UNDERSTANDING CELTIC RELIGION

REVISITING THE PAGAN PAST

EDITED BY

KATJA RITARI AND ALEXANDRA BERGHOLM

UNDERSTANDING CELTIC RELIGION

NEW APPROACHES
TO CELTIC RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAR	British Archaeological Reports
CCCM	*Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*
CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*
CG	*Críth Gablach*
CIH	*Corpus Iuris Hibernici*
CMCS	*Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* (1–25), thence *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* (26–)
CSANA	Celtic Studies Association of North America
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*
CSIR	*Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*
DIL	*Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of the Irish Language*
EC	*Études celtiques*
ITS	Irish Texts Society
JRA	Journal of Roman Archaeology
LU	*Lebor na hUidre*
MGH AA	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi*
MMIS	Medieval and Modern Irish Series
PL	*Patrologia Latina*
PsG	Greek Psalms from the Septuagint
PsH	Hebrew Psalms
PRIA	*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*
RC	*Revue celtique*
SCF	*Studia Celtica Fennica*
YBL	Yellow Book of Lecan
ZCP	*Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

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FOREWORD BY THE SERIES EDITOR

It is timely that one of the major university presses in the Celtic nations is launching a series on approaches to Celtic religion and mythology. The myths and religious ideas of the Celtic-speaking peoples have had an enduring appeal for scholars as well as general readers. Our new series acknowledges this long-standing interest, while also picking up on the particular energy that approaches to religion and spirituality have brought to studies of Celtic sources across recent decades. By the end of the 1980s the old conception of a 'Celtic Church' had been set aside – and with it long-held assumptions of cultural isolation and insularity. At the same time, another revisionist movement, arising from studies of narrative literature, took aim at 'nativist' approaches to literature; these had been concerned with perceived mythic structures in texts, but often at the expense of narrative meanings and the more immediate sources of tradition. Such revisionist perspectives, though arising in the first instance out of more historical and literary concerns, had the effect of opening up new spaces for the study of scriptural, patristic, and classical influences on a Celtic culture which had too often been perceived as isolated and exceptional.

Scholars of religion from a range of countries – several of whom contribute to this first volume of our series – were thus encouraged to engage with Celtic topics. A further generation of scholars – amongst them two outstanding Finnish scholars who are the editors of the present collection – have taken this study further forward. At the same time, developments in the disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology brought new perspectives on questions of indigenous religion, narrative studies of myth, and historical interpretation of theology – all of which benefit studies of Celtic sources. In Classical studies, new approaches to Roman provincial religion and religious diversity in late antiquity further serve to contextualise developments in the religions of the Celtic-speaking peoples. We are beginning to move beyond a preoccupation with defining what is – or what is not – distinctly 'Celtic', to find new energy in studying the processes of encounter between religious cultures.

The studies in this first volume all set examples of how to bring new approaches to traditional data. Together they make an outstanding collection and an exciting start to our series.

Jonathan Wooding
University of Sydney, Australia

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1

INTRODUCTION: 'CELTIC RELIGION': IS THIS A VALID CONCEPT?[1]

Alexandra Bergholm and Katja Ritari

The last few decades have witnessed a paradigmatic change in the human sciences which has challenged the very basis of the process of acquiring knowledge. In the study of history, the point at issue is the one about possessing 'objective' knowledge of the past: if all history is unavoidably situated, how do the scholars' presuppositions and methodological choices concerning the 'proper' way of 'doing history' shape our understanding of historical reality? [2]

It could be argued that the reverberations of this shift have been slow to reach Celtic Studies, which since its inception as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century has been firmly grounded on the methodological premises of comparative philology. Indeed, writing less than twenty years ago in 1996, Hildegard L. C. Tristram could observe that '[c]ritical discourse has only just begun in Celtic Studies and research with more modern methodologies than philology are [*sic*] as yet rare'.[3] With regard to Tristram's poignant remarks on the stagnant nature of scholarly discourse in the field, an illustrative case in point would be the so-called nativist/anti-nativist controversy, which until relatively recently dominated the study of early Irish textual material. As Jonathan Wooding has observed, this debate concerning the origin and nature of these sources had its roots planted in contemporary cultural politics and wider intellectual commitments of twentieth-century scholarship, and therefore cannot be seen as purely a problem of textual or literary analysis.[4] From a methodological point of view, however, what is particularly noteworthy is the manner in which the constructed oppositions characterising this polemic – oral/literary, native/foreign, archaic/medieval, or pre-Christian/Christian – reflect a particular understanding of the possibility of recovering historical 'reality' from early textual sources, which in itself stems from a fundamental, albeit narrowly conceived, philosophical dichotomy between truth and fiction. Thus, despite the polarised views

of the two camps, the epistemological premise of the controversy was ultimately the same: to quote Wooding, 'we either can recover the past – or earlier strata of texts – through "excavating" texts, or we cannot.'[5]

While the efforts of perpetuating and maintaining such rigid polarisations have gradually given way to more dynamic approaches, the question of the methodologies underpinning the study of various sources at our disposal still remains pertinent.[6] In the case of early Irish texts, however, several important publications published in the past few years alone demonstrate that the field is moving towards more theoretically informed approaches, with scholars adopting a plurality of analytical perspectives that present old material in a new light. Recent examples of this include studies addressing topics such as cultural memory, transmission history, textual interpretation, classical learning, narrative strategies, performativity, and literacy, to name just a few.[7] In highlighting the multifaceted nature of the textual material, and bringing to the fore the complexity of intellectual mechanisms of literary communication, this work is increasingly reaching beyond the 'monolithic, self-assertive and positivistic discourse of philology',[8] thereby redefining the questions we should be asking of our sources.

Although such heightened theoretical awareness may still be seen as a relatively recent development in Celtic Studies in comparison to many other neighbouring disciplines, other issues have been more thoroughly subjected to critical interrogation, which has subsequently called into question many of the traditional assumptions guiding scholarship in the field. This is perhaps most readily apparent in the criticisms levelled against the term 'Celtic' – a concept which, according to its critics, has little (if any) basis in historical or ethnographic reality, and equally little value as an analytical scholarly category.[9] The contours of the controversy surrounding the notion of 'Celticity' have been traced many times,[10] and the various arguments need not be rehearsed here. For the purpose of the present volume, the importance of questioning definitions – in other words, of asking *who* the 'Celts' are, and *what* counts as 'Celtic' – is, of course, evident, as the term 'Celtic religion' in itself presupposes an understanding of some shared commonalities between the various phenomena included under this broad umbrella term. However, whereas the various ideological implications of 'Celticity' are nowadays generally recognised, relatively less analytical attention has been paid to the fact that as a scholarly term, 'religion' is equally complex and contested.[11] In seeking conceptual clarity with regard to 'Celtic religion', it is therefore worth framing the question anew, asking not only what counts as 'Celtic', but also what counts as 'religion'.

In the academic study of religion, it has become something of a truism to observe that 'religion' as a category is as familiar as it is impossible to define. In this vein, Willi Braun for instance characterises the term as a 'floating signifier', which is 'capable of attaching itself to wide range of objects – many of them obscure – to countless blurry ideas and a host of often imprecise definitional propositions.'[12] For many, this indeterminacy of meaning entails that scholars should abandon the efforts of arriving at a universal definition of the concept altogether, and rather focus on the dynamic processes and operations by which certain social and cultural formations are marked off as belonging to the category 'religion'. At the same time, the questioning of the validity and heuristic utility of the term has also raised the issue of the ethnocentric and Western bias of the concept which, as an academic construct, derives from a Christian (and predominantly Protestant) understanding of religious belief and practice.[13]

In light of these theoretical considerations, it is clear that the critical appraisal of how such conceptual categories as 'religion', 'mythology', 'pre-Christian', or 'Christian' are defined and used in the field of Celtic Studies is also timely.[14] In recent years, some of these terms have come under scrutiny especially due to the eclectic appropriation and re-creation of 'Celticity' in the context of popular movements known as 'Celtic Christianity', 'Celtic Paganism', or 'Celtic spirituality'.[15] Other scholars, focusing on theology in particular, have revised the long-held view of the insularity and marginality of Christianity in the British Isles, and enhanced the appreciation of the reception and development of Christian intellectual tradition in this area throughout the Middle Ages.[16] The present volume serves as a contribution to this wider discussion, by bringing to the fore some of the methodological challenges involved in the demarcation of boundaries that define the elusive entity called 'Celtic religion'.[17] Thus, the questions that we wish to raise are: When scholars attempt to construct the belief system of the Celts, what counts as 'religion'? Or, when something is labelled as 'religion' as opposed to 'mythology', what do these entities entail? To what extent is it possible to attain the pre-Christian stratum through the extant textual sources which themselves present us with a mediated understanding of the religious traditions of the past? And what theoretical viewpoints or analytical tools could help towards a better understanding of the essence of the different strata usually labelled as 'pre-Christian', 'Christian' or 'Celtic'?

This collection of articles has its origins in a two-day colloquium, held at the University of Helsinki back in 2008, where a group of twenty scholars from different disciplinary orientations working in the field of Celtic

Studies gathered together to discuss these issues from the point of view of their individual research interests. As the purpose of the meeting was to encourage free dialogue and to create a stimulating atmosphere for the exchange of ideas, we did not expect solutions or ready-made answers. We were delighted by the success of the event, which provided sustenance to our conviction that the topic was indeed worth addressing. The importance of examining the existing paradigms on the one hand, and introducing new insights to the field on the other, became the dominant theme of the colloquium, which generated lively discussion and civilized debate.

It was clear to us from the outset that the current methodological premises of the field also merited critical re-evaluation in print. Therefore we asked our guest speakers to contribute to this volume by elaborating on the problems of methodology with regard to their own research materials. With this aim we also invited a number of eminent scholars who were not present at the colloquium to participate in the publication. In each of the articles, the authors reflect upon the same broad theme, drawing from a range of materials including theology, narrative literature, history, law and archaeology. The case studies illustrate particular problems related to individual genres, while also highlighting fundamental questions and concerns pertaining to the study of 'Celtic religion' at large.

One of the central themes in this regard is the process of Christianisation, which is addressed by several contributors with particular reference to the early Irish literary material. Jacqueline Borsje offers a balanced discussion of the multilayered nature of early Irish sources by considering the survival of indigenous beliefs from the viewpoint of translation and adaptation in literary communication. Drawing upon the methods of theological exegesis, she examines how ritual expression is represented in texts containing spells and other words of power, concluding that pre-Christian cultural elements may be gleaned in the extant sources in a number of different ways. Borsje's observation that the early missionaries in the fifth century did not arrive in a vacuum, but had to seek ways to communicate their message in a manner that was intelligible in the new cultural and social context, is an important one, as it foregrounds the question of how this ongoing process of negotiation is reflected in the textual evidence. This topic is addressed by John Carey, whose article discusses the place accorded in medieval Irish literature to supernatural beings who are evidently derived from the gods and goddesses of the pagan period. The significance of this, and its implications for the nature of Irish tradition, have been matters of spirited debate in recent decades. Instead of confronting the question of origins, the article

looks in the opposite direction, endeavouring to trace some of the ways in which the Irish vision of the immortals continued to flourish and further develop in the later medieval period.

The Christian attitudes towards the pre-Christian past are also at the focus of Joseph Nagy's contribution, which takes a performative approach in its examination of the depictions of the non-Christian otherworld in medieval Irish narratives. After a careful assessment of current scholarly approaches to the elusive archaic religious tradition, he argues that even if the early Irish sources cannot be read as accurate or authentic representations of the pre-Christian past, the manner in which this past is enshrined in the texts still merits investigation. The discussion highlights this point by looking at how the otherworldly confrontations in the narrative sources can be understood not only as an encounter between the human and the supernatural, but also in terms of a relationship between the otherworldly performer and his or her audience.

In his examination of the central importance of the Christian scriptures in the literary cultures of the early Middle Ages, Thomas O'Loughlin calls for a dialogue between different disciplines by demonstrating why competence in handling biblical materials should not be confined to theologians and historians of biblical exegesis. Considering the works of Gildas, Adomnán, and Muirchú alongside the Irish collection of canon law *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, the author draws attention to the pervasive role of the scripture in these works, as well as in collective memory and imagination throughout Christendom. Accordingly, he argues that a re-evaluation of our own fundamental scholarly assumptions is a necessary prerequisite of a fuller appreciation of the biblical dimension of early medieval mentality.

Robin Chapman Stacey's article focuses on a body of material that has long been at the centre of debates about the origins of the earliest Irish sources. Early Irish law tracts have played a major role in scholarly efforts to define the nature of the extant source material and to reconstruct the historical 'reality', whether pagan or Christian, that these sources reflect. The fact that the secular legal material has traditionally been given an unusual place of prominence in the study of the religious institutions and practices of the early Irish is in itself noteworthy, and highlights the need for a reassessment of this body of texts alongside other source materials analysed in this volume. In her discussion, Stacey departs from the positivist approach of much of the earlier scholarship in order to apply new methodologies to her analysis of three of the main early Irish status tracts, *Críth Gablach*, *Uraicecht Becc*, and *Míadshlechtae*. Examining issues of gender,

political space and symbolic landscape, she illustrates how these aspects form a critical component of the way in which status is conceptualised in both literal and symbolic terms, thereby affording an important insight into the representation of reality in these tracts.

Scholars have always privileged archaeological material as one of the key sources for the study of 'Celtic religion'. Yet as Webster argues in her article, the label is intensely problematic for many later prehistoric archaeologists in Britain today. Her contribution begins by asking why this is so, and examines key recent developments in the archaeological study of Iron Age religious belief and ritual practice. She demonstrates that much of our current understanding derives not from Iron Age sites and finds, but from post-conquest epigraphy and iconography, as well as from Irish and Welsh textual sources that continue to be routinely employed in archaeological work on Celtic religion. Webster offers a critical assessment of the evident methodological difficulties that arise from such an approach, and demonstrates how recent re-analysis of the Romano-Celtic religious encounter, inspired by post-colonial theory, has transformed our understanding of the dynamics of religious change in the Roman west.

We hope that this volume will stimulate further discussion and encourage others to engage with the methodological challenges that provide part of the fascination of working with early medieval sources. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the funding granted by the Otto A. Malm Foundation and the liberal financial assistance of the Department of Comparative Religion (now part of the Department of World Cultures), which made the hosting of the colloquium at the University of Helsinki possible. The editing of this volume has been funded by the Academy of Finland (project numbers 1114180 and 1138310).

Notes

[1] In adopting this title, we acknowledge the fundamental importance of Kathleen Hughes's posthumously published article in questioning the validity of the long-held idea of the 'Celtic Church'; see K. Hughes, 'The Celtic Church: Is this a Valid Concept?', *CMCS*, 1 (1981), 1–20. The view that the notion of a single church with a unified practice and institutional structure is not only 'unhelpful', but 'positively harmful' in the historical context of the early Middle Ages is clearly articulated in Wendy Davies, 'The myth of the Celtic church', in N. E. Edwards and A. Lane (eds), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992), 12–21.

[2] The challenge to the ideal of historical objectivity stems from the epistemological scepticism of postmodern philosophy. Seminal early works include

R. Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967); and H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973). For an overview of the debates surrounding the question of relativism and objectivism in historical scholarship see E. A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Harvard, 2004).

[3] H. L. C. Tristram, 'Celtic in linguistic taxonomy in the nineteenth century', in T. Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 35–60 (40). Tristram goes on to cite some notable examples of more modern approaches, including her own work as well as that of Daniel Melia, Seán Ó Coileáin and Maria Tymoczko, among others. For an excellent treatment of this issue with particular reference to literary criticism, see R. O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013), esp. pp. 2–8.

[4] See J. Wooding, 'Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past: Anti-nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm', *SCF*, VI (2009), 61–74. For a selection of articles illustrating the views of both sides of the nativism/anti-nativism debate, see R. Karl and D. Stifter (eds), *The Celtic World: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, 4 vols (London and New York, 2007), I, pp. 155–310.

[5] Wooding, 'Reapproaching', 64.

[6] It is perhaps telling that in Karl and Stifter's edited collection of articles published in 2007 in the Critical Concepts in Historical Studies series, the part titled 'Theoretical approaches to Celtic Studies?' includes only two articles; see Karl and Stifter, *The Celtic World*, I, pp. 311–46.

[7] See D. Schlüter, *History or Fable? The Book of Leinster as a Document of Cultural Memory in Twelfth-Century Ireland* (Münster, 2010); J. E. Rekdal and E. Poppe (eds), *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory* (Münster, 2014); E. Boyle and D. Hayden (eds), *Authorities and Adaptations: The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2014); A. Bergholm, *From Shaman to Saint: Interpretive Strategies in the Study of Buile Suibhne* (Helsinki, 2012); B. Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011); O'Connor, *The Destruction*; R. C. Stacey, *The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007); E. Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2013).

[8] Tristram, 'Celtic', p. 39.

[9] See e.g. M. Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London, 1992); S. James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, 1999); T. Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam, 1996).

[10] See e.g. P. Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *CMCS*, 36, 1–35.

[11] For a useful overview see e.g. W. Braun, 'Religion', in W. Braun and R. T. McCutcheon, *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London, 2000), 3–18. A clear and concise treatment of topical themes in the study of religion is given in J. S. Jensen, *What is Religion?* (London and New York, 2014). The issues at stake in the ongoing polemic concerning the constructed and discursive nature of the category of religion are well illustrated in R. T. McCutcheon, *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion* (Sheffield, 2014).

[12] Braun, 'Religion', p. 5.

[13] See e.g. A. Lindberg, 'The Concept of Religion in Current Studies of Scandinavian Pre-Christian Religion', *Temenos*, 45 (2009), 85–119.

[14] For an overview of current approaches to religion in early medieval Ireland in historical scholarship, see the momumental collection of articles titled *L'Irlanda e gli Irlandesi nell'alto medioevo: Spoleto, 16–21 aprile 2009*, Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 57 (Spoleto, 2010).

[15] See e.g. D. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh, 2000); I. Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh, 1999).

[16] See T. O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama* (London, 2007); K. Ritari, *Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland: Moral Theology in the Lives of Saints Brigit and Columba*, Studia traditionis theologiae, 3 (Turnhout, 2009); T. O'Sullivan, 'Texts and Transmissions of the Scúap Chrábaid: An Old-Irish Litany in its Manuscript Context', *SCF*, 7 (2010), 26–47; J. Carey, E. Nic Cárthaigh and C. Ó Docharthaigh (eds), *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2014).

[17] For our earlier collection of essays exploring similar themes, but with a broader approach, see K. Ritari and A. Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008).

