Other World in a non-Christian setting'. Hading, still a guest at the king's dwelling, is shown stalks of hemlock by a strange woman, who conducts him through the realm of the dead,[38] in order to show him where the plants originated. Upon his safe return Hading, accompanied by his wife, leaves for his homeland.[39]

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36. Saxo Grammaticus, 1996, p. 18-19.

37. An example of *svayamvara* 'own choice' where the prospective bride is free to choose among the suitors vying for her hand. West notes (2007, p. 439) that Penelope was free to exercise this option had Odysseus failed to return, and the practice is associated with a royal context in cultures from India to ancient Gaul. Cf. Lyle, 2008, p. 357-362.

38. Cf. Lord, 1960, p. 169. The enchantress Circe (*Odyssey* Books 10-11), whose magic involves the use of plants, arranges Odysseus' passage to the Underworld and provides instructions for him to follow once there.

39. Saxo Grammaticus, 1996, p. 30-31. Fortuitous or not, there is a minor parallel to Homer that I should mention in passing. Although the name of the woman is not given, her realm is without doubt that designated as Hel in ON, a word derived from a widespread verbal root in IE and meaning 'the concealed place'. The same root (IE **kel-* 'to cover, conceal') appears in the name Kalypso 'Concealer', the nymph who held Odysseus for seven years during his wanderings in the cave that was her dwelling (*Od*. 5, 184-186). It has been argued that Circe and Calypso are close counterparts, with possible parallels in Indic (Emily West, 2014, *passim*).

Much the same heroic story is recounted in the Icelandic *Viglundarsaga* 'Viglund the Fair' from the late 14th – early 15th cent.

> Thorgrim asks Earl Thorir for the hand of his daughter Olof but is refused. He 'met lovingly' with Olof during three nights while he was there, and promises are exchanged. He then departs on a war expedition. In the meantime Olof is wooed by Ketill. Thorir gives his consent, but Olof does not speak. A day is set for the wedding. Thorgrim returns, and is dissuaded by Thorir who gives him a ring. Thorgrim visits three days before wedding. He enters hall at the wedding feast and informs Ketil of the vows, which Olof confirms. Thorgrim challenges Ketil to fight, when suddenly the lights are quenched; Thorgrim abducts the bride, is outlawed, and lands in Iceland.

Friðþjófs saga hins frœkna 'The Story of Friðþjóf the Bold' composed in Iceland around 1300, contains more of the detail with which we are familiar.

> Friðþjóf 'Peace-thief', a respected warrior and an exceptionally large man, is betrothed to Ingibiorg. As a result of events in local politics he is obliged to go abroad to Orkney on a mission. While he is away, his enemies seek to deprive him of his lands and possessions. Meanwhile Ingibiorg marries a king named Ring. Throughout his adventures Friðþjóf is transported in his 'intelligent ship' Elliði, 'the best ship of the Northlands' that can weather any storm, understands human speech, and at one point becomes surrounded by 'mirk'. Eventually he sails back and enters King Ring's hall disguised in a great cloak and a mask, walking with two staves, making like an old man. His identity revealed, he remains as a guest. King Ring dies, leaving Friðþjóf in charge of the kingdom. He and Ingibiorg marry and prosper.[40]

The above northern European versions of the hero's return contain definite traces of the more archaic 'heroic' variety found in Greece and central Asia, incorporating an associated voyage through the Underworld; traces of a bipartite structure consisting of a heroic wooing followed by the abduction and recovery of the bride; the appearance of the hero at the wedding feast disguised as an aged man dressed in tatters; and the hero's transportation by an intelligent ship (Motif D1310.3 in Thompson, 1955-58) where Friðþjóf's ship Elliði with her magical abilities to survive any seas, and to understand the speech of men vividly recalls the descriptions of the ships of the Phaeacians that transported Odysseus to Ithaca. On their return the ships of the Phaeacians

40. Magnusson, 1901. My thanks to Terry Gunnell for bringing this source to my attention.

were turned to stone and their city surrounded by a ring of mountains as punishment by an angered Poseidon.[41]

