



Dovecot Tapestry Studio



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Scottish International Storytelling Festival: Stories Without Borders

Thread of the Cosmos: Orion the Warrior Hunter and Asclepius the Snake Healer

Saturday 24 October 2015 3-4pm Free event | Dovecot Studios, 10 Infirmary St, Edinburgh, EH1 1LT

The tallest and most handsome man in the world is a giant hunter armed with an unbreakable club of solid bronze. His name is Orion. Of gigantic strength and great beauty, Orion is so tall he can walk through deep water without wetting his head. His father is Poseidon, god of the sea and his mother Eurayle, daughter of King Minos of Crete.

The hallmark of Orion, the great warrior hunter, is his belt. The central feature of Alan Davie's tapestry *To a Celtic Spirit, 2*, is three vertical belts, symbolic of the great hunter's girdle. In the heavens you will see this belt clearly, directly above you in the Celtic countries on a January night.

Three stars in a north-south orientation are unmistakable:

Mintaka, the northernmost, Arabic for 'the giant's belt'

Alnilam – 'String of Pearls'

Alnitak, the southernmost, 'the girdle'

If you draw a line through the belt upwards in the sky, you will come to the red star Aldebaran, 'the follower' in Arabic, so named because it follows the two star clusters we call the Hyades and the Pleiades. In Greek mythology these stars are daughters of Atlas. Orion is said to be in love with the Pleiades, who are seven sisters pursued by the warrior hunter across the starry heavens.

[Story of the Pleiades from the Nez Perce tribe in America.]

The story of Orion's death is portrayed in a beautiful drama acted out by the stars every night in January. Absolutely fearless, the arrogant Orion threatened to kill all the animals of the Earth. With winter to help him, the hunter would not have to work very hard! When Gaia, Goddess of the Earth, heard this threat she shuddered, cracked the Earth and sent forth a scorpion to kill the great hunter. That scorpion bit Orion and he fell to earth mortally wounded. But the story is only beginning! For the antidote to Scorpion's poison is on its way and Orion will be restored by none other than the father of modern medicine himself – Asclepius.

[Story from Greek mythology and a Celtic version of the snake healer]

Thread of the Cosmos:

Cosmic Spiral and The Hearth Rug

Long long ago men gazed at the stars in the dark sky at night and saw patterns in the shapes and figures made by the stars, and in their movement across the sky from dusk to dawn, and their recurring cycles from season to season. Star gazers saw animal figures, gods and heroes of their beliefs played out in the stars at night. Today we recognise 88 official star groups, constellations, stories mainly from Greek mythology, the stars themselves with names from Arabic tradition. Above us in the starry sky on a summer night is the constellation Ophiuchus 'snake bearer' – a very muscular man with a monstrous snake coiled around his waist; the man holds the snake's head in his left hand, he holds the snake's tail in his right hand.

In Greece there was a great healer called Asclepius, son of the god Apollo. His mother was Coronis, guarded by the crow. While pregnant to Apollo, Coronis fell in love with a mortal man, Ihsay, and planned to marry him. Apollo cursed Coronis, turned the crow black and condemned to death the two lovers on a funeral pyre. But before the woman's body was consumed by flames, Apollo snatched his nearly born child away from the flames. The god put the boy, called Asclepius, under the care of the centaur Chiron, who taught him the arts of medicine and healing. Not only did Asclepius cure illness, but he also mastered the art of restoring life to the dead. ... Glaucus, young son of King Minos of Crete, fell into a jar of honey and drowned while at play. As Asclepius contemplated the body of Glaucus, a snake made towards it. He killed the snake with his staff. Then another snake came along with a herb in its mouth and placed it on the body of the dead snake – which returned it to life. Asclepius snatched a little of the herb from the snake, revived Glaucus and ever since had the power to restore life.

Hades, king of the Underworld and the Realm of the Dead did not much like Asclepius saving lives, so he complained to Zeus, father of the gods, who sent Aquila the Eagle with one of his thunderbolts. The Eagle hit Asclepius with this weapon and the great doctor sank dead to earth.

Zeus placed the famous medicine man among the stars, carrying the snake who gave him the secrets of life's elixir. The snake and the staff of Asclepius are widespread symbols for healing today, as the single snake entwined about the rod of Asclepius is the logo for 45 medical bodies including the World Health Association, the American Med Ass and the British Med Association.

From the West Coast comes a Celtic story about a boy, a toad and a snake which is played out in Alan Davie's tapestry hung over the entrance to this gallery, *The Cosmic Spiral*.

When Ophiuchus is in the eastern sky – Orion is in the west. When Ophiuchus is rising, Orion is setting. They are as far apart from each other as two constellations can be in the northern hemisphere. Ophiuchus is directly above us at night for the summer solstice in June, while Orion is above us for the winter solstice in December. Or, while Orion gives its light for us in winter nights, the sun traverses Ophiuchus during the day.

Directly behind Orion in the starry sky is Monoceros the Unicorn.

Orion, the king of hunters, can never catch the unicorn, as he does not see it at his back.

The unicorn has silent magical movements with its stars embedded in the Milky Way, its single horn the driving force of creation – [reference to the Rosette Nebula, famous star nursery of interstellar winds and Plaskett's binary star – two tapestries of *Wind Dance* and *Pausing on the Stair*]

The horn of the unicorn in legend purifies any water, heals any illness and protects the user from all evil. In the forest animals drink from pools first visited by the unicorn. Hunters would trade a lifetime of hunting to catch a glimpse of a unicorn.

The unicorn is believed to live in the most remote and loneliest place in the world. Some people say that is Tibet, high in the Himalayas where clouds cover the peaks. There the new crescent Moon is symbolic of the horn of the unicorn. Legend says that the Sun and Moon symbolise the coming and going of the unicorn. In the morning, the Sun – or Lion wins supremacy of the skies but in the evening he surrenders the sky to the Moon – or unicorn.

Story to finish: Rabbit on the Moon, with reference to *The Hearth Rug* and the sun in total eclipse – 8-9 March 2016 – the glowing red chromosphere revealed.