2

CELTIC SPELLS AND COUNTERSPELLS

Jacqueline Borsje

Introduction[1]

The study of Celtic religion is a difficult, almost taboo, subject area that we should explore further, using the knowledge that we have gained in the past decades.[2] Within Celtic Studies, the term 'Celtic religion' is a historical concept that refers to all religious phenomena connected with the cultural groups now identified as 'Celts' who spoke a Celtic language. Outside this discipline, however, the term is also used to refer to religious phenomena associated with adherents of modern Celtic Christianity and pagan Celtic religions.[3] In this contribution, the term is reserved for those forms of religion that pre-date the Christian missions and to a certain extent coexist with medieval Christian religion. The focus is on Irish forms of Celtic religion.

There are three types of sources that give access to 'Celtic religion': first, archaeological finds; second, Classical (i.e. Ancient Greek and Latin) witnesses; and third, texts in Celtic languages, of which Irish texts are most numerous. None of these sources is unambiguous; because what we find in the earth is silent, we must speculate a lot. The Greek and Roman authors represent the voice of outsiders whose view of the Celts is often far from neutral. The Celtic texts were written thanks to Christianity, which introduced manuscript literacy; therefore, they do not reflect a pristine Celtic religious view.

This book is the result of a round-table conference on 'Celtic religion' at the University of Helsinki organised by the Finnish scholars Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm, who asked various Celticists to describe their methodologies when they attempt to study Celtic religion. My field of study is religious phenomena in medieval Irish texts. The methodologies and analytical tools that I apply in this field of study have been to a great extent formed during my training as a theologian, and especially through the discipline of exegesis (the interpretation of biblical texts).

When I was trained in exegesis at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, the main lesson was to approach the text as if for the first time, with an open eye and mind. This was very difficult, because many of the tales were so extremely familiar. I heard them at the end of each meal at home, every morning at primary school, and in various forms during church services. Moreover, these tales appeared to me in the whole culture around me through art, literature and other cultural manifestations, and yet my teachers in exegesis handed me the tools for a fresh reading of biblical texts.[4]

Irish texts were initially very unfamiliar to me; the methods of biblical exegesis I had previously learnt turned out to be very helpful in analysing them as well. They can be briefly summarised as follows. After a first reading, the questions that come up in one's mind need to be written down. One should copy the text and make a 'work translation'. This is a very literal translation, in which the several meanings of a word should be listed, divided by strokes, so that the whole semantic field is before one's eyes, which may open up new roads of interpretation. The structure of the text needs to be analysed on various levels, such as grammatical, lexical and motif. The reading of the commentaries, or secondary literature, must wait to the end of the analysis, in order not to be influenced too early in the interpretative process. Awareness of the well-known hermeneutical circles was also part of this process. What could the text have meant for the original audience; what has happened during the reception history of the text; and what does it mean to us? Who are we? In which ways are we different from the original and later audiences and how does this influence our reading of the text?

Two modifications were added to this basic training. Firstly, my main field was not Christian theology but the academic study of religion. I was interested in religion in general. The dominant culture at this Protestant department was one in which Christian beliefs were combined with left-wing political ideas. This meant that I trained myself in a continuous alertness to theological biases and I analysed everything offered from this critical perspective.

Secondly, I remember my days as a student as very exciting. One of the reasons for this was that I witnessed the birth of Feminist Theology, nowadays called Gender Studies Theology. Here, I learned about the hermeneutics of suspicion. What is not said? What is absent? What is hidden?[5] Women were either virtually absent in the texts that we studied, or the image of women was a constructed one, which needed to be analysed. This research perspective further sharpened my analytical tools.

The search into the shadows, the unorthodox and the hidden layers of texts has always fascinated me. When I wrote a thesis on 'The Song of Deborah' (Judges 5), I dived into Ugaritic mythology.[6] The goddesses Anat and Astarte appeared to stand in the shadows of the heroines Deborah and Jael. For the New Testament, I discussed the multiform religious background of Revelation 12 on the vision of the dragon and the woman.[7] It is, therefore, no wonder that when I discovered Celtic Studies my interest was in the Christianisation process. The methodology followed in my study of monsters focused on the one hand on the use of external sources or their absence, and on the other hand on the analysis of the concept of evil in the texts studied.[8] My second project in Celtic Studies was a quest for fate in early Irish texts. Fate is hardly ever explicitly mentioned but nevertheless omnipresent.[9] The present contribution is part of my third project within Celtic Studies: the power of words in medieval Ireland.[10] This is another study into the margins and shadows of medieval Irish texts, and relevant to Celtic and Irish religion.[11]

The present contribution consists of three parts, and each has a guiding saint. The first part deals with missionaries in the Celtic lands, with Saint Patrick as our guide. The second part describes protective texts, and here Saint Columba comes into the picture. The last part of this contribution discusses two case studies of love magic: first, Saint Brigit's charm for love and second, a spell for impotence.

Celtic conversion

What happened when Christian missionaries went to the Celtic lands? What did they see? What did they hear? How did they interpret the numerous details that they witnessed of indigenous beliefs? What role did their own frame of reference play? How did the Celtic peoples experience this advent of foreigners who brought this impressive means of communication – writing – with them? What happened as a result of language differences, and what happened in the translation and adaptation processes?[12]

We are fortunate to have an eyewitness account in the documents of Saint Patrick, the most famous missionary who went to Ireland. For our present subject, it is unfortunate that he was not a scholar of religion. His interest was not Celtic religion but his message for the people. He went to Ireland to bring his good news – the gospel. We have to work with this perspective in the documents he left behind: his *Confessio*, 'Declaration', his letter to Coroticus and a few sayings.[13] The language he uses is not only different

from the language of the Irish, but he also clothes his narrative in biblical phraseology. If we want to arrive at a description of pre-Christian religion, we have to decode a lot. There are a few passages in Patrick's *Confessio* that are eligible for such decoding.[14] I have chosen one of these, which takes place just before Patrick's flight from Ireland. As is well known, Patrick went twice to Ireland. He was taken there from Britain as a slave; he escaped but was drawn back to Ireland by his vocation. We start our investigation at the point where he describes his existence as a slave in Ireland.

The sixteen-year-old adolescent toiled in the mud and pastured the flocks of his master in snow, frost and rain. These circumstances did not depress him, however. Patrick sees his forced exile from Britain as a punishment for his sins (*Confessio* §§1–3). He decides to make the best of this 'divine punishment', and spends his time increasingly in prayer. Before dawn he rises to pray, and at a certain stage he says a hundred prayers during the daytime, and almost as many at night. He notes that these prayers strengthen his faith and his love and fear of God (*amor et timor Dei*); they make him strong and diligent (§16).

Patrick seems to imply by this description of his devotion that it leads to his first miracle as recorded in his *Confessio*: he receives revelations. After six years, he hears a voice advising him to fast, and he is told to flee, for his ship is ready (§17). In the opening paragraphs of his *Confessio* (§5), Patrick quotes Psalm 49:15, which is presented as a promise from God:

> Invoke Me in the day of your distress,
> and I shall deliver you and you will glorify Me.[15]

In Patrick's view, this promise is fulfilled in his life. God delivers him from distress after his many prayers.

When Patrick arrives at the ship, however, the captain refuses him as a passenger. Patrick then turns away (*separavi me ab illis*, 'I separated myself from them')[16] and prays while he is walking. Then a miracle happens. He is called back (§18) and the sailors suddenly offer him their trust and friendship. Patrick then mentions a ritual that seems to be part of the old religion because he condemns it on religious grounds:

'Veni, quia ex fide recipimus te; fac nobiscum amicitiam quo modo volueris' – et in illa die itaque reppuli sugere mammellas eorum propter timorem Dei, sed verumtamen ab illis speravi venire in fidem Iesu Christi, quia gentes erant – et ob hoc obtinui cum illis, et protinus navigavimus.[17]

'Come, because we are receiving you on faith, make friendship [i.e. an alliance] with us in whatever way you will have wished', and on that day, to be sure, I refused to suck their nipples on account of the fear of God (*timor Dei*), but nevertheless I hoped to come by them to the faith of Jesus Christ, as they were gentiles, and because of this I got my way with them, and we shipped at once.[18]

Before we have a closer look at this ritual, we need to pay attention to a thought-provoking article by Morten Lund Warmind. In the context of research into Celtic religion, he downplays the importance of the study of mythology and mythological literature as 'only one aspect of religious life – and even an individual and very fleeting one at that'. In contrast with this, he argues, 'the study of religious organisation and its tangible expression in rituals is more promising, since precisely this side of religious life is not a matter of individual speculation, but requires patterned behavior universally agreed upon'.[19] Warmind wants to weigh the Irish textual evidence against continental Classical and archaeological source material about Celtic religion, in which the latter is weightier because it is not mythological.[20] There are a few methodological problems with these statements.[21] Within the context of this contribution, I hope to show how important the connection is between ritual descriptions and literary or mythological texts.[22]

The ritual, condemned by Patrick, will now be studied from various perspectives: textual criticism, motif analysis, biology, cultural anthropology, the history of religions, reception history and source study.

Patrick's refusal to partake in the ritual is interesting, because it shows that this procedure has a religious significance, thought to be incompatible with Christian belief. James Carney suggests the emendation *separavi* ('I separated') for *speravi* ('I hoped'), which may be an echo of Patrick's earlier above-quoted words: *separavi me ab illis.*[23] Moreover, Carney adduces the text of non-Irish manuscripts here: *Speravi* [read: *separavi*] *ab illis ut mihi dicerent 'Veni in fide Iesu Christi' quia gentes erant*, 'I separated from them (i.e. in the first place) so that they might say "Come in the faith of Jesus Christ," for they were pagans.'[24] This would refer to their allowing Patrick to follow a Christian ritual instead of their own. Carney interprets the captain's initial refusal to allow Patrick to embark in terms of a disagreement about this ritual. He suggests that the captain 'agreed to take him if he performed the pagan rite of breast-sucking in token of loyalty.'[25]

How can we make sense of this ritual? We need to resort to early Irish literature or mythology first, before we cast our net wider into other

disciplines. The religious significance of the ritual seems to be connected with the belief in *fír*, 'truth' or 'justice', an ethical cosmic concept in medieval Irish literature. I base this connection upon the fact that this ritual is called *fír fer*, 'the truth/justice/pledge of men', in the Old Irish tale 'The adventure of Fergus mac Leite'.[26] People should live in accordance with *fír*, 'truth' or 'justice'. If one transgresses this ethical demand in public behaviour or solemn utterances, this is said to have cosmic resonances, according to Irish medieval texts. The elements are said to respond to this behaviour as sanctions pertaining to these transgressions. Thus, *fír* is an ethical law related to the cosmic order.[27] Even though truth and justice are also central ethical demands in the Christian religion and related to Christian cosmology, the ritual is unacceptable to Patrick. Why would this be the case?

The ritual is designated in the *Confessio* as the making of *amicitia*, '[a league of] friendship, an alliance', and consists of *sugere mammellas*, 'sucking breasts or nipples'. The central element in the most common instance of sucking breasts – a mother feeding her child – is mutuality. The mother wants to nurture her child and physically needs to get rid of her milk; the child needs the milk in order to live and grow. The mother is of course the more powerful party in this bilateral exchange. It seems that by means of this ritual a contract is made between two parties, one of whom – the one whose breast is sucked – is acknowledged to be the more powerful. It appears that Patrick refuses to take on the role of the less powerful party.[28]

We turn now from biology to anthropology and the history of religions. Bernhard Maier studied the ritual of symbolic suckling in an international context.[29] In Muslim law, suckling produces a foster-kinship, which grants the persons involved the same mutual rights and duties as a relationship based on birth-kinship.[30] The person who lets her breasts be sucked is here a female. In Maier's examples from the ancient Near East, suckling is a symbol for divine protection, for instance with Horus as the god who offers his breast and protection.[31] In an African context, the sucking of (male) breasts forms the conclusion of an inter-tribal treaty of friendship or a pact of non-aggression among Berbers. There is an Ethiopian ritual of taking the breasts of someone who is to become one's protector into one's mouth and in this way becoming the protector's fosterling.[32] Maier concludes with the hypothesis that

the custom of make-believe suckling as a symbol of granting protection was in origin a rite of both social and religious significance which had developed among the early cattle-breeders of the ancient Near

East, then spread westward in the course of the Neolithic revolution, and subsequently endured on the Celtic fringe of Western Europe down to the early Middle Ages.[33]

From this theory on the origin and spread of the ritual, we move to its reception history in Irish Christianity. Dorothy Bray has shown how the motif of sucking the breasts of holy men (including Christ) and women was used in Irish hagiography.[34] Here not adults but children are sucking, and they are either future saints or foster-children of holy men.[35] The religious significance of the motif has been changed or adapted under the influence of New Testament symbolism: giving milk symbolises giving spiritual food, i.e. Christian wisdom and teachings.

Does Patrick describe a ritual from pre-Christian Celtic religion? On the one hand, there is the widely spread ritual custom connected with protection and adoption, as shown by Maier, with a similar significance to the ritual rejected by Patrick. On the other hand, there is some biblical evidence that we need to consider in this discussion of the methodologies for studying Celtic religion. Ludwig Bieler has pointed out that Patrick borrowed the expression *sugere mammellas* from the Old Latin version of Hosea 14:1 (a prophecy that mothers and babies would be slaughtered as a divine punishment for the sins of Samaria) and Bieler compared this with Luke 11:27 (a blessing of the breasts that gave suck to Jesus).[36] These are literal references to breastfeeding women, but the Latin Bible also mentions male breast feeders in a metaphor.[37] In the Book of Isaiah, in a paradisiacal vision of the future, Israel is addressed as follows: *Et suges lac gentium et mamilla regum lactaberis*, 'And you will suck the milk of the nations/Gentiles and you will be suckled at the breast of kings' (Is. 60:16).[38] The nations/Gentiles and kings that are often a symbol of destruction and persecution now symbolise food and nurturing. We know that Patrick dressed his narrative in biblical language, so Isaiah 60 with its male imagery may have been on his mind as well.[39]

Scholars use the ritual described in 'The adventure of Fergus mac Leite' as explanation for Patrick's words. Please note that it is a king whose breast is sucked in this tale. If we did not have Patrick's autobiographical work from the fifth century, how would we look at this literary motif of a breast-sucking ritual from the eighth century? Would we adduce the verse from Isaiah, despite its different context and meaning, and argue for creative use of sources by the author of the tale? Saint Patrick's reference and Bernhard Maier's extensive study are arguments for seeing this ritual in a broader cultural context. It is highly likely that

it was a part of Celtic religion. This example also shows how deep the waters are in which we are swimming.[40]

The Bible is the model according to which Patrick structures the description of events in his life in his *Confessio*. Moreover, phrases from the Bible are literally used to convey what he wants to express.[41] This obviously is the model that we need to keep in mind in our search for traces of Celtic religion; the rich body of medieval Irish texts that has gone through the eyes, minds and hands of Christian scribes.

This, however, is also our starting point; deducing from the way certain things are described, we are given the impression that there was a certain overlap between the lore of Christians and the cultural heritage of the Irish. The phrase from the book of Hosea and the metaphor from the book of Isaiah may only be literary 'vessels' in Patrick's reference to a Celtic ritual. The idea of truth or justice in early Irish literature is a pervading motif, and intuitively I would say that this was part of the native ethics and worldview. We know, however, that truth and justice are also central values in Christianity. Many elements in early Irish texts may have been taken over from the external literate culture, and yet some may have already been part of the indigenous culture. The missionaries did not arrive in a vacuum when they landed in Ireland. They had to use what they found there – the language, the images, the ideas, the knowledge and the customs – in order to be understood by the inhabitants.

In fact, when Irish authors used sources such as the Bible, the Apocrypha and classical literature, there may be an advantage for us. For instance, when we read of confrontations between saints and druids in Irish hagiography, and such textual sources have been used, we can make a comparison and find what does not stem from those sources. Could the extra material be native Irish? Or is it a Christian construction of pre-Christian religion? Each text will have to be carefully investigated. Source study needs to be performed meticulously in combination with other disciplines, such as the ones mentioned above.

Celtic opposition

Patrick lived in Ireland, first in forced exile from Britain and then in voluntary exile. He will have encountered opposition to his message, and he will have had to face antagonism. His hagiographers have symbolized this opposition in their description of his encounters with the king and his druids.[42] Many scholars have analysed these descriptions; I mention the work of Joseph Nagy and Thomas O'Loughlin as examples.[43]

Another saint who also lived in exile and who faced opposition from pre-Christian religious functionaries, according to his hagiographer Adomnán (*c.* 628–704), is Saint Colum Cille or (in Latin) Columba (between 519 and 522–597).[44] Columba left Ireland and built a monasterial community on the island of Iona. All his encounters with 'magicians' (in Latin *magi*, and once – II.17 – *maleficus*) are in fact power contests. The magicians want to prevent their people from hearing the liturgy of the Christians (I.37). They rejoice when they see the saint approaching a dangerous well, a source of disease for those who touch or drink the water (II.11). They taunt and reproach Pictish parents, converted by Columba (with the aid of an interpreter), when their son becomes ill and dies (II.32). The foster-father of the Pictish king is a magician (probably a druid), and Columba threatens him with death if he does not release an Irish slave. When the magician almost chokes on glass, he has to let the girl go (II.33). On another occasion, this magician commands the weather in order to show his power and prevent Columba from travelling. This amuses the other druids, but in the end God's omnipotence is said to prevail (II.34). A *maleficus*, or 'evildoer', shows his power by milking a bull, which almost kills the animal (II.17).

In all these encounters, Columba manifests his verbal power, which is attributed to God. He sings Psalm 44 in a miraculously loud way, so that everybody hears him despite the wishes of the magicians (I.37). He blesses the dangerous well by raising his hand and invoking Christ, which makes the water curative (II.11). He cries, prays, and invokes Christ's name, so that the son of the above-mentioned converted Picts is resurrected from death (II.32). He blesses a white stone, which becomes a cure for the choking magician and for many others (II.33). He invokes Christ and is then able to sail against the wind; eventually, the wind changes its direction (II.34). He blesses the bull's milk, which shows its true nature by appearing as blood. He blesses water with which the bull is sprinkled and healed (II.17).

The verbal power of the non-Christian religious functionaries is absent in all these examples. Neither is there reference to their spells nor are these powerful words quoted in direct speech. Adomnán believes that the power of the druids stems from demons or the devil, but he indicates neither how the druids draw upon this power nor what kind of words they utter during such rituals. It is as if he wants to keep the indigenous supernatural arts at as low a profile as possible.