A Gaelic Hero Tale

There is a source in the Gaelic world, with origins in the late Middle Ages and extending in its oral variants well into the 20th century, where the heroic return theme can be discerned still more clearly. It is the story of 'The Man in The Cassock' (*Fear na h-Eabaid/Murchadh mac Briain*), a classic hero tale that over the last half-century has repeatedly engaged the interest of folktale scholars in Scotland, chiefly with regard to what it can teach concerning memory processes and the transmission of a full-length tale over time. It has been the subject of a survey by Bruford examining its structure, variants and manuscript origins.[42] There are 14 texts of the tale extant in Scotland and Ireland of which two are in manuscript and the rest noted down or recorded from field work carried out from the mid-19th to the mid- 20th centuries. The earliest source is a manuscript in Scotland dating from around 1690, possibly from a SE Ulster exemplar. It consists of an introduction, followed by a small portion of the main tale, the remainder of which has been lost with much of the manuscript. A later manuscript, written down in Ireland in the second decade of the 19th century, seems to be based on an oral source. Of the dozen oral versions, nine were noted down in Scotland, and the remaining three in Ireland. The oral sources of the tale are well-established in the west of Scotland, extending from the Outer Hebridean islands of South Uist and Barra in the north to Islay in the south, with one version recorded in Morar on the western coast of the mainland. The earliest of these was taken down by John Francis Campbell in Islay in 1859 ;[43] the most recent to be recorded, recited by the South Uist storyteller Duncan MacDonald during the 1940s and 1950s, is surprisingly consistent over multiple recorded performances .[44] It is also the most extensive rendition of the tale known, and has formed the basis for the studies by Bruford and others. From a comparison of the oral versions it is possible to reconstruct the original form of the tale with some confidence.[45] Oral versions of the story agree with the oldest manuscript source in consisting of an in-tale i.e. a lengthy version of 'The Return of the Husband', contained within a frame-story - a structure well attested in other full-length Gaelic hero tales.

41. *Od.* 8, 555-569

42. Bruford, 1996.

43. Campbell, 1890,2, p. 209-231.

44. Craig, 1944, p. 17-29, Bruford and MacDonald, 1994 [transl.], p. 153-170. The degree of consistency between various recitations from this source is discussed in detail by Lamb (2012).

45. Bruford, 1996, p. 177.

Like the Altaic story of Alyp-Manash, the Gaelic hero-tale is replete with otherworldly associations, appearing from the very beginning of the frame-story where Murchadh son of Brian Boru, King of Ireland, is out hunting with his father and brothers on the famous mountain Beinn Gulbann. He sights a stag with antlers of gold and silver pursued by a red-eared hound, and as he follows them a mist (a sure sign of the Otherworld) descends. He then follows the sounds of an axe and encounters a man of extraordinary and outlandish appearance 'with a black cassock, a squared staff, and a string of bone beads and a string of bronze beads'. The Man in the Cassock exudes associations with the supernatural: his bead ornaments confer on him a form of invulnerability against weapons in battle; the cassock is the garb of the supernatural trickster in other tales ;[46] and he demonstrates his unworldly strength by the size of the load of wood he is gathering. He invites Murchadh mac Briain back to his castle where Murchadh encounters once again the wondrous stag and hound, and meets the Man in the Cassock's wife, a woman of incomparable beauty. The host notices Murchadh staring at the wife, and, not altogether pleased, reacts with a preface to his own story whose essence could just as well apply to the other heroic versions of the theme in the epics we have reviewed above:

> 'But, Murchadh mac Briain,' said he, 'even though the food is on the table, if you would listen to my story, it was through that woman, and that stag and hound over there, that I suffered trials such as no one of my people ever suffered before me and I hope never will after me.'

At this point the frame-story ends and the stage is set for the in-tale, the focus of our interest. Like the Alpamysh tales, the tale told by the Man in the Cassock falls into two sections: the heroic wooing of the bride, followed by her abduction and recovery.

> The bridal contest comes about when he rescues a magic warrior, the Gruagach of the Stag and the Hound, from his pursuer, and is given the two magic animals as his reward. He then settles an inheritance dispute between the Gruagach and the Gruagach's brother. They travel over water – in some Irish versions likely reflecting the original story they dive down a well to an Underworld realm.[47] Upon arriving, the Man in the Cassock is told that suitors are about to battle to the death for the hand of the Gruagach's daughter; the Gruagach has secretly sent for him, 'for she knew very well that if he was in the company he would win the girl'. As an alternative, the Man in the Cassock proposes that a race

46. Bruford, 1996, p. 182.
47. Bruford, 1996, p. 184.

be held; he enters it and wins the girl. At this point she is abducted by force three times but is recovered each time by the Man in the Cassock. Accompanied by the girl, the hound and the stag he returns over the water to his own home. Thus ends the first section.