If we compare this with the descriptions of Patrick's encounters with the druids in the seventh-century *Life of Patrick* by Muirchú moccu Machthéni, we see that they satirise him, utter incantations and invoke

their gods, who are said to be demons.[45] No direct quote of the druidic words of power is given; the only possible exception is the satirical *Ascicaput*-poem, purportedly translated into Latin by Muirchú.[46] The whole point of these stories is the superiority of the saints as evidence for the value of the religion that they represent.

The saints use various forms of verbal power; Patrick invokes the 'Lord', curses, quotes a psalm, blesses and prays; Columba sings a psalm, invokes Christ, prays and blesses. The silence in the sources on the part played by the druids and the so-called evildoer does not reflect the reality of the pre- or non-Christian voices. When we look at the Irish terms for supernatural verbal power, we are stunned by their variety.[47] Many of these words are translated simply as 'magic, incantation, charm, spell', but this variety of terms seems to reflect a variety of meanings. The definitions of what they stood for have been lost.[48] This process perhaps started in the period when Christian literacy was introduced in Ireland, for many of the people who could write will have rejected these forms of verbal power in fear or anger. It may have been all the same to them: magic or magical arts (*magia*; *ars magica*).

The missionaries heard Celtic languages when they travelled through the Celtic lands. Some inhabitants will have been interested in their message; others may have seen the missionaries as a threat. They may have uttered their words of power against these newcomers. The missionaries may have replied to this with their Latin psalms, which in their turn are translations from the original Hebrew texts, or from their Greek translation in the Septuagint. If the hagiographies of Patrick and Columba reflect reality to some extent, then missionaries also uttered invocations, prayers, curses and blessings.

It may be important to emphasise in our secularised context that such battles with words must have had a very serious character. When indigenous holy people drew upon the power of their gods with words, the missionaries will have seen this as drawing upon demonic power. Demons were very much feared by many Christians in the early Middle Ages. Adomnán tells us of the difficult time that Columba has when he is attacked by demons during prayer in a wild, remote area (III.8). He uses the armour (*armatura*) of the apostle Paul, we are told, but needs the help of angels in order to overcome them. This armour is in fact the armour of God, mentioned in the Letter to the Ephesians 6:11–18 (the emphasis is mine):

Induite vos **arma** Dei ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli quia non est nobis conluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem sed adversus

principes et potestates adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum contra spiritalia nequitiae in caelestibus propterea accipite **armaturam** Dei ut possitis resistere in die malo et omnibus perfectis stare. State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate et induti **loricam** iustitiae et calciati pedes in praeparatione evangelii pacis in omnibus sumentes **scutum** fidei in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere et **galeam** salutis adsumite et **gladium** Spiritus quod est verbum Dei per omnem orationem et obsecrationem orantes omni tempore in Spiritu et in ipso vigilantes in omni instantia et obsecratione pro omnibus sanctis.

Put you on the **armour** of God, that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil for our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Therefore take unto you the **armour** of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and to stand in all things perfect. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the **breastplate** of justice, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace: in all things taking the **shield** of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one. And take unto you the **helmet** of salvation, and the **sword** of the Spirit, which is the word of God. By all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the Spirit; and in the same watching with all instance and supplication for all the saints.

The First Letter to the Thessalonians (5:8) likewise mentions spiritual armour: *Nos autem qui diei sumus sobrii simus induti* **loricam** *fidei et caritatis et* **galeam** *spem salutis*, 'But let us, who are of the day, be sober, having on the **breastplate** of faith and love, and for a **helmet** the hope of salvation'. These metaphors have their roots in the Hebrew Bible or so-called Old Testament.

What is important to us is that a Celtic form of verbal power has come into existence, which was used as protection. The genre is indicated by a term borrowed from these biblical passages: the *lorica*, or 'breastplate'.[49] Celticists have seen this type of text as a hybrid between pre-Christian Celtic and Christian culture.[50] Michael Herren argued that the origin of the *lorica* lies in Roman Britain. The basis for his theory is a suggestion by Wallace Martin Lindsay:

> Is it possible that they [sc. *loricae*] were adopted by the early missionaries as a guard against the spells which the heathen sorcerers directed against them? Such spells often took the form of leaden execration-tablets with malignant specification of the various parts of the body.[51]

According to Herren, the *lorica* may have had two sub-literary models.[52] Firstly, he refers to curse tablets, of which specimens were found in Roman Britain. Curse tablets are texts, inscribed on lead, which were sometimes buried with an image of the person to be cursed. The structure of these texts has a pattern similar to the structure of the *lorica*:

1. invocation of the aid of a supernatural entity to curse/protect someone
2. a detailed list of parts of the body to be affected/protected, sometimes together with a list of evils
3. a pact between the performer and the supernatural entity whose power is sought.[53]

Herren furthermore mentions the use of nails, inserted in the curse tablets, and 'the practice of stabbing an image of a person with a needle or sharp object in order to inflict real pain in the area affected'.[54] This metaphorical stabbing ritual was performed without the intended victim being aware of it.

Connecting these details with the narrative about Saint Columba's fight with demons, I observe that the demons were said to fight with iron spikes. Columba explains later to the ignorant monks that he protected them from the demonic attack which would have caused pestilential diseases. Thus, we see a spiritual attack by supernatural entities striking with sharp implements aimed at ignorant victims, who were to receive physical wounds, i.e. a plague. The defence against this attack is with words, a spiritual attitude and supernatural help: Columba prays, metaphorically wearing God's armour, and another monastery purportedly defends itself against their attack with fasting and prayer (III.8). Comparing this narrative with the curse ritual, we note that human performers of the supernatural attack are absent in the former, but otherwise a similar pattern of thinking appears to exist.

The second subliterary model that Herren adduces is represented by amulets inscribed with protective texts. He describes a relevant specimen, probably stemming from a Jewish community in Roman Egypt, which was found in Roman Britain. Amulets were carried, and hence could be easily

distributed across various countries. The model that they present has a double nature: as a text to be recited and as an object to be worn. Herren points out that the *lorica* is not a Celtic invention but a Celtic innovation, for he sees the roots of the genre in Graeco-Roman and Jewish diaspora religion. This new type of text may thus have been based on curse tablets and amulets, but was embellished with biblical phrases and items from glossaries. The link between these amulets and the *loricae* may have been Christian exorcism formulae.[55]

The following methodological issue is important for us. Herren bases his line of argument on the contents of extant texts, on the one hand on Celtic *loricae* and on the other on non-Celtic words of power that bear a structural similarity to these Celtic texts. From these forms of verbal power he gleans information of what might have been there in oral Celtic culture. Since the publication of his excellent book, we have learned that the custom of uttering dangerous words in combination with the piercing of an image of a person with a thorn (or a pin, nail, spike or pointed implement: *delg*) was also known in Ireland. We find this described in the Middle Irish glosses in the Old Irish *Uraicecht na Ríar*, 'Primer of the Stipulations', a law text on the poetic grades from the second half of the eighth century.[56] The dangerous words are identified as satire (*áer*), further specified as *congain comail*, 'magical wounding', and *corrguinecht*, 'sorcery', in the Old Irish text, and explained as *túaithe*, 'a charm', and *glám dícenn*, which is a lethal type of satire, in the Middle Irish glosses.[57] Medieval Irish satire overlaps not only with magical texts but also with curses.[58] Thus, there is Irish evidence of a ritual involving stabbing a figurine combined with verbal power that may be compared with curse tablets and their ritual context.

Following in Herren's footsteps, I hope to show how pre-Christian culture may shimmer through our extant texts in at least three ways: by reflecting customs and beliefs rejected by Christian authors; by referring to pre-existent spells through loosening them or exorcising their influence; and by being hidden in a deep layer of a text.

The first part of this contribution gave an example of the rejection of a certain ritual in Patrick's *Confessio*. The rejection of certain beliefs will now be shown from a poem, of which two recensions are extant; therefore, we can follow its textual development. The poem discusses dangers on a journey. The author expresses the belief that everything is in God's hand; when one's time has come, one will die. The first recension is extant in two manuscripts and dated to *c.* '900 or perhaps a little later'.[59] The first and last stanzas of Recension I are as follows:

1. M'aenarān dam isa sliab
– a rī grian rob soraid sét – ;
ním nesu éc ina mend
andās no bend trí*ch*ait c[h]*ét*.[60]

I go alone toward the mountain,
O King of suns let the way be smooth;
Death is no nearer to me in its pitfalls,[61]
Than were I thirty hundred strong.[62]

11. F*or* faesam dē uasail āin,
A*th*air naī ngrā*dh* spirad naem*h*,
Nīm reilci i n-ua*th*aib*h* bāis bāin,
Nō a ngrāin, gia nom tegma am aen.

M.aenurān.[63]

I place myself under the protection of God, noble and glorious,
Father of nine ranks of holy spirits;
May He not let me into the terrors of white death,
Or into horror, though I be alone.[64]

The later and longer Recension II is also extant in two manuscripts and attributes the poem to Saint Columba or Colum Cille.[65] The version in the Yellow Book of Lecan adds that the saint sang this text when he travelled alone and, moreover, promises protection for the person who sings it going on a journey (*sét*, literally 'a path').[66] In other words: the poem has become a *lorica* or protective text. The Early Modern Irish *Life of Colum Cille* by Manus O'Donnell supplied a narrative context; when the saint travelled through Sliab Breg on his own,[67] he was under the protection (*coiméd*) of God, who made him invisible. Singing his song, he travelled safely, while the king and his men waited in ambush in vain.

Some stanzas of this textual tradition merit close reading. Stanza 6 in Recension I reads:

6. Nīm d*h*erbann do *th*eacht for feacht
Cia s[h]rēidid ne*ch* a n-air*eacht*;
Fód for ro delbad mo lea*cht*
Isam ēcean a *th*aire*acht*.[68]

It does not hinder me from going on a journey,
Though someone sneezes in an assembly;

The sod whereon my tombstone has been shaped,[69]
I must needs approach it.[70]

A sneeze in public was apparently an evil omen for undertaking a jour-
ney.[71] Sneezing is also mentioned in stanza 13/14 in Recension II. The YBL
version of Recension II reads:

> 14. Nocha n-ag sreód ata ar cuid,
> Nocha n-ag eóin da barr slat,
> Ní ag curnán do chrand chas
> Ní ag sordán, glac i n-glaic.
> Fearr in té re tabraim taeb,
> In t-Athair 's-in t-Aen 's in Mac.[72]

> It is not with a sneeze[73] our destiny is,
> Nor with the bird on the top of the twig,
> Nor with the trunk of a knotty tree,
> Nor with a humming[74] hand in hand;
> Better is He in whom we trust,
> The Father, the One, and the Son.[75]

The extra two lines in this poem, otherwise in quatrains, are absent in
the Laud 10 version:

> 13. Nī hag sreoidh atá mo chuid,
> nī ag énaibh do bharr shlat:
> ferr in triúr ris'tabhruim taobh,
> Athair, Spirat naom is Mac.[76]

> It is not with a sneeze that my destiny (lit. share) is,
> Nor with the birds on the top of twigs (tree branches),
> Better is the trio (i.e. Trinity) in whom we trust,
> Father, Holy Spirit and Son.

The authors seem to reject various types of divination and exhort the
audience to trust divine guidance. Recension II lists more descriptions of
this rejected belief in portents in another stanza, which has no parallel
in Recension I. We read in the YBL version:

> 16. Ni adraim do gothaib én,
> Na sreód na sén for bith-che,

> Na mac na mana na mnai,
> Is e mo drai Crist mac De.[77]

> I adore not the voice of birds,
> Nor a sneeze,[78] nor a portent[79] on the earthly world,
> Nor a son, nor an omen,[80] nor a woman,
> My Druid is Christ, the Son of God.[81]

The son and woman are somewhat enigmatic;[82] Laud 10 has again a different reading:

> 14. Nā hadhair do ghothaibh gerg,
> Ná sreōdh nā sén ar bith cé,
> Nā creid mana bīs ag mnái,
> Is é is rí[g]fhāidh Críst mac Dé.[83]

> Do not adore/adhere to the voices of heath-birds/grouse,
> Nor a sneeze nor a portent in this world,
> Do not believe an omen that is with a woman/that a woman has,
> Christ the Son of God is [the] pre-eminent seer.

What we see here mentioned are instances of rejected belief. Is this pre-Christian belief? The time of the first missionaries was long gone when these texts were written, and, interestingly, the later recension lists even more unorthodox beliefs than the older recension. Let us consider the possibilities.

Two concepts are relevant to our question: genre and reception history. As for genre: the older first recension is in fact a poem that puts the belief in the protective force of a *lorica* in a different perspective: God is the one who protects and who decides when one's time has come. It may even be that the author objected to belief in *loricae*. The preface to the YBL version of Recension II, however, promises protection to those who utter the text when they go on a journey. This promise gives the text a *lorica*-function.[84]

When we consider the reception history of the text, we observe a parallel development concerning a *lorica* associated with Saint Patrick. The scene of Columba escaping invisibly from the king in Manus O'Donnell's *Life* may very well have been modelled upon a tale in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick.*[85] Patrick and his men await a royal ambush, but thanks to a blessing by Patrick, they escape either invisibly or in the form of deer.[86] The

Middle Irish preface to the famous Old Irish 'Deer's Cry' or '*Lorica* of Saint Patrick' not only identifies this text as Patrick's blessing mentioned in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* but also promises protection to future reciters.[87] Likewise, our poem in Recension II has a *historiola* in Manus O'Donnell's *Life of Colum Cille* on a miraculous escape by the saint and becomes a *lorica* for each reciter in the YBL version, although YBL literally refers to the text as a *coimdi*, 'protection'.[88] This term is a designation for protective texts, such as charms and hymns.[89]

Recension I of the poem expresses a world view in which the only source of protection for human beings is identified as God (or the Trinity), and this protection is closely connected with the belief that life is predestined by God. Life predestined and in the hand of God is a common theological idea. The poem is put in the first person singular in both Recension I and II. The latter recension with its *lorica*-function, however, also uses plural forms and the imperative.[90] These traits are uncommon for the *lorica*, which is usually written in first person singular, but suit a sermon well. Could it be that the poem had a homiletic source?

When questions concerning the future or things hidden are not addressed to God, such types of divination, frequently associated with 'magic', are condemned in the Bible. Paradigmatic is Deuteronomy 18:10–11:

> Nec inveniatur in te . . . qui ariolos sciscitetur et observet somnia atque auguria ne sit maleficus ne incantator ne pythones consulat ne divinos et quaerat a mortuis veritatem.

> Let there not be found among you . . . anyone that consults soothsayers, or observes dreams and omens, neither let there be any wizard (lit. evil-doer), nor charmer, nor anyone that consults pythonic spirits, or fortune tellers, or that seeks the truth from the dead.

The tools for divination from our poem, however, such as sneezes and bird cries, are not mentioned in the Bible,[91] but Greek and Roman literature from the *Odyssey* (XVII.539–47) onwards does attribute ominous significance to sneezing, although some authors ridiculed this belief.[92] Sneezing at the outset of an undertaking, especially a journey, is often mentioned as being seen as an omen.[93] We also find lists of practices and beliefs simliar to those mentioned in our poem in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and other theological treatises, but they forbid them.[94]

Some sermons of Caesarius of Arles (*c*.470–542) were of great influence on theological writings dealing with forbidden beliefs and practices. Caesarius used pseudepigraphy to augment the authority of his writings, and one particular sermon relevant to us – number 54 on omens and soothsayers – was in such a way ascribed to Augustine.[95] A list of forbidden things in sermon 54 shares items with our Irish poem. Caesarius comments on using bird sounds as a divination instrument for journeying:

> Similiter et auguria observare nolite, nec in itinere positi aliquas aviculas cantantes adtendite, nec ex illarum cantatu diabolicas divinationes adnuntiare praesumite.[96]

> Likewise, do not observe omens or pay attention to singing birds when you are on the road, nor dare to announce devilish prophecies as a result of their song.[97]

He adds that it does not matter on which day one leaves for a journey, for all days were made by God. Sneezing at the outset of a journey, therefore, is irrelevant:

> Illas vero non solum sacrilegas sed etiam ridiculosas sternutationes considerare et observare nolite: sed quotiens vobis in quacumque parte fuerit necessitas properandi, signate vos in nomine Christi, et symbolum vel orationem dominicam fideliter dicentes, securi de dei adiutorio iter agite.[98]

> And do not pin any faith on or pay any attention to the both impious and ridiculous [interpretation of] sneezes. As often as there is need for you to hurry, sign yourself in the name of Christ, devoutly recite the Creed or Lord's Prayer, and go on your way secure in God's help.[99]

We encounter quotations and paraphrases of these lines in various theological writings.[100] How should we see this phenomenon? Is the repetition of the words of Caesarius sometimes a matter of convenience, or do the authors share his feelings concerning forbidden beliefs?[101] Are we dealing with a mere quotation phenomenon or do these repeated lists of forbidden beliefs reflect contemporaneous practice? According to Dieter Harmening, these beliefs mainly stem from Late Antique culture; he considers them as a literary tradition and hence a fiction within the Christian context.[102]

It is instructive to have a brief look at the reception history of this sermon in the vernacular. Aelfric of Eynsham (*c.*955–*c.*1010) used Caesarius's sermon for his own homily on auguries.[103] Aelfric preaches that those who trust divination through birds, sneezing, horses or dogs are no Christians. If someone goes on a journey and wants to be protected, no fortunate days need to be divined but one should sing the *Pater noster* and the *Credo* and cross oneself for divine protection.[104] Caesarius did not refer to horses and dogs. The extra material may stem from yet unidentified sources;[105] Aelfric may have heard about such things somewhere[106] and/or they may be his adaptations to the contemporary Anglo-Saxon context.[107] Similarly, the comparison of Aelfric's sermon with an Old Norse version of this sermon brings out the phenomenon of contextualisation as well. The Old Norse text adapts Aelfric's text to the Norwegian context and thus leaves out the reference to divination through birds, sneezing, dogs and horses.[108]

Turning to an Early Modern Irish sermon on the Ten Commandments from Leabhar Breac, we note certain, now familiar, forbidden beliefs, although categorised not as auguries but as 'idolatry' or forms of veneration of other gods. The list consists of belief in casting lots, in the spells/charms of women, in the sound of birds, in visions/dreams, in the time of the moon, in forbidden days or in prophecies from now living people.[109]

It is not surprising that we find similarities in lists of forbidden practices and beliefs in penitentials, sermons and other literature. Theological ideas stemming from the Bible, the Church Fathers and other ecclesiastical authorities were influential and hence borrowed. The lists are not identical, however. Especially in regard to sermons, adaptations to the local context will have been made for pastoral aims. For example, Aelfric condemns lot-casting in general, but allows it for a specific purpose when dealing with 'worldly matters', for example in order to divide land.[110] This is his own additions to what he read in his sources,[111] thereby probably condoning local customs. This is why we need to study the lists and detect the differences. In our poem, for instance, the tree trunk (?) and humming as ways of divination stand out and deserve further study. The differences and the fact that they are found in the sermon genre are grounds for questioning the view that these lists are merely literary artefacts.[112] Why preach against these things, if they were no longer practised?

This leads to another relevant issue. If contemporary religious practices are being addressed, should these be seen as pre-Christian or Christian? Caesarius of Arles and, following in his footsteps, Aelfric are clear about this: people who practise the forbidden things are not Christians but 'pagans'.[113] Thus the Christian public is admonished not to

lose its Christian identity (literally: the sacrament of baptism)[114] and not to 'return' to pre- or non-Christian practices (literally, 'return again to the observance of omens' and 'return to their impious, detestable omens').[115] Caesarius distinguishes not only between Christians and pagans, but also between good and bad (literally, tepid and careless) Christians.[116] The Early Modern Irish sermon uses the label 'idolatry' in a similar vein. The sermons and versions of our poem are theological rejections of unorthodox belief that the authors associate with an earlier phase and with paganism.

Some people may have disagreed about the unorthodoxy of the beliefs and practices mentioned; value judgements on these have varied depending on time and place. That some of these beliefs and practices have their roots in an older pre-Christian past seems highly likely. Wearing an amulet or herb as protection, another ancient forbidden practice,[117] was suggested above as one of the models for the belief and practice of using *loricae*. Despite its condemnation,[118] many Irish (textual) examples are extant. Within Ireland, the First Recension of our poem would agree with the condemnation, whereas the YBL version of the Second Recension makes the poem into a *lorica* and thereby condones and promotes the practice.

The fact that medieval sermons and poems warn against belief in sneezes as omens seems to me to be evidence that not only Mediterranean peoples in the Classical period and Late Antiquity believed this.[119] Even today, people feel the need to say something when someone sneezes.

Finally, practices and beliefs deemed forbidden and unorthodox, according to some ecclesiastical authorities, may also be found in depictions of foreigners.[120] Hence, a Middle Irish poem attributes these beliefs to the Picts.[121] The teachings of six Pictish druids, who settle in Ireland, include some of the above-mentioned forbidden beliefs: idolatry (*ídlacht*), the honouring of sneezes and omens (*mórad sréd is mana*), lucky times (*amsona*) and paying attention to the voices of birds (*gotha én do aire/ fhairi*).[122]

It is not unlikely that the Irish, just like their neighbours in Britain, heard premonitions in bird sounds. The reference to the cry of the Badb above the ford in which Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad will fight may be a literary reflection of this.[123] It is possible that one did not go on a journey when someone sneezed, or when the grouse or another bird made an unusual sound or when the weather showed inauspicious signs. This may have been pre-Christian belief to which some continued to adhere in Christian times. Hence, the poems that we just studied keep reminding their readership or audience that this is not the way one should think according to orthodox Christian doctrine.

What we are in fact dealing with in the poems and sermons discussed here is an attempt to establish 'orthodoxy'. The message given is that a 'true Christian' is a 'true Irish person' who neither adheres to such beliefs nor performs these practices. The texts address the whole population who are supposed to be Christian, but if people persist in these forbidden ways, they are threatened with rejection by the Church. They are then defined as non-Christians by the authors of the texts because of their beliefs and practices, which are associated with and may go back to pre-Christian times.

Mirrors and layers

The first method to find Irish pre-Christian religious traces is, therefore, looking for rejection of belief forms in Christian sources. The second method closely follows Herren's theory. Can we find texts that refer to pre-existent spells by trying to overcome their effect? In other words, are there Irish counterspells other than the genre of the *lorica*? I think there may be several,[124] but I discuss one instance, which is not immediately obvious and therefore serves as another methodological example.

Andrei Toporkov has noted the structural similarity between ancient Greek love charms (from around the beginning of the Common Era until the fourth century) and more recent Eastern European love charms (from the seventeenth century onwards).[125] The formula 'let her neither eat nor drink' is a basic strand in these charms. All sorts of variations are added. The idea behind this formula is that through this charm a person suffers, being unable to eat, drink, sleep and so on until she or he has become the lover of the person for whose sake the charm is uttered. Toporkov points out a connection with 'love-sickness', described in Greek love literature and medical writings as someone who has fallen in love and may have difficulty eating and sleeping because of obsession with the loved one.[126] Herren's above-mentioned theory was limited to execration or curse texts; we should add the genre of love charms to this discussion. Some Greek *defixiones* or binding spells pertaining to love (or sex) show structural similarity to the *loricae* as well. Often, body parts are enumerated in the spells, and, similarly, invocation of and contracts with supernatural beings may be part of the ritual. The figurines that may accompany curse tablets are part of love magic too: the piercings of those dolls are, however, not accompanied by curses to harm but by constraining spells, equally consisting of violent, aggressive language: 'I pierce whatever part of you so that you will remember me'.[127]

One Graeco-Roman example from the fifth century (found in Upper Egypt) suffices to get an impression of what is involved. A clay pot with two wax figurines, originally deposited in a cemetery, was accompanied by a lengthy spell on papyrus.[128] The beginning of the binding spell gives an example of the 'let her not . . .' formula and the idea of binding someone's listed body parts:

> I bind you with the unbreakable bonds of the Fates in the under-world and powerful Necessity. For I invoke you *daimones* who lie here, who are continually nourished here and who reside here and also you young ones who have died prematurely. I invoke you by the unconquerable god IAÔ BARBATHIAÔ BRIMIAÔ CHERMARI.[129] Rouse yourselves, you *daimones* who lie here and seek Euphêmia, to whom Dôrothea gave birth, for Theôn, to whom Proechia gave birth. Let her not be able to sleep for the entire night, but lead her until she comes to his feet, loving him with a frenzied love, with affection and sexual intercourse. For I have bound her brain and hands and viscera and genitals and heart for the love of me, Theôn.[130]

We also have a love spell of insular Celtic origin from the period between *c.* 600 and the late ninth century: the so-called Leiden *lorica*, which is simultaneously an exorcism and a binding spell.[131] It does not contain the 'let her not . . .' formula, but there is an extensive list of body parts to be scrutinised/tracked out for the sake of the love of the person who utters the text. Therefore, not only curses and curse rituals comparable to those associated with Late Antique curse tablets were known in the Celtic lands, but also binding spells and rituals for love. Toporkov noted the widespread pattern of the not eating, drinking and sleeping formula in the eastern parts of Europe.[132] We now have a look at the West, using a narrative about our third saint, Brigit.

Saint Brigit is visited by a man with marriage problems. His wife wants to leave him and he goes to Brigit for help.[133] According to the Middle Irish version of the *Life of Brigit*, the man asks for a spell or charm (*epaid*). The saintly charm consists of blessed water. In the Old Irish *Life*, the man sprinkles his wife with the water; in the other three versions he is told to sprinkle house, food, drink and bed with the water during the woman's absence. Three elements in this latter ritual – food, drink and bed – correspond to the elements of the well-known formula of 'let her neither eat nor drink nor sleep' from binding spells. The healing ritual in the Old Irish version could be an exorcism of the woman herself, and the ritual in the

other three versions might be a loosening spell; those places associated with desire and love need to be purified from an interfering substance or presence in order to heal the woman and restore the love. The tale does not say anything of the reason for the marriage problem. 'Magic' or demonic disruption of the relationship could have been a possible diagnosis in those days, and the similar structural elements that we know from binding spells leave open the possibility of the presence of such beliefs. What I have done here is argue backwards, just as Herren did in the case of his theory on the origin of the *lorica*. I have adduced further arguments for seeing Brigit's miracle as a counterspell elsewhere.[134]

Our third and last method of digging into the past focuses on textual layers. Just as the above-mentioned Jewish amulet wandered from Egypt to Britain and presumably stayed in use, pre-Christian Ireland may also have had useful charms for healing, love and other purposes that remained in use after the advent of Christianity. Despite the orthodox dislike of spells, we do find spells in Christian manuscripts.[135] People used spells in the Middle Ages, whether they saw themselves as Christians or not. It is possible that some spells are rooted in pre-Christian Irish culture. Again, we cannot go back to their pristine state. Charms usually exist in many variations and their form makes contemporary contextualisation possible. The use of the letter N, for which the name (Latin *nomen*) of the target of the charm's effect can be substituted, is a case in point.[136] The lists in spells can be made longer or adapted for a specific purpose. Often, spells are of a composite nature. If, for instance, we look again at the love charm of Theôn, we see that he is referred to in the third person singular in the 'let her not . . .' formula, whereas in other places the text is put in the first person singular. The name 'Theôn' may very well have been inserted as a generic mark for a name (cf. *N*(*omen*) in Latin) in a source text. John Gager comments on this binding spell:

> As the many parallels with other texts indicate, almost every line of our spell was copied from recipes in reference works much like those preserved in the large collections of *PGM* [the Greek Magical Papyri].[137]

Can we detect composite and possibly layered structures in Irish spells as well? I will attempt to uncover such a structure in one example, also pertaining to love and sex.

Among the charms and incantations from manuscript H.3.17,[138] famous for its legal texts, there is one that appears to have been used for making men impotent.[139] The texts, written in vacant spaces and margins by the

principal scribe of some law tracts, were edited and translated by Richard Best.[140] The text to be discussed here is number IX in his collection; numbers V to IX are written on the two sides of a half page with a big hole in it. Best's translation is only partial;[141] hence I offer a new, tentative translation:[142]

> Eolas do lemad ḟir
>
> Fonriug do luth .ii.
> fonriug do lath.
> fonriug do nert.
> fonriug do thracht.
> fonriug
> ben druth dam
> tuli i n-ath.
> focertar cros de dar da les in fir.
> Fidula fadula fidaili
> bibili belabili
> au[143] tert tíua
> gront in celi dei noinglenda
> tilalup tilalup tilalup et reliqua.[144]

Knowledge/charm/spell/prescription to render a man impotent

1. I bind him,[145] your power of movement[146] (repeat)[147]
2. I bind him, your heat[148]
3. I bind him, your strength[149]
4. I bind him, your vigour[150]
5. I bind him.
6. A wanton woman to me
7. Floods/ Flooding in a ford.
8. The cross of God is made over the two thighs of the man.
9. *Fidula fadula fidaili*
10. *Bibili belabili*
11. *Autert* (or *autertert*) *tíua*[151]
12. *Gront* to the heavens of God or of the valley[152] (??)
13. *tilalup tilalup tilalup* etcetera.

This text shares characteristics with other charms: repetition, alliteration, obscure language, mysterious words, use of the first person singular, reference to ritual and to supernatural beings. The first five lines

are formed by performative words that would affect the intended victim with impotence. Lines 6–7 seem to stand in contrast with the preceding five lines: things should stagnate, stop moving, be bound, become weak for the victim of the spell, whereas the speaker wants to have a sexually active partner, in which case things (bodily fluids?) should move, flow and stream, perhaps metaphorically hinted at by flooding in a ford.

Line 8 seems to be a ritual prescription. The mention of the cross of God is clearly a sign of knowledge of Christian belief; referring to 'Christ' as 'God' was common in the Middle Ages.[153] Carey sees this line as a ground for interpreting the purpose of the text as healing impotence, contrasting it with the 'jingling lines at the heart of the charm' which would represent 'hostile magic'.[154] Although the making of the sign of the cross for the interconnected purposes of blessing, exorcism, protection and healing is well-known, on methodological grounds we cannot a priori ascribe healing to a Christian symbol (such as the cross) and damaging health to mysterious, 'magical' words.

The last five lines are obscure 'words of power' and thus clearly representatives of the mysterious language, characteristic of magical texts. If I am allowed to speculate: the first seven lines and the five last lines could have roots in a pre-Christian culture. The last five lines may have formed a separate, different spell, which in its current form is incomplete, judging from the 'etcetera'. It should be noted that the first part up to the ritual prescription are in smaller letters than the rest in the manuscript (beginning with line 9, the possibly second spell).

Richard Best suggests that 'the conjurations . . . appear to be fanciful names replacing those of the divinity usually found'.[155] If this is so, we would have here a clue to a deeper layer of the text. Could it be that the mysterious words are a corrupt version of oral incantation? Or are they indeed part of an invocation of supernatural beings? If so, have they been taken over from foreign-language amulets? Although not the same as the words *bibili belabili* from our spell, we find *BIA BI BIOTHÊ* in a list of names of the supernatural *BARBAR ADONAI* in an often-copied recipe for a binding spell for love from the papyrus manuscript from Egypt known as *Greek Magical Papyri IV*, dating from the fourth century CE.[156] The spell contains several variations of the 'Let X not eat, drink, sleep, without me' formula. The love spell of which the beginning was quoted above gives the names for the seven heavenly thrones, some of them being 'BALEÔ BOLBEÔ BOLBEÔCH BOLBESRÔ'.[157] A lead tablet from Egypt from the fourth or fifth century CE, originally deposited in a grave, gives an elaborate Greek spell to bind a man's anger. Among the many supernatural names and

mysterious words, there is an invocation of BELIAS BELIÔAS AROUÊOU AROUÊL CHMOUCH CHMOUCH.[158]

Closer to home, though, we find something which looks like a variant version of one term – *tilalup* – in a spell against fever in an English monastic miscellaneous manuscript.[159] The spell is part of a booklet, possibly originally a separate manuscript, with herbal and other medical remedies from Anglo-Saxon and ancient sources. The immediate manuscript context (fols 117r and 118r) is prescriptions for textual amulets, to be worn around the neck and 'to be used in combination with standard Christian prayers, blessings, verbal formulas, and signs of the cross'.[160] The text is a combination of Latin, mysterious words and Irish; the relevant word is put in bold type:

> Con*tra* febres. [in the margin:] *cave*
> In nomine patris & filii. ¬ s*piritu*s s*ancti*.
> Telon. Tecula. **Tilolob.** Ticon. Tilo. Leton. Patron. Tilud. Am*en*.
> Ronbea. Furtacht. Italmon.
> Ronbea. Beathatrocor. Laruithitt [Or: Lariuthitt]. inim.
> D*omi*ni e*st* sal*us*. χρ*ist*i e*st* sal*us*.
> Sal*us* tua d*omine* sit se*mper* mecu*m*. N.
> S*ancta* trinitas sana me. ab hostib*us* corporis ¬ animæ meæ.
> Ih*esus* nazaren*us* rex iudeor*um*
> hæc scribent*ur*. ¬ in collo ligent*ur*.

> Against fever. [in the margin:] Beware
> In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
> Telon. Tecula. **Tilolob.** Ticon. Tilo. Leton. Patron. Tilud. Amen.
> May there be His/Their help for us on earth[161]
> May there be His/Their merciful life with glory for us in heaven.[162]
> Salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is of Christ.
> May your salvation, Lord, always be with me, N.
>   [*Nomen* – Name to be inserted].
> Holy Trinity, heal me from the enemies of my body and soul.
> Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.
> Let these [words] be written and bound around the neck.[163]

The 'Beware' in the margin shows that some have deemed this healing text unorthodox. We deal with a composite text, which may well have had an oral pre-existence.[164] The heading indicating the text's use and the common Trinitarian invocation are followed by enigmatic words presumably with healing qualities, two lines expressing wishes concerning life on

earth and in heaven[165] and three sentences that are adaptations of Psalm 3:9. These sentences have also been used as the conclusion of two Irish *loricae*.[166] The fever text personalises this conclusion by using the first person singular and adding N for the name to be inserted. Then another request for healing addressed to the Trinity follows together with a quote from the Gospels of the well-known inscription on the cross of Jesus.[167] Just as with a *lorica*, the text should be worn on the body.

A second variant version of *tilalup* is found in another Irish healing text. A charm to stop every flow consists of the following mysterious words: *Aluta abnis tota aluta beta nel nua pacit bel **til tolab*** that need to be uttered thrice on a thumb before applying the thumb to the flow.[168] The mysterious sound *tilalup/tilolob/tiltolab* (or *tillolab*) is thus in all cases used for halting/hindering, be it an erection, a fever or a flow. These two healing texts share their restraining, halting or binding function with the impotence spell.

We have seen that John Carey suggested a possible healing function for the impotence spell. Yet another interpretation was suggested to me by Johan Corthals.[169] When I sent him my translation and asked for comments, he argued for seeing the text as a *lorica*, used by monks against feelings of lust.[170] His suggestions lead to the following translation of the first lines:[171]

> I hold us (or emend: *fomriug*, 'me') back from [sexual] motion (or, the
>   power of movement)
> I hold us/me back from heat
> I hold us/me back from strength
> I hold us/me back from vigour
> I hold us/me back.
> A wanton woman is for me
> A flood in a ford.

With the emendation, the text would fit the *lorica*-genre well, in that these texts are usually in the first person singular and uttered for one's own sake.[172] Unemended, the text appears to be spoken by one person on behalf of a group (of monks?). Line 8 with its impersonal ritual prescription would then describe this person performing the gesture of the cross over the thighs of every man in the group in order to exorcise or bless their thighs by the sign of the cross. Carey's interpretation of a healing would then fit, albeit as an exorcism of lust. In such a context, it would also make sense to interpret the words *celi dei* in line 12 as a reference

to the *Céli Dé*, or a member thereof. Another argument for seeing the text as a *lorica* is supplied by a comparison with the other charms in the manuscript. Four of Best's nine charms have *lorica* characteristics. Two of them (VII and VIII) are a *cúairt comgi*, 'circle of protection'; one of these literally refers to a *lorica*.[173] I have already referred to the protective textual genre designated *coimge/coimdi* when discussing the *lorica* of Colum Cille (YBL version).

Thus far, we have only looked at the charm (or charms) proper. The text is followed by a lengthy description of its purpose and, interestingly, impotence is absent from this list:

> Ar tennta ⁊ i snaithi foc*ertar* ⁊ ar cosc fola ⁊ a c*ur* i scathan ⁊ a thais-be*na*d[174] do mnai torra*ig* ⁊ ni b*er*a in toirr*chis* gu faicea in scathan ariss. A c*ur* i fot reisc ar seilb in fir teit i comruc ⁊ a bél re lar ⁊ b*er*aid a roga baill don fir bes ina agaid ginmotha a chend.