There he sleeps alone, his marriage unconsummated, not in the dungeon or pit of other traditions, but 'in a long, bare barn' and during the night a voice at the window informs him that he is under magic obligations (*geasa*) to put in 'three days of hunting and sport before I could get wedding or marriage'. He returns from the hunt the next day to find the girl gone, and is informed by her mother that she has been abducted by three harpers. Off he goes in pursuit, and after a sea-voyage, once more signalling a passage between two worlds in Gaelic tradition, he sights the harpers on a desert island. Due to the sweetness of their music – a common Irish theme – he must struggle to remain awake, recalling the drunken sleep of Alpamysh and his warriors, as well as Odysseus encounter with the sirens. He succeeds in besting all three harpers and returns home with the girl. Two more abductions follow. It is not long before his bride is abducted by three great giants who are out fishing. As they flee, the giants attempt to prevent them by casting their magic lines and fixing the hooks in the boat, and the Man in the Cassock is forced to cut away a section of the gunwale where they are lodged. The third abduction is carried out by a character named the Macan Òg ('Young Hero') of Greece. In this final adventure, the Man in the Cassock, upon landing, encounters a herdsman and pays him for news. He learns that the girl is to be married in Athens that night to the Macan Òg of Greece, and the alert has gone out to kill on sight anyone approaching in a cassock carrying a square staff and wearing a string of bone beads and a string of bronze beads. He pays the herdsman again to exchange clothes with him (in a comic aside, the more humble apparel did not extend to covering the hero's thighs, while his own clothes trailed 'two or three yards along the ground' behind the herdsman), and goes up to the 'big house' to join the poor of the realm who are lining up outside the door for handouts from the wedding feast. Using his great strength, he works his way up to the doorpost, and puts his shoulder to the door. His attempt to enter is resisted by those inside, but the resulting fracas attracts the attention of the prospective groom, who does not recognize him, and observing that he 'must be just a poor man who was used to company' admits him. One of the guests, 'a shambling, ill-mannered young man', subjects him to ritual abuse, first dancing a reel in front of him and then aiming a blow at him, but has the misfortune to land the blow on the bronze beads worn on his brow. The attacker suffers

> accordingly, stuffing his fist into his mouth. The Man in the Cassock is then quickly recognized – in some versions also by a beauty-spot on his forehead - and in the ensuing mêlée he does not 'leave a head on a neck' except – in this Uist version – for that of the Macan Òg, who seems to accept the sudden turn of events with commendable equanimity. He then takes his bride home for a final time and they marry. At this point the in-tale ends.
>
> Murchadh mac Briain takes leave of the Man in the Cassock and returns to the hunting hill where he waits 'for some time before the hunters came back, such was the power of the magic that had been worked on them'.

Observations and Comparisons

Beside the surviving 'romantic' traditions of the Return of the Husband in Gaelic Scotland and elsewhere in the British Isles,[48] the Man in the Cassock appears as an anomaly. To be sure, a number of motifs characteristic of the western variety of the Return Song theme are shared here: the enforced absence from the bride or betrothed, the return in humble disguise, the wedding feast. Yet unexpectedly, the Gaelic hero tale, along with its two-part structure, shares many more features in common with the eastern 'heroic' variety of the theme. In his notes to the Islay variant noted down in 1859, John Francis Campbell remarks that '[t]he tale might be taken partly from the Odyssey', drawing attention to the parallels in the story to Odysseus entrance to the feast in Ithaca .[49] A further shared episode is Odysseus's exposure to ritual abuse by the local ne'er-do-well Irus and the boxing match at the entrance to the hall that opens Book 18 (1-110) of the *Odyssey*. As he gathers his rags around him in preparation, Odysseus exposes his immense thighs to the wonder of the suitors, indicating great physical strength under a humble disguise and providing what appears as a surprisingly precise parallel to the description of the Man in the Cassock in his borrowed garments. The physical confrontation involving the Man in the Cassock is far briefer than that between Odysseus and Irus, and he is recognized usually at this point on account of his invulnerable bronze beads; Odysseus on the other hand, is not recognized by the suitors until he strings his great bow. However, the correspondences may be closer than immediately apparent if we accept Lord's observation (1960,175) that the boxing match and the trial of the bow are two parallel events where Odysseus effectively abandons his disguise. Zhirmunsky draws attention to a possible instance of the same episode in a number of variants of the Alpamysh epic,

48. See McLaughlin, 1975.
49. Campbell, 1890, 2, p. 230-231.

where the hero takes vengeance on the cook at the wedding feast, providing a possible further point of comparison.[50]