> For staunching, and let it be put/[let it be cast][175] on a thread, and for stopping blood; and put it in/[cast it on] a mirror and show it to a pregnant woman and she will not give birth until she see the mirror again. Put it in/[Cast it on] a sod of turf in the possession of a man who goes into a fight and its/[his?] mouth to the ground, and he will seize whatever limb he chooses of the man who may be against him, save only his head.[176]

These purposes are in line with the whole idea of binding, restraining and holding back; it would help to stop blood from flowing (cf. the above-mentioned charm in 24 B 3), delaying a birth and restraining an opponent in battle. We may add to Toporkov's conclusion that 'the multitude of meanings of the formulae and the possibility of variant interpretations are characteristic of the whole poetics of charms',[177] that some of them also seem to have served multiple purposes.

This charm seems to have had a life before it was written in the manuscript. Perhaps there were initially two charms: firstly, the impotence charm consisting of the heading and lines 1 to 7, followed by the ritual prescription, and secondly, the abbreviated *fidula*-charm consisting of lines 9 to 13 together with the piece about its triple purpose. These two charms may have been clustered together in the manuscript because of their communal binding function. The impotence spell may have been read together with the second text and may have been put to use for staunching blood, control of the time of birth and one's opponent in

battle, because of its hindering and constraining qualities. For the same reason, people may have used it as a *lorica* against lust. We do not know when or how the text was used or who used it. It is tempting to suggest a diachronic development from pre-Christian impotence spell to Christian chastity *lorica*, but it is more likely that the text may have been used for different purposes by different people contemporaneously and in different times. There is no reason to suggest that the idea of making a competitor impotent was less attractive to some in Christian times than it may have been in pre-Christian times.[178] The composite text, however, makes different readings possible and its composite nature seems to be a case of being layered; people added and omitted pieces of text according to their wishes and needs. That the text has its roots in Celtic religion is a possibility, but we will never be able to prove it.

Conclusion

In this contribution, various rituals that may have once been part of Irish society were discussed, such as a ritual for making a pact and forms of divination. I tried to argue backwards in my interpretation of an episode in the *Lives* of Saint Brigit by suggesting that she prescribed a loosening spell when supplying the husband with blessed water to regain his wife's love. Finally, a search for layers was done in a complex text by which sexual acts were restrained, either for external or internal use. The text was further used to hinder the flow of blood, the birth of a child and the movements of an opponent. The words of power used in this sort of ritual may have gone through a dynamic process of adaptation and reinterpretation.

This contribution has furthermore attempted to show that we should not study religious ritual in isolation in order to theorize about Celtic religion. Texts from various genres were related to each other. The ritual way to make a compact, defined by Saint Patrick, was put in a wider context not only through reference to real life situations in historical religious anthropology but also by reference to literary sources, such as medieval Irish sagas (i.e. mythology), biblical prophetic texts, and finally, Irish hagiography. The second example from hagiography of Saint Columba performing the ritual of prayer was connected on the one hand with New Testament epistles and on the other with the Irish custom of making, uttering and wearing *loricae*. Two recensions of a poem on this custom were discussed; the earlier first recension appeared to reject the custom, whereas the later second recension condoned and, in one manuscript version, even promoted the use of *loricae*. The poem was subsequently

incorporated in the Early Modern Irish *Life of Colum Cille* as a *lorica* for the saint within the context of a *historiola*. This was done in a fashion comparable to – and probably modelled on – the episode in the seventh-century *Life of Saint Patrick* by Muirchú, which attributes the saint's escape from a royal ambush to his not-quoted blessing. In the Middle Irish period, this blessing is said to have been the same as the Old Irish protective text, known as the 'Deer's Cry'. In both cases, an anonymous Old Irish text is connected with a saint and receives a *historiola* in the Middle Irish or Early Modern Irish period. The two recensions of the poem tried to establish Christian orthodoxy by listing forbidden beliefs and rituals. It is likely that treatises of the Fathers of the Church, who in their turn borrowed from biblical, Classical and Late Antique writings, were sources of inspiration in such lists of forbidden rituals and beliefs. On the other hand, there is reason to think that these lists were adapted to the local context. Again, we find examples of such forbidden belief in medieval Irish mythology, as part of the portrayal of the religion(s) of the past.

Another example discussed was the blessed water or love charm with which Saint Brigit let the desperate husband ritually exorcise his wife or their house. The source texts were of the hagiographical genre, but the texts adduced to understand what was going on stemmed from various other genres, such as instances of love magic from daily life. The models of harming with curse tablets and protecting with amulets suggested by Herren were extended with descriptions of rituals on satire, love magic, and exorcism. All these models have their descriptions in a ritual context, but we also find examples in mythological texts.

A final word needs to be said on the mysterious words in the 'impotence spell'. One word – *tilalup* – appeared to have variant versions in a charm against fever in an English manuscript and a staunching charm in an Irish manuscript. Although we do not know what the words mean, thanks to the headings and the ritual prescriptions we know that it served in medications with a restraining and halting function. In this way, ritual and words of power go hand in hand. Similarly, descriptions of ritual and mythology may reinforce each other. This should, however, be deduced from careful study of each separate text, which is the basis for our ideas on what Celtic religion(s) may have looked like.

Notes

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performers of verbal power conducted by Dr J. K. Reid, and my study of the 'words of power' themselves. See *http://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/86/2300134086.html*. I am grateful to Phillip Bernhardt-House for his comments on an earlier version.

[2] This sentence summarises a plea from the paper 'Celtic religion: a scholarly reconsideration' by Tom Sjöblom at the Thirteenth International Congress of Celtic Studies at Bonn (23–27 July 2007).

[3] See J. Borsje, 'The Secret of the Celts Revisited', in *Religion and Theology: A Journal of Contemporary Religious Discourse*, forthcoming 2015/2016.

[4] I am deeply indebted to Tjitze Baarda, Henk Leene †, Sybolt Noorda and Niek Schuman.

[5] I have been influenced by the work of Mieke Bal, Mary Daly †, Carol Christ and Starhawk (born Miriam Simos).

[6] *Het Lied van Je Grote Zus*, written together with Lieke Werkman (unpublished kandidaatsscriptie Old Testament, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, April 1984).

[7] *Wie is Wie in het Twaalfde Hoofdstuk van de Openbaring van Johannes?*, also written with Lieke Werkman (unpublished kandidaatsscriptie New Testament, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, July 1983).

[8] J. Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An Investigation Related to the Process of Christianization and the Concept of Evil*, Instrumenta Patristica, 29 (Turnhout, 1996); see the Introduction for general remarks on the methodology.

[9] See, for instance, J. Borsje, 'Fate in Early Irish Texts', *Peritia*, 16 (2002), 214–31.

[10] A fourth, related, project is Celtic cosmology, which resulted in J. Borsje, A. Dooley, S. Mac Mathúna and G. Toner (eds), *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland*, Papers in Mediaeval Studies 26 (Toronto, 2014).

[11] Compare J. Borsje, 'Druids, deer and "words of power": Coming to terms with evil in Medieval Ireland', in K. Ritari and A. Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008), pp. 122–49.

[12] To name just a few studies in this vast field of research: K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990) and J. F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1997).

[13] L. Bieler (ed.), *Libri epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi: Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Dublin, 1993); A. B. E. Hood (trans.), *St. Patrick: His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (London, 1978); D. R. Howlett (trans.), *The Confession of Saint Patrick* (New York, 1996).

[14] See, for instance, J. Borsje, 'Monotheistic to a certain extent. The "good neighbours" of God in Ireland', in A.-M. Korte and M. de Haardt (eds), *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism* (Leiden/Boston, 2009), pp. 53–82.

[15] My translation; Patrick's Latin text – *Invoca me in die tribulationis tuae et liberabo te et magnificabis me* (*Confessio* §5: Bieler, *Libri epistolarum*, I, p. 60) – is closer to the Latin translation of the Hebrew psalms (abbreviated as PsH) in the Vulgate text than the Latin translation of the Greek psalms from the

Septuaginta (abbreviated as PsG): *et invoca me in die tribulationis et liberabo* (PsG: *eruam*, 'I shall rescue') *te et glorificabis* ('you will glorify'; PsG: *honorificabis*, 'you will honour') *me*. The reading *magnificabis* is present in the Vetus Latina, the Psalter version(s) that Patrick used; see M. McNamara, 'Tradition and creativity in early Irish psalter study', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds), *Irland und Europa. Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter/ Ireland and Europe: The Early Church* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 338–89 (348–53).

[16] Bieler, *Libri epistolarum*, I, p. 66; Howlett, *Confession*, p. 63.

[17] Bieler, *Libri epistolarum*, I, p. 67, §18.

[18] Howlett, *Confession*, pp. 63–4.

[19] M. L. Warmind, 'Irish Literature as Source-material for Celtic Religion', *Temenos*, 28 (1992), 209–22 (217–18).

[20] Ibid., 216–21.

[21] To name a few: one could wonder whether mythology or even literature was an individualistic form of art, both before and during the Middle Ages. On the methodological problems concerning the connection between Irish texts and continental Celtic data (although on some points outdated), see M. Draak, 'The religion of the Celts', in C. J. Bleeker and G. Widengren (eds), *Historia Religionum: Handbook for the History of Religions*, *Vol. I: Religions of the Past* (Leiden, 1969), pp. 629–47; and cf. also the remarks on the sources for Celtic religion above.

[22] Cf. e.g. H. S. Versnel, 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: Myth and ritual, old and new', in L. Edmunds (ed.), *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 25–90.

[23] James Carney, *The Problem of St. Patrick* (Dublin, 1973), pp. 61–2. There is another echo in this passage: the basis of his refusal is the fear of God (*timor Dei*), which was also mentioned in the passage about his frequent praying during slavery.

[24] Carney, *The Problem*, pp. 61–2; cf. Bieler, *Libri epistolarum*, I, p. 67 crit. app.

[25] Carney, *The Problem*, p. 62, sees the reason for inclusion of this detail as apologetic: Patrick associated with non-Christian sailors but he remained true to his Christian identity. According to Eoin Mac Neill, *St. Patrick Apostle of Ireland* (London, 1934), p. 23, the captain may have deduced from Patrick's voice and appearance that he was a runaway slave, and therefore he refused to take him on board.

[26] *Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti* (D. A. Binchy, 'The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti', *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 33–48; for more about this tale and *fír*, see Borsje, *From Chaos*, pp. 17–91, esp. pp. 73–75; for more about *fír fer*, see M. E. Byrne, 'Note on a Gloss of O'Davoren', *Ériu*, 11 (1932), 94–6; Binchy, 'The Saga', 42; P. O'Leary, '*Fír fer*: An Internalized Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', *Éigse*, 22 (1987), 1–14.

[27] This mythological, religious motif is hardly the view of just an individual author but can be found throughout the literature (contra Warmind).

[28] But see J. Ryan, 'A Difficult Phrase in the 'Confession' of St. Patrick *reppuli sugere mammellas eorum*, §18', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 5, 52 (1938), 293–9, on

fír cíche, 'the guarantee of a breast' (296), and on similar rituals of grasping the breast, cheek or knee of another adult as 'an appeal from the weaker or less important to the stronger or more important that the latter should receive the former in his society on terms of complete friendliness and equality' (299). According to Ryan (299), Patrick did not want to enter into such a relationship of friendliness and equality with the 'pagan' sailors.

[29] B. Maier, '*Sugere mamellas*: A pagan Irish custom and its affinities', in R. Black, W. Gillies and R. Ó Maolalaigh (eds), *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Vol. I: Language, Literature, History, Culture* (East Lothian, 1999), pp. 152–61.

[30] Ibid., pp. 155–6.

[31] Ibid., pp. 156–8.

[32] Ibid., pp. 158–9.

[33] Ibid., pp. 160–1.

[34] D. A. Bray, 'Suckling at the Breast of Christ: A Spiritual Lesson in an Irish Hagiographical Motif', *Peritia*, 14 (2000), 282–96.

[35] Ibid., p. 283.

[36] Bieler (*Libri epistolarum*, II, pp. 139–40) refers to the Vetus Latina text, Codex Bobbiensis, of Hosea 14:1: *sugentes mamillas illorum*. He characterises Patrick's Latin expression as the equivalent of the Irish phrase *dide a cíche-som*, '[he] who sucked his breast', from 'The Adventure of Fergus mac Leite'. Bieler refers to the contract ritual from the tale as a 'common pagan ceremony in ancient Ireland'. References to the Bible in this contribution are to the Vulgate, unless otherwise indicated.

[37] Bieler (*Libri epistolarum*, II, p. 139, n. 107) also mentions the verse in Isaiah but deems it less likely as a source, because it concerns a metaphor, even though he admits that Patrick goes very far in his adaptation of biblical phraseology. Bray ('Suckling', 288) lists this metaphor among other imagery from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament from which the above-mentioned New Testament symbolism drew.

[38] Cf. also Is. 49:23.

[39] Ryan, 'A Difficult Phrase', p. 295, refutes any biblical connection, isolating the phenomenon as being 'fundamentally Irish': 'it is therefore a mistake to search for light and aid in Biblical or in classical sources'.

[40] The contract between Patrick and the sailors is in the end sealed in an unspecified way, according to Patrick's wish. Despite his alternative ritual, however, Patrick at first sight seems to be the weaker party to the contract, because he needs the aid of the sailors. The mention of his successful prayer, however, makes the reader aware of the powerful entity that is on Patrick's side.

[41] Cf. Carney, *The Problem*, pp. 53–83.

[42] Although there is a variety of designations for Irish pre-Christian religious functionaries in hagiography, the druids are singled out as the most notable and important opponents of saints. In Latin, however, these druids are referred to as *magi*, 'magicians'. For important observations on the

overlaps and distinctions between druids (*druíd*) and magicians (*magi*), see
C. McKenna, 'Between two worlds: Saint Brigit and pre-Christian religion
in the *Vita Prima*', in J. Nagy (ed.), *Identifying the 'Celtic'*, CSANA Yearbook, 2
(Dublin, 2002), pp. 66–74.

[43] Nagy, *Conversing*; T. O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara-event within its
background as a biblical "trial of divinities"', in J. Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagi-
ography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff, 2003), pp. 123–35.

[44] Adomnán, *Vita Columbae*, in *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, eds and trans A. O.
and M. O. Anderson (Oxford, 1991; revised edition of the 1961 publication).

[45] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, in L. Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book
of Armagh*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, X (Dublin, 1979), pp. 62–123.

[46] This textual tradition and the encounters between Patrick and the religious
functionaries (briefly mentioned below) are analysed in my forthcoming
Saints and Spells: Miraculous Magic in Medieval Ireland.

[47] To name just a few instances: *aidmilled*, *airbe druad*, *amainse*, *ammaitecht*, *bluga*,
bricht, *cerd cumainn*, *cerd ngenntlichtae*, *comal*, *corrguinecht*, *cumachtae*, *díchetal*,
doilbe, *dolbaid*, *druídecht*, *elada*, *éle*, *eólas*, *epaid*, *faisdinecht*, *féth*, *felmas*, and so
on (see *http://www.dil.ie/* for translations).

[48] Cf. A. Murray, 'Missionaries and Magic in Dark-Age Europe' (review article
of Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*), *Past and Present*,
136 (1992), 186–205 (187–9), on the variety of terms for performers of super-
natural power.

[49] For more on this genre, see L. Gougaud, 'Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur
les prières qui s'en rapprochent', *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et d'archéologie
chrétiennes*, 1 (1911), 265–81; Gougaud, 'Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur
les prières qui s'en rapprochent (Suite)', *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et
d'archéologie chrétiennes*, 2 (1912), 33–41, 101–27; G. S. Mac Eoin, 'Invocation
of the Forces of Nature in the *loricae*', *Studia Hibernica*, 2 (1962), 212–17; K.
Hughes, 'Some Aspects of Irish Influence on Early English Private Prayer',
Studia Celtica, 5 (1970), 48–61; M. W. Herren, *The Hisperica Famina II: Related
Poems* (Toronto, 1987), and P.-Y. Lambert, 'Celtic *loricae* and ancient magi-
cal charms', in R. L. Gordon and F. M. Simón (eds), *Magical Practice in the
Latin West*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 168 (Leiden–Boston, 2010),
pp. 629–48.

[50] See Borsje, 'Druids', pp. 129–40.

[51] W. M. Lindsay, *Early Welsh Script* (Oxford, 1912), p. 23, n. 1.

[52] See Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, pp. 23–31.

[53] I made one list out of the two lists that Herren (*Hisperica Famina*, p. 27) gives.

[54] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, p. 27.

[55] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, pp. 29–31.

[56] L. Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law*, Early Irish
Law Series (Dublin, 1987), pp. 77–8, 114–15, 138–40.

[57] Ibid., pp. 114–15.

[58] For the overlap of satire with curse, see T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'Curse and Satire',
Éigse, 21 (1986), 10–15; see also B. Mees, *Celtic Curses* (Woodbridge, 2009).

[59] The text was edited from Dublin, National Library, MS G 3 (formerly Phillips MS 7022) with some emendations from the version in Dublin, Trinity College, MS H.3.18, by J. Carney in 'M'aenarān dam isa sliab', *Éigse*, 2 (1940), 107–13; for the date, see Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* (Dublin, 1967), p. xxix. According to A. Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Toronto, 2006), p. 139, the first recension poem is Old Irish; D. Greene and F. O'Connor, in *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry A.D. 600 to 1200* (Dingle, 1967, repr. 1990), p. 161, assign this recension to the eleventh or twelfth century. Greene and O'Connor (*Golden Treasury*, pp. 161–4) give Carney's edition of Recension I, but emend some words and offer alternative translations. For more on this poem and the theme of 'being alone' in ecclesiastic poetry and heroic literature, see Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, pp. 130–2, 139–45.

[60] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 108.

[61] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 112, takes *mend* (H.3.18: *meind*) as *meing*, dative of *meng*, 'treachery', possibly referring to treacherous mountain paths.

[62] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 110.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 111.

[65] The version in the Yellow Book of Lecan (Dublin, Trinity College, H.2.16, now 1318, 14th-15th c.) was edited and translated by J. O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem Attributed to St. Columbkille; with a Translation and Notes', *The Miscellany of the Irish Archaeological Society*, 1 (1846), 1–15; the version in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud 615, 16th c., was edited by K. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP*, 7 (1910), 302–3.

[66] O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', pp. 3, 6. This preceding line is absent in the version in Laud (Meyer, 'Mitteilungen', p. 302).

[67] A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille: Life of Columcille. Compiled by Manus O'Donnell in 1532* (Urbana, 1918), pp. 180–1. O'Donnell's *Life* quotes the first stanza only, which can be identified as the Second Recension.

[68] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 109.

[69] For more on the sods of birth, death and burial, see Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, pp. xxix–xxxi.

[70] Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 111.

[71] Cf. ibid., p. 113.

[72] O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', p. 5.

[73] O'Donovan gives 'the *sreod*', for he could not find the word in the dictionaries available to him; the same applies to *sordán*. See *DIL*, s.v. *sreód*.

[74] O'Donovan gives: 'a *sordan*' (cf. above).

[75] O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', p. 12.

[76] Meyer, 'Mitteilungen', p. 303.

[77] O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', pp. 5–6.

[78] O'Donovan gives 'the *sreod*'.

[79] O'Donovan translates 'a destiny'.

[80] O'Donovan translates 'chance'.

[81] O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', pp. 12–13.

82 But compare the view expressed in the *Talmud*: 'Although one may not deliberately divine by them, a house, an infant and a woman may be regarded as prognostics' (J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York, 1939), p. 210).

83 Meyer, 'Mitteilungen', p. 303.

84 Gougaud ('Étude', part 1, p. 270) also characterised this version as a *lorica*.

85 More examples of this motif are discussed in my forthcoming *Saints and Spells*.

86 Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 90–1. In the narrative in O'Donnell's *Life* (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille*, pp. 180–1), Colum Cille appears to be invisible thanks to God's protection (*coiméd Dia*), just like Patrick and his companions (their invisibility is somewhat complicated; see Borsje, 'Druids', p. 142), but unlike Patrick's adventure, in Colum Cille's case the escape consists of two parts. After a conflict with the king, Colum Cille disappears invisibly from the meeting. Then Colum Cille and his retinue spend the night in Monasterboice. The next day, he is warned about a royal ambush in the mountains. Colum Cille sends his companions along a different road, and he travels on his own through the mountains (Sliab Breg). This breaking up of the company is clearly introduced to suit the context to the first line of the protective song 'Alone I am on the mountain'. In all cases, the protection is explicitly ascribed to God.

87 See Borsje, 'Druids', pp. 131–40 and the literature there cited.

88 O'Donovan, 'An Ancient Poem', p. 3; see *DIL* s.v. *coimge*; cf. the above-mentioned *coiméd Dia* in O'Donnell's *Life* that is believed to make Colum Cille invisible.

89 See also Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910), I, p. clxxix, n. 1.

90 Plural forms are found in stanza 13 in Laud 10 and 14 in YBL; the imperative is found in stanza 11 in YBL and stanza 14 in Laud 10.

91 Bird divination is introduced in the Septuagint but not taken over to the Vulgate (B.-C. Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen* (Berlin, 2011), p. 282). The Septuagint influenced the Church Fathers, such as Origen (H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 259).

92 A. S. Pease, 'The Omen of Sneezing', *Classical Philology*, 6, 4 (1911), 429–43, esp. 429–31; P. W. van der Horst, 'Niezen als omen in de antieke wereld', *Hermeneus*, 68 (1996), 179–81. The belief was also present in ancient India; Pease ('The Omen', p. 442, n. 3) refers to amuletic protection in the case of having 'an evil dream, seeing an inauspicious animal, hearing an ominous sneeze or evil shriek of a bird', mentioned in the *Atharva Veda* (X.3.6).

93 Pease, 'The Omen', p. 433.

94 For references, see Pease, 'The Omen', pp. 431–3 (on page 431, note 4, the column number should be 675); J. T. McNeill, 'Folk-paganism in the Penitentials', *Journal of Religion*, 13 (1933), 450–66: esp. 456, 463; E. S. McCartney, 'Wayfaring Signs', *Classical Philology*, 30 (1935), 97–112: esp. 106–8; Dieter Harmening, *Superstitio: Überlieferungs- und theoriegeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur kirchlich-theologischen Aberglaubensliteratur des Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1979), pp. 81–94.

95 V. I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1991), pp. 42–3, who points out that sermon 54 seems to have been the most popular one (p. 43, n. 31).

96 G. Morin (ed.), *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis sermones*, I, *CCSL*, 103 (Turnhout, 1953), pp. 235–41 (236).

97 Sister M. M. Mueller, *Saint Caesarius of Arles Sermons* (Washington DC, 1956), I (1–80), p. 266.

98 Morin, *Sancti Caesarii*, p. 236.

99 Mueller, *Saint Caesarius*, p. 266.

100 The texts referred to by Celticists (J. H. Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach: The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin, 1848), p. 145; Carney, 'M'aenarān', p. 113) as sources for this Irish tradition, such as a seventh-century sermon ascribed to Eligius of Noyon and the eighth-century *Libellus abbatis Pirminii*, were in fact influenced by sermon 54 of Caesarius (Flint, *The Rise*, pp. 42–3).

101 Flint, *The Rise*, p. 43.

102 Harmening, *Superstitio*, pp. 318–19.

103 For the edition and translation of this homily, see W. W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints* (London, 1881), II, pp. 364–83. See further A. L. Meaney, 'Ælfric's Use of his Sources in his Homily on Auguries', *English Studies*, 66 (1985), 477–95.

104 Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, pp. 370–1, ll. 88–99.

105 Audrey Meaney ('Ælfric's Use', pp. 480–9, esp. p. 481) has shown that they occur in two other often-quoted sources albeit not together, while some other ideas in lines 80–165 appear to be Aelfric's own. She points out that it is exceedingly doubtful if Aelfric ever saw these two sources (i.e. *Indiculus Superstitionum* and Pseudo-Augustine's *Homilia de Sacrilegiis*; cf. below).

106 See ibid., p. 481.

107 See J. Russell-Smith, 'Ridiculosae sternutationes (*o nore* in *Ancrene Wisse*)', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 8, 31 (1957), 266–9 (266–7).

108 D. Kick, 'Old Norse translations of Aelfric's *De falsis diis* and *De auguriis* in Hauksbók (Summary)', in J. McKinnell, D. Ashurst and D. Kick (eds), *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles* (Durham, 2006), pp. 504–7. I am grateful to Professor John McKinnell for sending me this paper summary.

109 *gan credium do chrandchuraib, na d'upthaib ban, no do glór en, no d'aislingthib, no d'aimmsir escai, no do la chrosta, no d'fháistine duine d'a marand indíu*; R. Atkinson, *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac: Text, Translation, and Glossary* (Dublin, 1887), pp. 245 (text), 479 (translation). For more on this sermon, Augustine and Caesarius, see Borsje, *From Chaos*, pp. 220–2, n. 530.

110 Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, pp. 370–1, ll. 84–7.

111 Meaney, 'Ælfric's Use', p. 481.

112 Cf. C. Rider, *Magic and Impotence in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2006), p. 30.

113 Morin, *Sancti Caesarii*, p. 236; Mueller, *Saint Caesarius*, p. 266; Aelfric adapts this by writing such a person is not a Christian, but an infamous apostate (Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, pp. 370–1).

[114] Morin, *Sancti Caesarii*, p. 236; Mueller, *Saint Caesarius*, p. 266. Aelfric adapts this by writing that such a person lets their Christianity go (Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives*, pp. 370–1).

[115] Morin, *Sancti Caesarii*, p. 237; Mueller, *Saint Caesarius*, p. 267.

[116] Morin, *Sancti Caesarii*, p. 237; Mueller, *Saint Caesarius*, p. 267.

[117] Cf. also A. Murray, 'Missionaries and Magic', 192–3.

[118] E.g. from Pseudo-Augustine, *Homily on Sacrilegious Practices*, an eighth-century Latin sermon from Germany: 'whoever ties around the neck of humans or dumb animals any characters, whether on papyrus, on parchment, or on metal tablets made from bronze, iron, lead, or any other material, such a person is not a Christian but a pagan'; J. G. Gager (ed.), *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 263–4.

[119] I am indebted to Máire Herbert for pointing out an early Welsh example to me; a poem in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* (the poem dates to the period after the tenth/eleventh century and before *c.*1250; J. Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 389, 499–500) rejects belief in sneezes as omens and contrasts this with the daily utterance of 'may the cross of Christ be as armour about me' as 'good' belief; cf. Russell-Smith, 'Ridiculosae', pp. 267–8.

[120] Cf. Borsje, 'Fate', pp. 229–31.

[121] G. Mac Eoin, 'On the Irish Legend of the Origin of the Picts', *Studia Hibernica*, 4 (1964), 138–9, dates the poem beginning *Cruithnig cid dosfarclam* on linguistic grounds to the period between the end of the tenth and the middle of the twelfth century, adding that it may also be an eleventh-century redaction of an earlier poem.

[122] See Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, pp. 124–5, 144–5; W. F. Skene, *Chronicles of the Scots, and Other Early Memorials of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. 30–45; A. G. van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach: The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum Ascribed to Nennius* (Dublin, 1932), pp. 9, 13–14; the same terms occur in the accompanying prose text. More research concerning the variant manuscript readings and a fresh translation are needed.

[123] See C. O'Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), pp. 86, 202, ll. 2835–38; cf. Borsje, 'Omens, Ordeals and Oracles: On Demons and Weapons in Early Irish Texts', *Peritia*, 13 (1999), 234–6 for non-verbal sounds as omens.

[124] For examples, see my forthcoming *Saints and Spells*.

[125] A. Toporkov, 'Russian love charms in a comparative light', in J. Roper (ed.), *Charms, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic* (Basingstoke/New York, 2009), pp. 121–44.

[126] Toporkov, 'Russian love charms', p. 128; cf. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, pp. 81–2, on the Greek view of intense desire as illness and the possibly therapeutic function of love charms as treatment by transference and projection. See also D. Martinez, '"May she neither eat nor drink": Love magic and vows of abstinence', in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 129 (Leiden, New York, Köln, 1995), pp. 335–59.

[127] Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p. 81.

[128] For more details and the complete translation of the spell, see Gager, *Curse Tablets*, pp. 101-6, and for an image of the figurines, see ibid., Figure 14.

[129] Three of these names are discussed in Gager, *Curse Tablets*, pp. 103, n. 67, 266, 268.

[130] Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p. 103. Gager (p. 103, n. 68) notes that Theôn may already have performed a symbolic binding act before uttering the spell.

[131] Edition and translation in Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, pp. 90-3; for the date and provenance, see pp. 45-8; on p. 26, Herren mentions the view that the Leiden Lorica is a love charm but he prefers to see it as a *lorica* (protective text) that has a close similarity to exorcisms. See also P. Dronke, 'Towards the Interpretation of the Leiden Love-spell', *CMCS,* 16 (1988), 61-75 and cf. R. Kotansky, 'Greek exorcistic amulets', in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, pp. 243-77.

[132] The formula also exists in Middle Dutch incantations which sometimes prescribe the use of wax dolls too. See e.g. W. L. Braekman, *Middeleeuwse witte en zwarte magie in het Nederlands taalgebied* (Gent, 1997), pp. 421–2, 426–7.

[133] There are four versions, one in Old Irish, another in Middle Irish (D. Ó hAodha (ed.), *Bethu Brigte*, Dublin, 1978, p. 16, §45, 32; W. Stokes (ed.), *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, Oxford, 1890, pp. 44, ll. 1478-1487, 192) and two in Latin (E. Hogan, *The Latin Lives of the Saints as Aids towards the Translation of Irish Texts and the Production of an Irish Dictionary*, Dublin, 1894, pp. 78–9, §72; R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Oxford, 1991, p. 156, §47).

[134] J. Borsje, 'Love Magic in Medieval Irish Penitentials, Law and Literature: A Dynamic Perspective', *Studia Neophilologica*, 84, Supplement 1, Special Issue (2012), 6–23; J. Borsje, 'The power of words: sacred and forbidden love magic in medieval Ireland', in A. Berlis, A.-M. and Kune Biezeveld † (eds), *Everyday Life and the Sacred: Re/configuring Gender Studies in Religion* (Leiden–Boston, forthcoming 2015).

[135] See the important article of J. Carey, 'Téacsanna draíochta in Éirinn sa mheánaois luath' (Magical texts in early medieval Ireland), *Breis faoinár nDúchas Spioradálta: Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, 30 (2000), 98–117.

[136] See also J. Borsje, 'Medieval Irish spells: "Words of power" as performance', in E. van den Hemel and A. Szafraniec (eds), *Words: Religious Language Matters* (New York, forthcoming 2015).

[137] Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p. 103.

[138] Dublin, Trinity College, 1336 (formerly H.3.17), 15th-16th centuries, col. 672c.

[139] On law texts that refer to supernatural instruments for causing impotence, see J. Borsje, 'Rules and Legislation on Love Charms in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia*, 21 (2010), 172–90.

[140] R. Best, 'Some Irish Charms', *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 27–32.

[141] Best commented on the possibly corrupt nature of the text and felt doubtful concerning the true rendering. He translates: 'A charm for impotence . . . a

mighty stag in a ford. Let the cross of God be put over the loins of the man. Fidula, fadula, etc.' (Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 32).

[142] John Carey, 'The Encounter at the Ford: Warriors, Water and Women', *Éigse*, 34 (2004), 19, also gives a new translation of the first part of the text, emending the Irish slightly: *Eolas do lemad fhir. Fo-rriug* (MS *fonriug) do lūth, fo-rriug* (MS *.ii.) do lāth, f*[o-rriug] *do nert, f*[o-rriug] *do thrācht, f*[o-rrig] *b*[en] *drūd dam tuli i n-āth,* 'A charm for rendering a man impotent (or, a charm for [healing] a man's impotence). I bind your vigour, I bind your passion, I bind your strength, I bind your force. A wanton woman binds a 'stag of flood' (*dam tuli*) in a ford'. J. Carey and P. Bernhardt-House, 'The Old Irish Impotence Spell: The *Dam Díli*, Fergus, Fertility, and the Mythic Background of an Irish Incantation', *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic*, 4 (2007), 304–24, explain this text in a mythological context; my reading concentrates on it being rooted in a Late-Antique and medieval context of binding spells. A more extensive discussion was presented as 'Medieval Irish Impotence Magic', at *Magic Moments in Maynooth 2: A Symposium on Charms and Magic in Medieval and Modern Ireland*, National University of Ireland at Maynooth, Ireland, 6–7 April 2014.

[143] *autertert* MS, first *ter* crossed out (Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 32).

[144] Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 32. This is followed by some lines on the charm's use (see below). I adapted the layout of the charm to my reading. Best gives continuous lines, which principle is in agreement with the manuscript, although the line division is different from what Best produces.

[145] Best ('Some Irish Charms', p. 32) interpreted *fonriug* as Old Irish *fa-riug*, 'I hinder, delay (etc.) him', referring for *-n-* in this use to J. Strachan, 'The Infixed Pronoun in Middle Irish', *Ériu*, 1 (1904), 165–9. *Fo-rig* also means 'binds', which is a common verb in impotence spells (see Rider, *Magic and Impotence*, pp. 76–89). My translation is very literal; 'him' can be omitted from the translation, giving: I bind your power of movement; I bind your heat; I bind your strength, and so on.

[146] *Lúth*, 'act of moving; power of movement, motion; vigour, power, energy'; cf. *lúth lige*, 'effective intercourse' (i.e., leading to offspring) in G. Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics* (Dublin, 1998, repr. of Oxford, 1956), pp. 96–7, §19.

[147] Best ('Some Irish Charms', p. 32) hesitates on the transcription of .ii., suggesting a possible reading of *u* or *n*. In my view, '.ii.' means that the phrase must be repeated. Other charms in this manuscript prescribe the uttering of texts for a number of times (e.g. *tri patera* ⁊ *tri have*, 'three pater nosters and three aves'; Charm I). In other manuscripts, we find such prescriptions written in a similar way by using Roman digits between dots: e.g. *Pater noster* .iii., 'Our Father, three times'.

[148] *Láth* means 'warrior', or 'heat, rutting' of animals (*DIL* s.v.).

[149] *Nert* means 'strength, might, power, ability, control' (*DIL* s.v.).

[150] *Trácht* means 'strength, vigour' (*DIL* s.v. 3. *trácht*).

[151] This line is obscure. *Tiba* signifies 'destruction' (*DIL* s.v.); is the preceding a corruption of something to be repeated three times (Latin *aut*, 'or'?, *ter*, 'three times'? or Irish *tert*, 'a third'?).

[152] Or is this *n-oenglenda*, 'of one valley/hollow', or does this refer to the Céli Dé (see W. Follett, *Céli Dé in Ireland: Monastic Writing and Identity in the Early Middle Ages,* Woodbridge, 2006)?

[153] Cf. the tenth-century protective text *Cros Chríst tarsin ngnúisse*, 'Christ's cross over this face', attributed to Mugrón; Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp. 32–5 (the thighs are mentioned in stanza 4).

[154] Carey, 'The Encounter', p. 19.

[155] Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 27.

[156] Paris, Bibl. Nat. suppl. Gr. 574; Gager, *Curse Tablets*, pp. 94–7 (95). The spell is to be written and spoken, and accompanies wax figurines, for which an elaborate ritual is prescribed.

[157] Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p. 105.

[158] Gager, *Curse Tablets*, pp. 211–14 (214).

[159] Durham Cathedral Chapter Library, Hunter MS 100, early twelfth century, fol. 118r. Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 27, drew attention to this text as a possible parallel for our impotence spell. The fever charm was edited and partly translated by R. Thurneysen, 'Irische und britannische Glossen. A. Irische Glossen', *ZCP*, 21 (1939), 280–90 (289–90). For a more recent edition, see D. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (Pennsylvania, 2006), p. 80. Because the texts in these publications diverge, I checked the readings from an image of the page – with thanks to Professor Phillip Sheldrake and Catherine Turner, Durham Cathedral Library assistant, for making this possible. Thurneysen's edition appeared to be the correct one. I give a new transcription here. Cf. also A. H. Blom, '*Linguae sacrae* in ancient and medieval sources: An anthropological approach to ritual language', in A. Mullen and P. J. James (eds), *Multilingualism in the Greco-Roman Worlds* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 124–40 (136).

[160] Skemer, *Binding Words*, pp. 79–80.

[161] Thurneysen ('Irische und britannische Glossen', p. 290) reconstructs *Ron·bé furtacht i talmo<i>n*; with *a* in *ronbea* perhaps as possesive pronoun 'his' or 'their'. He finds this reconstruction in the second Irish sentence unlikely and sees *ronbea* consequently as corruption of *ronbe*.

[162] Thurneysen ('Irische und britannische Glossen', p. 290) emends *beatha* to *bethu* or *beothu*, 'life', and interprets *trocor* as *trócar*, 'merciful', or *trocare*, 'mercy'. Because 'His/Their merciful life' did not make sense to him, he suggested 'life and mercy'. He interprets *laruithitt* as *la* (preposition) and emends *ruithitt* to *ruithin* (acc. sg of *ruithen*) or *ruithini*. In my view, the phrase refers to the wish for a future life in heaven, bestowed on the believers thanks to the mercy of God, Jesus or the Trinity.

[163] My translation, based upon Thurneysen's insights concerning the Irish phrases.