Surprisingly, the Central Asian epics offer the most interesting parallels of all to our Gaelic hero tale, and in this regard Zhirmunsky's interpretations, together with his reconstruction of the oldest stages of the central Asian epic based on the incomplete Altaic version of Alyp Manash, which he regards as the most archaic form of the story, help to throw light on the story's central meaning and origins. The epic adventures of the Man in the Cassock, Alpamysh and Alyp Manash are all characterized by a 'double plot' consisting of a heroic wooing, followed by the return of the husband, the recovery of the bride and the return to/regaining of the home or tribal position. As we have seen, there is some evidence that the winning of the bride was also a part of the body of stories surrounding the adventures of Odysseus, but here, on opposite peripheries of the Eurasian story area, the structure is explicit. In the 'heroic wooing' accounts of both traditions, the hero wins the bride in a contest involving a race. In his attempted reconstruction of an early form of the Central Asian heroic story, Zhirmunsky notes the parallelism between the events of the 'wooing' and the 'return', where the wooing generally consists of three episodes.[51] This specific tripartite structure is strikingly present in the first section of the Man in the Cassock's adventures, with three episodes featured as well in the account of his return. Likewise, the Otherworld associations in the quest of Alyp Manash, involving the location of the bride 'at the end of the world where sky and earth come together' in the land where 'no traces lead back', and the crossing of bodies of water[52] appear in the same role in the adventures of the Man in the Cassock. If we accept the Underworld journey of Saxo's King Hading following his exploits as being significant in this regard, then a faint echo of the same association has been retained in northern Europe. The otherworldliness of the Gaelic hero is further underlined by the presence of mist at crucial points in the tale; by 'the power of the magic' that describes at the end of the frame tale the quality of the entire adventure; and by his outlandish dress, which provides his name in the oral versions. Alpamysh and Alyp Manash are detained, usually in a deep pit; the Man in the Cassock, sleeping alone in a 'bare barn', is drawn into his search for the abducted bride by a mysterious voice compelling him through the binding power of magic spells to go to the hunting mountain. Although he is not confined as the heroes in the other traditions were, the net results – separation and deprivation – are the same. In all of the heroic variants, as we have seen, the hero possesses exceptional physical strength. Odysseus and Alpamysh are the only ones present capable of stringing and

50. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 279.
51. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 285.
52. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 273.

drawing the great bow; Alpamysh in his wooing of Barchin triumphs in wrestling against the strongest of his rivals; Alyp Manash is endowed with fabulous strength; and the Man in the Cassock demonstrates superhuman strength by the load of wood that he lifts and swiftly transports to his castle. The motif of invulnerability is explicitly expressed in the central Asian epics. Alpamysh and Alyp Manash are both impervious to all weapons turned against them;[53] the same characteristic is dramatically featured in the Gaelic hero tale through the wearing of the bronze beads and their role in protecting the Man in the Cassock against an adversary's spear.[54] On considering the shared characteristics of the heroic variants, it is evident that some parallels such as Otherworld associations and invulnerability are more explicitly present in the Gaelic tale and the central Asian Alpamysh group than in the *Odyssey*, or in the Norse sagas. Taken together, the characteristics examined above appear only rarely in the more modern 'romantic' 'western' varieties of the theme.

As a clear example of the 'heroic' variety of the international Return Song theme, the Gaelic hero tale The Man in the Cassock may be regarded as an isolate. Yet it is well-established in its Scottish and Irish oral variants, with the known manuscript tradition extending back over three centuries, and in its conventions, e.g. an in-tale within a frame tale, and the characteristic inclusion of a standard travelling (sea-) run,[55] it sits well with other medieval Gaelic hero tales. Although we cannot be certain how long the hero tale has existed within Gaelic tradition, a review of the comparative evidence may offer up some suggestions.

The Norse materials indicate that our heroic Gaelic version is only a partial anomaly in (north)western Europe and is in fact part of a question that must be considered on a grander geographical scale. The heroic character of the Norse saga versions reinforces what we have seen in the Gaelic tale. The two-part structure of the Gaelic version, which so closely parallels the Alpamysh stories, can also be discerned, though not so clearly, in the northern saga and legend materials, and specific details (the hero's garments, the Underworld associations, the intelligent ships), bind them closely to the Gaelic, Greek and Central Asian versions. Given the active and varied folktale exchanges between the Gaelic in the Norse worlds in the Middle Ages, we may ask whether the presence of the heroic variety in both cultures is the result of contacts from those times.[56] So far there is nothing from comparisons of the tale contents to yield convincing evidence in this regard, and we must assume

53. Zhirmunsky, 1966, p. 269, 273.

54. Bruford and MacDonald, 1994, p. 162.

55. See Bruford, 1969, p. 188-193.

56. For Norse-Celtic contacts see Christiansen 1930, 1931; Almqvist, 1996; Shaw, 1999, 2008.

for the moment that the Gaelic hero tale and the Norse sagas are products of a common European tradition. Explanations based on the introduction of Homeric materials into Northern and western Europe are likewise too limited in scope to be of much use. Motifs found in some medieval versions of the tale such as the hero's entrance to the wedding feast, and the intelligent ships, parallel those found in the *Odyssey* in astonishing detail, and may indeed have attached themselves to the regional narratives at some point.[57] Early contact in Ireland with literary versions of the *Odyssey* did occur, as witnessed by the Irish manuscript tale *Merugud Uilix Meicc Leirtis* 'The Irish Odyssey' written around 1300; yet its storyline bears scant reference to the original work, and its literary origins are obscure.[58]

Having considered the possibilities of more recent contacts, it is important to recall the features in the Gaelic hero tale not present in the *Odyssey*, but shared in common with the Central Asian epics. In addition to the bipartite structural one of the heroic wooing combined with the rescue of the bride, the Man in the Cassock shares with Alpamysh (or his predecessors) the attributes of superhuman strength, and invulnerability to blows or weapons. In both traditions the episode of confinement from the bride - either in a deep pit or through the binding magic of *geasan* 'obligations' - is ushered in by a (drunken) sleep. With reference to the broader scheme of classification proposed by Zhirmunsky, the Gaelic/Central Asian parallels, and to a lesser extent, the Norse material, point to remarkable survival of some of the Return Song theme's oldest details in the farthest regions of western Europe.[59] Considering the geographical distances involved, and the large intervening area on the European continent where the romantic western variety predominates and the heroic variety is all but absent, no ready explanation suggests itself. It is advisable to keep in mind that we are dealing not only with geographical distance, but with vast stretches of time – centuries, or perhaps millennia. It has long been recognized that folk narratives have travelled over great distances, and recent collection and comparison of oral variants have demonstrated the surprising extent to which this has occurred.[60]

From distributional evidence, a possible analogue may be found in Kaplanoglou's (1999) comparative study of the folktale AT 545B 'Puss in Boots',

57. Cf. M.L. West, 2007, p. 439.

58. Meyer, 1886, p. ix.

59. A further detail of interest shared between the Alpamysh epic and Norse and Gaelic traditions is the exchange of verses, often cryptic or taunting, between the returning husband and the bride, and/or her family members.

60. See Berezkin's 2007 wide-ranging study of a motif *Pigmies fight cranes* that first appears in Homer (*Il.* 3.1-7); and his map of tale types and indices for the distribution of motifs (Berezkin, 2015)

which originated in central Asia and acquired diverse forms ('the heroes and the reasons for their actions were not constant; on the contrary, they were subjected to arbitrary modifications - accidentally in the course of narration, but also deliberately - so that they conformed to new historical circumstances' [60]') over a wide geographical area before arriving in western Europe, possibly with the expansion of the Mongol empire during the middle ages. A notable parallel to our story is the association in this widespread tale type with central Asian shamanistic belief (58). Similar to the Alpamysh epic, the variants can be divided into Eastern and Western varieties, with variants or motifs from the Eastern tradition found occasionally in the western extent of the tale area. That storytelling contacts between East/Central Asia and European antiquity extend back considerably beyond our era is evidenced by a 5th century BCE account from Herodotus (2.139, 141), also involving animal helpers (K 632.1 in Thompson, 1955-58). The story has it that the Egyptian king, when confronted with the invading armies of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, received miraculous support from a great host of field mice, who gnawed the bowstrings and leather thongs of the enemy, effectively disarming them. Since the early 19th century western scholarship has been aware of a close Khotanese parallel to Herodotus' motif, and S. West has offered the explanation that the story originated in East, reaching the Greeks of Asia minor some time before the Persian conquest.[61] In this connection she notes the parallel with the Eastern genesis of the Alpamysh epic and its relation to the *Odyssey*.

In the case of the Return Song, we may take Lord's advice in treating the distribution of its variants in northwestern Europe as the subject of a 'multitext study' and a product of long-term interactions between various populations.[62] We may regard the Gaelic and Norse heroic versions as the legacy of multiple separate streams of story that entered Europe - on the basis of some of the archaic features retained their introduction may extend back into prehistory - and are now preserved on the extreme western and eastern peripheries of a vast story area.

61. S. West, 1987, p. 270-271.
62. Lord, 1960, p. 173.

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