[164] Thurneysen ('Irische und britannische Glossen', p. 290) refers to the fact that the Irish suffered because it was passed on but not understood. Don Skemer (*Binding Words*, p. 80) concluded from the rhyming of the magical words that the texts were initially recited to patients.

[165] Could we compare this with the heavens and valley in the impotence text?

[166] The fever text is closest to the ending of the 'Deer's Cry' or the '*Lorica* of Saint Patrick', but with two differences. The 'Deer's Cry' repeats *Domini est salus* twice and the final request is that the Lord's salvation be always with 'us', whereas the fever text has 'me'. The other *lorica*, *Cétnad n-aíse*, 'A chant of long life', prescribes the repetition of both *Domini est salus* and *Christi est salus* three times, concluding with the final part of Psalm 3:9 (*super populum tuum, Domine, benedictio tua*, 'On your people, Lord, your blessing') to which a vocative (*Domine*, 'Lord') is added. For both *loricae*, see J. Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 130–8.

[167] Mt 27:37; John 19:19; partially in Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38.

[168] Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 24 B 3, copied *c.*1496, p. 55; J. and M. Carney, 'A Collection of Irish Charms', *Saga och Sed*, (1960), 144–52 (151), where the similarity to the *Contra febres* charm is noted. Aoibheann Nic Dhonnchadha kindly pointed out some errors in these transcriptions. The line on the triple incantation was omitted and its third word should be *tota* instead of Carney's *tola*. This modern misreading of *l* for *t* illustrates a possible medieval misreading which would result in *til lolab* for the last two words, thereby approaching *tilolob* and *tilalup* even more closely. A charm for safe delivery in MS 24 B 3 shares characteristics with charm V in Best's collection (Best, 'Some Irish Charms', 32, Additional note).

[169] E-mail correspondence in May, 2008.

[170] Compare stanza 11 in Máel Ísu Úa Brolchán's (†1086) poem beginning *A Choimdiu, nom-choimét*, 'Lord, guard me': 'Guard my male organ in the matter of pure chastity: may lust never overwhelm me, never approach me, never come to me!' (Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp. 54–9 (57)).

[171] Corthals suggested that *fon-riug*, perhaps to be emended to *fom-riug*, may be a variation on *atom-riug*, used in the above-mentioned 'Deer's Cry' (from *ad-rig*, 'binds (both in a physical and a legal sense)'; cf. D. A. Binchy, 'Varia III. 3: *Atomriug*', *Ériu*, 20 (1966), 232–4.

[172] Herren, *Hisperica Famina*, p. 25, on the private nature of *loricae*, allowing for the possibility of them to be chanted in groups.

[173] The numbers II, III, VII and VIII are *lorica*-like; VIII starts with *Gabrial esto mihi lorica capitis mei* (Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 31), 'Gabriel, be to me a cuirass of my head'. Best's charm VII probably consists of two circles of protection, which makes the total three.

[174] The words *a thaisbenad* were added above the line.

[175] Best's translation of *a cur* in the sense of 'putting it' needs to be complemented with 'casting it', for the verb *fo-ceird* may indicate not only placing the piece of parchment somewhere but also uttering the words contained in it.

[176] Best, 'Some Irish Charms', p. 32.

[177] Toporkov, 'Russian love charms', p. 135.

[178] Compare Coptic Christian impotence charms that sometimes employ the imagery of Christ being bound on the cross in the binding spells (M. Meyer and R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco, 1994), pp. 178–81, 269.

3

THE OLD GODS OF IRELAND IN
THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

John Carey

One of the most intriguing areas of inquiry in the history of Irish Christianity – and, for that matter, in the history of Irish culture – is that of the process by which the old religion gave place to the new, and of what it left behind in doing so. What happened when the first missionaries confronted the druids? What sort of relations existed between the earliest Christian communities in Ireland and their pagan neighbours? What rapport was there between the Church and those learned classes whose sense of their identity was rooted, in great part, in the pre-Christian past? And, as a culture which was both Irish and Christian emerged out of the fusion of traditions, what were the nature and the significance of the native elements which it incorporated and preserved?

These are obviously vast questions, which we will probably never be able to answer fully. In an essay published a few years ago I tried to tackle a single corner of the subject, one which has always intrigued me.[1] How did the early medieval Irish, as Christians, interpret traditions concerning their own former gods and goddesses, the people of the *síde* or hollow hills – traditions which bulked large in their literature and must have bulked larger still in oral, popular culture? Like other Christian peoples, the Irish had various strategies for *explaining away* these anomalous beings, for relegating them to some unproblematical compartment within the framework of orthodoxy. A hostile view took them to have been demons, who had deluded their pagan ancestors. We can already find such a viewpoint in the Greek translation of the Psalms, where the statement 'All the gods of the nations are empty (*elîlîm*)' was rendered 'All the gods of the nations are demons (*daimonia*)',[2] or even further back, in Zoroastrianism, where with the coming of the new religion the old word for 'god', *daēva*, came to mean 'devil' instead.[3] A more benevolent theory – a version of what historians of religion call 'euhemerism' – was that they had been a human tribe, the Túatha Dé Donann,[4] who had occupied Ireland before the coming

of the Gaels; mortals like ourselves, who had however come to be considered supernatural beings because of their skill in magic.

But the Irish also put forward other theories, for which no parallel is to be found elsewhere in western Christendom. In these conjectures they sought to give their former divinities a status which was both preternatural and benevolent: there seem to have been some who wished to continue to hold these beings in reverence, to the extent that doing so was in any way compatible with Christian faith. And so we find doctrines which push at the edges of mainstream theology, or slip beyond them. There is the idea that the people of the *síde* may have been 'half-fallen angels', banished from heaven because they had sympathised with Lucifer, but allowed to remain on the earth because they had not fought on his side. This doctrine is to be found in the famous tale *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* and probably owes its spread into other parts of Europe to the popularity of the *Voyage* itself; thus it is to be found repeated in Wolfram von Eschenbach's great romance *Parzival*, and in repositories of medieval devotion like the *South English Legendary*.[5] Still more venturesome was the suggestion that the gods represented an unfallen branch of humanity, still dwelling in some inaccessible region of the earth, whose deathless bliss preserved the beatitude of Eden. Allusions to this notion are scattered through early Irish literature, and seem also to be reflected in Irish speculations about the sinless condition of the inhabitants of China.[6] A particularly striking formulation appears in the eighth-century exegetical work known as the 'Irish Reference Bible'; speaking of the mysterious movements of the heavenly bodies, the author states that

> Some say that when they are hidden from us they shine upon others, lest God's creation should be idle. Some say that there is another race (*aliud genus*) of Adam there, which [God] created before [Adam] sinned; whence it is said, 'To whom every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those beneath the earth'.[7]

That theories of this kind should have been formulated at all bears eloquent witness to the potency of native supernatural belief, at all levels of Irish society, in the first centuries of the Christian period. We can see that the lengthy process of Christianisation must have involved a certain amount of compromise, whereby elements of the old order were accommodated in the new. But it is also striking – and this is the subject which I shall be addressing in what follows – that the issue did not go away. All through the Middle Ages, people continued to ponder the nature of those

mysterious figures of legend who seemed still to haunt the landscape. It is at some of these later ponderings that we shall be looking, in the period which extends from the eleventh century, when initiatives for reform in the Church as a whole began to reverberate in Ireland, down to the sixteenth century and the eve of the English conquest.

Why was there still speculation about the old gods, six centuries and more after Saint Patrick's time? One obvious answer is that the immortals must have continued to be formidable realities in the eyes of the population at large – for that matter, belief in the fairies survived among country people down to the last generation or so, if indeed it is not still with us. Medieval sources tell us little about the common folk, but stray remarks can help us to gain some sense of the rich world of tradition which flourished beyond the confines of the literate elite. Thus a text which seems to date from the early eleventh century speaks of 'women and the rabble' as praying to 'the *síd*-woman Mongfind' on the night of *Samain* or Hallowe'en,[8] a statement rendered all the more interesting by the circumstance that this is the only piece of evidence which we have to indicate that the Mongfind in question was a supernatural being; and the *Annals of Tigernach* record that on Halloween of the year 1084 a man named Gilla Lugán entered the Neolithic burial mound at Newgrange, hoping to have the future revealed to him by the immortal Óengus.[9] And of course the 'fairy faith' continued to be a living reality long after the Middle Ages. This could be illustrated endlessly, but I will confine myself to a single example which I find particularly interesting. Down into the nineteenth century, a supernatural figure named Donn was associated with various hills in the west of Ireland: he was called *Donn Fírinne* or 'Donn of Truth' because he was invoked as a guarantor of oaths and promises, which would be solemnly uttered at one of the spots held sacred to him as a small animal was sacrificed.[10] Here we are still in the realm of cult. There are indications in the medieval literature that Donn was originally the Irish god of the dead[11] and this ceremonial linking of the swearing of oaths with the realm of the dead recalls an evocative injunction in one of the old wisdom texts: 'Let the dead be summoned, let them be made to live by oaths sworn in the places where they dwelt'.[12]

But it was not only the populace in general who continued to be preoccupied with the people of the *síde*: they remained a living issue among the learned as well, and it is at the ideas of the latter that I shall be looking below. We can find our way into the subject by examining three passages, to be found at various points in the copious and tangled textual history

of *Lebor Gabála*, the account of Ireland's legendary past which is usually referred to in English as *The Book of Invasions*.

The first of these passages comprises a few stanzas of verse, appended to some of the copies of a long poem which enumerates the purported deaths of the Túatha Dé Donann:

> The Túatha Dé Donann, a throng like crystal:
> though the learned tell us
> that the folk of ships and goblets
> are in the Land of Promise,
>
> The 'Land of Promise' of which they speak,
> which the Túatha Dé Donann possess,
> is the perpetual, narrow place in which there is betrayal:
> it is the lowest hell.
>
> Though false prophets and storytellers
> severally relate
> that the folk of sorrows, of dwellings, are in the *síd*,
> that belief is not pleasing to Christ.
>
> Whoever in his heart believes
> that they are thus in the *síde*
> will not dwell in mighty heaven:
> they give true heed to a woman who is not truthful.[13]

The attitude of the author of these verses is an uncomplicated one, based on the euhemeristic reinterpretation of the old gods to which I have alluded above. The Túatha Dé Donann were not deities or spirits, but mortals; therefore, they are all dead; therefore – since they were pagans – they are all in hell. But it is the opinion or opinions which the poet is concerned to refute which really interest us here. Two doctrines, evidently overlapping in their implications, are being referred to: the view of 'the learned' that the Túatha Dé Donann are in 'the Land of Promise', and that of 'false prophets and storytellers' that they are in the *síde* or hollow hills. The storytellers in question may have been popular or learned or both: tales about the *síde* and their inhabitants are common enough at every stage in the tradition. But who are the 'false prophets'? Can we take this allusion to mean that, at the time of the composition of these lines in the eleventh or twelfth century, there was a class of persons who claimed like Gilla Lugán

to have preternatural knowledge thanks to contacts with the people of the *síde*? There certainly were such people in later centuries, as witch-hunters in Scotland were to discover; nor was it difficult for a sympathetic investigator like Yeats to make their acquaintance in County Sligo at the beginning of the last century. Both storytellers and 'prophets' appear to speak for indigenous belief: over against them are 'the learned', who place the Túatha Dé Donann in 'the Land of Promise'.

Most people who have some familiarity with Irish legend will know that 'the Land of Promise', or *Tír Tairngire*, is one of the names of the Irish Otherworld. What has not attracted notice, so far as I am aware, is the fact that all of the instances of its use to designate the native Otherworld appear to be relatively late: the example in our poem may indeed be one of the earliest, and I do not know of any cases in which a persuasive argument could be made for a date before 1000 for this usage.

The phrase *Tír Tairngire* itself is well attested in Old Irish. In the earlier literature, however, its connotations are exclusively and explicitly Christian; it is the Irish equivalent of the Latin *Terra Repromissionis*, the 'Promised Land' of Canaan in the Hebrew scriptures, which could be allegorically understood to stand for paradise or heaven. Although this sense of *Tír Tairngire* came to be overshadowed by its later extension to designate the habitation of the Túatha Dé Donann, the original meaning was never forgotten; writing in the seventeenth century, Geoffrey Keating could still speak of 'the *Tír Tairngire* of the heavenly kingdom, which has been foretold and promised to us since the beginning of the world'.[14]

The identification of the native Otherworld with the Christian paradise, an audacious example of that synthesis of traditions of which I was speaking earlier, is already to be found in *The Adventure of Connlae*, one of the oldest Irish Otherworld tales to have come down to us. The story opens with the sudden appearance of an immortal woman who says that she belongs to the people of the *síde* and comes – here using another biblical phrase – from 'the lands of the living'.[15] Now we see that this same idea was still alive and well in the eleventh century, so much so that another piece of Christian terminology, 'the Land of Promise', was appropriated in order to express it. A bridge between the two meanings of the latter phrase was probably provided, again, by the story of Brendan's voyage, in which the paradisal island which the saint finds in the ocean is called the *Terra Repromissionis Sanctorum* 'the Land Promised to the Saints'.[16] The only person whom Brendan and his followers encounter there appears to be an angel, and one twelfth-century Otherworld tale, *The Adventure of Cormac*, ends with the startling claim that the inhabitants of *Tír Tairngire*

are in fact the guardian angels of the Irish:

> But the learned say that whenever a wondrous apparition used to be revealed to the royal princes in the old days . . . it was a divine visitation which came under that semblance, and not a diabolical visitation. For it is angels who used to come to help them, for it is the Truth of Nature which they used to follow . . .[17]

This 'Truth of Nature', the *fírinne aicnid*, was a potent concept which Irish theologians had found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans: even those who had never heard the Gospel could intuit the truth, thanks to the divine goodness inscribed within their hearts.[18]

One further point deserves mention in this connection. To refer to the native Otherworld as 'the Land of Promise' is even more risqué than simply to compare it with the Garden of Eden: for 'the Land of Promise' lies by definition in the *future*. Whether deliberately or not, such a usage seems to imply that there is some connection between the people of the *síde* and the life to come. In fact, as I shall argue presently, there may be other indications that this subversive hint was a deliberate one. Before going further into this question, however, we should look at another passage from *The Book of Invasions.*

This comes toward the end of the section devoted to the Túatha Dé Donann in the version known as the second recension; the text might be very tentatively dated to *c.* 1100:

> Although some say that the Túatha Dé Donann were demons, on account of their coming [to Ireland] without being noticed . . . and on account of the obscurity of their knowledge . . . and on account of the difficulty of tracing their genealogy backward, nevertheless that is not true at all. For their genealogies go back correctly. But they learned knowledge and poetry: for every mystery of skill, and every clarity of healing, and every subtlety of art which exists has its origin from the Túatha Dé Donann. For although the Faith came, those arts were not rejected: for they are good, and no demon has ever done good. It is plain then, from their virtues and from their deaths, that the Túatha Dé Donann were neither demons nor *síd*-dwellers. It is said that Bethach mac Iardainis was the leader of this settlement, and of the arts.[19]

The most obvious thing about this passage is the neatness of its contrast with the verses at which we were looking a short while ago. In both cases

the Túatha Dé Donann are asserted to have been mortals, and to have died, but the conclusions drawn from this are diametrically opposed to one another. For the poet, it means that they do not still exist in an immortal paradise and/or in the *síde*, but are burning in hell; in the extract just quoted, on the other hand, their deaths prove that they were not demons, but rather the originators of much of what is most precious in Irish culture. There is much in the earlier literature to support this view. In fact, it would be difficult to enumerate all of the ways in which the old gods are found associated with the arts; poetry, medicine, music, metalwork, carpentry and the *ogam* script are all placed under their patronage, and sometimes it is explicitly stated that their relationship with these skills is that of presiding deities.[20] What is fascinating in the present instance is to encounter, in a relatively late source, evidence that this connection was still so vehemently believed in; for the author of our passage, an attack on the Túatha Dé Donann was tantamount to an attack on the arts themselves. We shall be looking at yet another expression of this association presently.

It is also interesting to find it being denied, not only that the Túatha Dé Donann were demons, but also that they were *síd*-dwellers; the issue is not whether there are beings within the hollow hills, but whether these beings are identical with the Túatha Dé Donann. Belief in the supernatural powers of the land was evidently too strong to be sidetracked by euhemerism; if the Túatha Dé Donann could be proved to have been mortals it did not mean that the *síd*-dwellers were disposed of, but merely that they must be something different from the Túatha Dé Donann.

Our third passage, which reflects conflicting interpretations of the nature of the Túatha Dé Donann, comes from one of the copies of *The Book of Invasions* preserved in the Great Book of Lecan:

Some say that the Túatha Dé Donann are of the race of Bethach mac Iardainis, that is, of the company of Nemed's household . . .

Others say that the Túatha Dé Donann were demons of a special order, and that they came from heaven along with the banishment from heaven of Lucifer and his demons. They take on bodies of air, to ruin and tempt the race of Adam. This is where those who inquire about them go (?): [they follow] after the Devil and his household. That people, then, go into the *síde*; and they go beneath the seas, and they take the form of wolves, and they visit witches and those who turn against the sun. The origin of all of them is the Devil's household.

Their genealogy cannot be reckoned back, nor can the men of the world learn it; and that whole multitude was vanquished by the right-eousness of the sons of Míl [i.e. the Gaels], and by the prophecy of the faith of Christ.

But in the *Liber de subternis*, others say that the Túatha Dé Donann were poets of the Greeks, [and] that it was in their power to go upon the seas without vessels . . .[21]

It is of course tantalising that the *Liber de subternis*, the 'Book of the Subterranean Ones', has not survived, but the very existence of a work with such a title at the time when our passage was written – probably at some point in the thirteenth or the fourteenth century – shows that this was still a subject on which a great deal could be said. As the pas-sage illustrates, it was also a subject concerning which there were many rival opinions. Were the Túatha Dé Donann humans, or were they devils? Some claim one thing, some another. It is the view that they are demons which here associates them with the *síde*, with underwater regions, and – intriguingly – with lycanthropy. It is also interesting to find them keep-ing company with witches; we can think perhaps of the 'false prophets' portrayed as claiming knowledge of the *síd*-dwellers in the verses which we looked at earlier. Such women are portrayed more sympathetically in Middle Irish glosses on the law tract *Bretha Crólige*, where it seems that their supernatural contacts are connected with some mental affliction; of the *ben foimrimme* or 'wandering woman' it is said that she is 'a half-witted woman, that is, she goes with the people of the *síde*'. Elsewhere it seems to be indicated that she is involved in 'summoning demons'; but another gloss says in vague extenuation of this that 'they only come to her every second time; and when they come it is not because of being spoken of that they come'.[22]

The reference to 'bodies of air' takes us back to the speculations concerning demons of Neoplatonist thinkers like Apuleius of Madaura. Augustine, although sharply critical of Apuleius, was prepared to accept from him the idea that demons had, or could assume, bodies of air – all the more so, interestingly enough, because this appeared to him to be corroborated by Celtic folklore. As he says in *The City of God*:

For there is a very frequent rumour, which many confirm that they have experienced themselves, or have heard to have been experi-enced by others whose good faith is not to be doubted – that depraved wood-spirits and fauns, who are commonly called 'incubi', had often

appeared to women, desiring to lie with them and even accomplishing this. And it is asserted by many, and by persons of such quality that it would seem impudence to deny it, that certain demons, whom the Gauls name *Dusii*, persistently both attempt and also perpetrate this defilement. I do not venture, on this basis, to determine whether certain spirits, embodied in the element of air (*elemento aerio corporati*) – for this element, even when it is stirred by a fan, is felt by the sensation and touch of the body – are indeed able to experience this lust; or [to determine] in what way, being able to experience it, they palpably unite with women.[23]

Drawing on such authority, Irish writers like the author of the treatise *Liber de ordine creaturarum* could speak of demons as 'lying and impure spirits, fleeting and insubstantial, [who] are capable of sensation and, clothed in bodies of air, never grow old'; and an Irish legal writer could take it for granted that an angel possessed a 'subtle pure body'.[24]

Some of the same ideas recur in the well-known Fenian tale *Acallam na Senórach*, 'The Conversation of the Old Men', for which a date in the early decades of the thirteenth century has been proposed by its most recent translators.[25] Here Aillenn Ilchrothach, although she is daughter of the ruler of the *síd* of Slievenamon, nevertheless makes the claim 'I am not a beguiling woman of the *síd*, but one of the Túatha Dé Donann: I am wearing my own body'.[26] As in the passage from *The Book of Invasions* which we were just considering, existence in one's 'own body', rather than in an illusory body fabricated from the air, is what distinguishes a human being from a spirit. We also encounter again the artificial distinction between the people of the *síde* and the Túatha Dé Donann which figured in a passage quoted earlier. Here it has reached the level of double-think: Aillenn, although resident within a *síd*, can nevertheless assert that she is not a *síd*-dweller.

The point at issue here and its religious ramifications are by no means peripheral to the narrative's main concerns. *The Conversation of the Old Men* is before all else a story about harmonisation: the harmonisation of past and present, of pagan and Christian, of native and foreign, of laity and Church. The author was evidently anxious – and rightly so, as history was to prove – lest the bringing into Ireland of foreign religious orders should disrupt the close relationship which had for centuries existed between monastic scholarship and native tradition, and so he portrayed Saint Patrick, the light-bringer and representative of Rome, as blessing and cherishing the ancient warriors of the *fían* and the stories which they

told. But it was not only the Fenians who were included in the new order: it was also the Túatha Dé Donann.

Thus we are told how Donn son of Midir, one of the great lords of the *síde*, formally submitted to Patrick, 'and he gave jurisdiction over the Túatha Dé Donann to him, and they all prostrated themselves before Patrick'.[27] This Donn is surely the same as the Donn Fírinne of whom I was speaking earlier, the ancient death-god whose cult survived into the nineteenth century.

The Conversation also relates how a musician from the hollow hills joined Patrick's retinue and obtained the saint's blessing upon his art; here the native musical tradition is directly identified with the people of the *síd*, but at the same time its rightful status as an enduring element in Christian Irish society is guaranteed by the national apostle.[28]

In fact, the first marriage celebrated by Patrick in Ireland is portrayed as uniting the king of Connacht with that same Aillenn from the *síd* of Slievenamon who was just mentioned.[29] This nuptial union of human royalty with the immortal race, consecrated by the authority of Patrick himself, is obviously a scene of the greatest symbolic importance. Its significance can be appreciated all the more when we realise that the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage is asserted again and again throughout the whole of *The Conversation of the Old Men*, evidently in reaction to the harsh criticisms of Irish marital customs which were being articulated by contemporary Church reformers.[30]

The determination to vindicate the right of the Túatha Dé Donann to an abiding place in the traditions of Christian Ireland is noteworthy; also noteworthy are the limits to this spirit of inclusivity. For the *Conversation* makes it clear that, although they may have been reconciled with the Christian order, the Túatha Dé Donann nevertheless belong firmly to the past. When Patrick exclaims in wonder at the contrast between the withered old warrior Caílte and the beautiful Scothníam, his lover from the cave of Rathcroghan, Caílte replies:

> I have the reason for that . . . we are not people of the same time. She is of the Túatha Dé Donann, and they are unfading; and I am of the progeny of Míl, and they are impermanent and subject to decay.[31]

'We are not people of the same time': the very qualities which give the Túatha Dé Donann their advantages over mortals mark them out as beings of a bygone age. What is gently hinted at here is made grimly explicit in a passage toward the end of the tale:

> [Patrick] will put the Túath Dé Donann into the slopes of hills and crags, unless one doomed to die should see an apparition's visit to the earth.[32]

And so the casuistry which had sought to distinguish the Túatha Dé Donann from the people of the *síde* dissolves like the insubstantial construct which it had always been. It is the saint himself who drives the old gods into the hollow hills; and if they appear to us, it is only as bodiless phantoms. This last statement is of course a tacit acknowledgement that, at the time when *The Conversation of the Old Men* was written, even the upper orders of society still believed that the immortal people were sometimes glimpsed by mortals; the author is concerned to make the point that although they may be seen, they have no substance. Again, the question of whether the Túatha Dé Donann have bodies is evidently an important one.

The notion that seeing the fairies might be an omen of death survived into recent times. It is presumably connected with another belief, that men drowned at sea, women who died in childbed, and people lost to the community in other ways had not really perished but had been stolen by the fairies.[33] In effect, this represents an alternative to the Christian doctrine of the afterlife, one which endured from pagan times down to the twentieth century; besides heaven, hell, and purgatory, there were the hollow hills. The same belief must have been current in the Middle Ages, and indeed it can be shown that the question of the relationship between the *síd*-dwellers and the fate of the soul was one which engaged the thoughts of several writers in the period which we are considering.

I have adverted to this possibility above, when I called attention to the implications latent in use of the term 'Land of Promise' to designate the Otherworld. To explore the matter further, we can now look at a story of a visit to that Otherworld. This is *The Adventure of Tadc mac Céin*, preserved in the fifteenth-century Book of Lismore and not necessarily much older than that manuscript. The hero, Tadc, lands by accident on a paradisal island. Here he finds Connlae – protagonist of the Old Irish story *The Adventure of Connlae* to which reference has already been made – together with the immortal *síd*-woman who had lured him away to dwell with her in 'the lands of the living'. What was only obliquely indicated in the Old Irish tale is however stated outright here. Tadc is told that the island is the westernmost of 'the four paradises of the world', corresponding to the Garden of Eden in the east, and the woman identifies herself as Veniusa, one of the daughters of Adam.[34]

In portraying Connlae's Otherworld island as a counterpart of Eden, *The Adventure of Tadc* is simply elaborating on an earlier conception, but another aspect of the island is more surprising. It contains four great fortresses: in one dwell all the rulers of Ireland from the beginnings down to the coming of the Gaels; in another are all the Gaelic kings who reigned before the coming of Saint Patrick; in a third are 'all the saints and righteous ones who have served God' (and we can remember here that the island visited by Saint Brendan was called 'the Land Promised to the Saints'); while the fourth is destined to be the habitation of all of Ireland's Christian kings. The Otherworld is an afterworld – albeit one reserved, like the Greek Elysium, for a privileged elite – and Christians as well as pagans will go thither after their deaths. It would probably be rash to see more in all of this than a flight of fancy; even so, it is certainly an adventurous one.

But even this is not all. Tadc encounters another immortal woman, who tells him that she is Clidna, one of the Túatha Dé Donann. This same Clidna is said in other sources to have been a native of *Tír Tairngire*,[35] but she is also associated with Glandore Bay and figures in later Munster tradition as a banshee or death-messenger. This last detail may well be a significant one, in light of Clidna's words to Tadc as he is preparing to make his way back to the mortal realm. Predicting his death beside the Boyne, she continues:

> and it is there that I will bury your body . . . and your soul will accompany me hither. And after that you will take upon yourself a weightless body of air; and we will be here until the Day of Judgment.[36]

Not only does Clidna prophesy Tadc's death; she also promises to take him back to the Otherworld, where he will have a new existence with her in an aerial body. Is it implied that she herself has such a body? Perhaps; for it has already been said of Connlae and Veniusa that when they walked, 'the tips of the lovely green grass scarcely bent beneath the delicate soft white feet of that pair'.[37] There is more than a suggestion, then, that the Túatha Dé Donann are just such potentially demonic spirits as other sources, which we have already considered, have either asserted or denied them to be. More than that, they can grant an existence like their own, in their own realm, to mortals after death.

That this was not mere imagining for imagination's sake is indicated by the fact that other texts as well attribute to the Túatha Dé Donann the power to bestow another life upon the dead. In these instances, however, it is not giving a new body to a discarnate soul which is in question, but

using a demon or some other spirit to animate a corpse. Thus at the end of the tale *The Pursuit of Díarmait and Gráinne*, probably composed in the fourteenth century, Díarmait's immortal fosterfather Óengus surprisingly refuses to allow Gráinne's servants to take possession of the body of her husband:

> Óengus said that he would not let Díarmait's body go with them, and that he himself would take it with him to the Bruig above the Boyne [i.e., to Newgrange]. 'And since I am not able to restore him to life, I will put an aerial soul into him, in order that he will be speaking with me every day.'[38]

This uncanny denouement is so out of keeping with the rest of the story, and indeed with any other traditions concerning the lovers, that it seems likeliest to reflect ideas concerning the Túatha Dé Donann which were current at the time when the text was written. We are reminded of how a thirteenth-century Icelandic writer, Snorri Sturluson, rationalised the statement in the early poem *Völuspá* that Óðinn speaks with Mímir's head; after the latter's death by decapitation, Óðinn is said to have treated the head with herbs, then enchanted it so that it could serve him as an oracle.[39]

Even more grotesque is an anecdote from the second recension of *The Book of Invasions*, in which the Túatha Dé Donann are portrayed, rather bafflingly, as having sided with the Athenians in a war against the Philistines:

> And at that time there was a battle between the Athenians and the Philistines every day, until the [Philistines] were nearly exterminated. For by magic the Túatha Dé Donann would put demons into the bodies of the Athenians, so that they would go every day to the fighting. And the Philistines found that strange, and came to the druid who was in that country, and said to him: 'We find it strange that the men whom we kill day and every night are the first who come to fight against us the next day.' Then their elder gave them counsel, and said to them: 'Take spikes of hazel and holly with you to the battle tomorrow; and if the day should be yours, thrust those spikes into the stumps of the necks of the men whom you have slain. And if they are demons, that will turn them into heaps of worms.' The Philistines went to the battle the next day, and the day was theirs, and they thrust those spikes into the stumps of the necks of the men whom they had slain, and they were heaps of worms on the morrow . . .[40]

There is accordingly a body of evidence that, between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, the Irish intelligentsia were grappling in various ways with a persistent notion that the Túatha Dé Donann were somehow associated with an unorthodox alternative to the Christian afterlife. Other texts of this period, although they do not speak of the Túatha Dé Donann, reflect comparable concerns. Thus the fragmentary annals in British Library MS Egerton 1782, while indignantly rejecting the tradition that the seventh-century wizard-prince Mongán was a son of the god Manannán, nevertheless relate that as a 'man of great knowledge' (*fer fesa mhóir*) he was able to come back to life a year after his death. (Unfortunately, because his mother failed to take account of its being a leap year and dug him up a day too late, he suffocated in his grave.)[41] A treatise on the resurrection, probably of twelfth-century date, gives an intriguing list of phenomena with which the true resurrection is not to be confused: besides *praestrigia*, or the summoning up of ghosts, *subductio*, or revival after a near-death experience and *suscitatio*, or resuscitation of the kind exemplified in the raising of Lazarus, this list includes *metaformatio* or shape-changing, as with werewolves and *reuolutio*, defined as 'the return of the soul in different bodies' (*tathchor na hanma i corpaib ecsamlaib*).[42] There is no suggestion that any of these processes was not believed in. I have so far been unable to find anything comparable to this list in non-Irish sources, although several of the individual items, and the vocabulary used, reflect the influence of Augustine.

What seems to be *reuolutio* in this special sense is again described in the late Middle Irish version of the *Pharsalia*, Lucan's epic account of the Roman Civil War. Lucan, in describing the druids of Gaul, says that they teach that the soul passes after death into another body, existing in another world (*in alio orbe*). This is notably embellished in the Irish rendering:

> This is what they say, thanks to their devilish knowledge: that the souls of those who die in this temperate zone are conveyed southward beyond the equator, and put into other bodies in the southern temperate zone.[43]

This scenario is reminiscent of the posthumous fate of Tadc mac Céin – especially since there was a medieval Irish theory (reflected for instance in the passage from the 'Irish Reference Bible' which I quoted earlier) that the Otherworld was located in the southern hemisphere.[44]

What lay behind all of this? As I remarked at the beginning of this discussion, I do not think that we will ever learn the whole story. But it is clear enough that the nature of the old gods, and their relationship with ideas concerning the realm of the dead and perhaps some kind of reincarnation, were living issues in the Ireland of the High and later Middle Ages. It was not merely a matter of survivals among the peasantry; if it had been, the erudite elite who held the monopoly on writing would simply have ignored such notions, or at best made them the subject of a few contemptuous allusions. No: these are questions which were taken seriously by men of learning. The people of the *síde* were still there, and still claimed some power over the souls of mortals. What implications this has for our understanding of Christianity in medieval Ireland remains to be considered.

Notes

[1] 'The Baptism of the Gods', in John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover and Aberystwyth, 1999; second edition 2011), pp. 1–38.

[2] Cf. my 'From David to Labraid: Sacral Kingship and the Emergence of Monotheism in Israel and Ireland', in K. Ritari and A. Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008), pp. 2–27 (14).

[3] Thus e.g. M. Boyce (ed. and trans.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Totowa NJ, 1984), pp. 35, 47, 57–8; Piloo Nanavutty (trans.), *The Gathas of Zarathushtra: Hymns in Praise of Wisdom* (Ahmedabad, 1999), pp. 70 n. 3, 90–1.

[4] Although it is the form generally employed in the secondary literature, *Danann* appears first to be attested in Early Modern Irish, the Old and Middle Irish spelling being *Donann*. Brief discussion in J. Carey, 'The Name "Tuatha Dé Danann"', *Éigse* 18 (1981), 291–4.

[5] Carey, *Single Ray*, pp. 21–6; further references and discussion in M. Dando, 'The Neutral Angels', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 217 (1980), 259–76.

[6] Thus J. Carey, 'The Irish Vision of the Chinese', *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 73–9.

[7] G. MacGinty (ed.), *Pauca problemata de enigmatibus ex tomis canonicis*, CCCM, 173 (Turnhout, 2000), p. 54 (§133). Comparable passages elsewhere in Irish and Hiberno-Latin are discussed in my 'Ireland and the Antipodes: The Heterodoxy of Virgil of Salzburg', *Speculum*, 64 (1989), 1–10.

[8] S. H. O'Grady (ed.), *Silva Gadelica*, 2 vols (London, 1892), I, p. 332.

[9] W. Stokes (ed. and trans.), *The Annals of Tigernach*, 2 vols (reprint: Felinfach, 1993), II, pp. 416–17.

[10] See the valuable studies of K. Müller-Lisowski, 'Contributions to a Study in Irish Folklore: Traditions about Donn', *Béaloideas*, 18 (1948), 142–99; and 'Donn Fírinne, Tech Duinn, an Tarbh', *EC* 6, 1 (1952), 21–9.

[11] Thus K. Meyer, 'Der irische Totengott und die Toteninsel', *Sitzungsberichte*

der Königlichen Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (1919), 537–46; also my 'Donn, Amairgen, Íth and the Prehistory of Irish Pseudohistory', *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 38 (2010), 319–41.

[12] M. Dillon (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1953), l. 275. See further the discussion by C. Swift, 'Pagan Monuments and Christian Legal Centres in Early Meath', *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, 2 (1996), 1–26.

[13] R. A. S. Macalister (ed. and trans.), *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 5 vols (London, 1938–56; rev. imp. 1993), IV, pp. 240–1. Cf. Carey, *Single Ray*, pp. 17–18; on the indications that these quatrains are not the work of Flann himself, see ibid., note 25.

[14] G. Keating, *Trí Bior-ghaoithe an Bháis*, ed. Robert Atkinson (Dublin, 1890), p. 216: '*thír thairngire an fhlaithis neamhdha, atá d'a thuar ┐ d'a thairngire dhúinn ó thus an domhain*'.

[15] K. McCone (ed.), *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland* (Maynooth, 2000), p. 121 §3; on 'the lands of the living' see J. Carey, 'The Rhetoric of *Echtrae Chonlai*', *CMCS*, 30 (Winter 1995), 41–65 (45–46).

[16] C. Selmer (ed.), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* (Notre Dame, 1959), p. 5. The *Voyage* in turn evidently took the term from the vision text *Visio Sancti Pauli*: thus T. Silverstein and A. Hilhorst (eds), *Apocalypse of Paul: A New Critical Edition of Three Long Latin Versions* (Geneva, 1997), pp. 114–15.

[17] W. Stokes (ed.), 'The Irish Ordeals, Cormac's Adventure in the Land of Promise, and the Decision as to Cormac's sword', *Irische Texte*, 3, 1 (Leipzig, 1891), pp. 183–229 (202).

[18] See on this topic C. Donahue, 'Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good', *Traditio*, 7 (1949–51), 263–77.

[19] Macalister, *Lebor Gabála*, IV, pp. 164–5. Cf. the third-recension version at pp. 200–3, where there are a few interesting variants.

[20] I have looked at some aspects of this topic in my essay, 'The Waters of Vision and the Gods of Skill', *Alexandria*, 1 (1991), 163–85, especially pp. 174–8.

[21] Macalister, *Lebor Gabála*, III, pp. 154–5. The passage is in the hand of Giolla Íosa Mór Mac Fhir Bhisigh, writing 1397–8.

[22] D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978), p. 2295; cf. p. 1547.

[23] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, xv.23.

[24] M. C. Díaz y Díaz (ed. and trans.), *Liber de ordine creaturarum: Un anónimo irlandés del siglo VII* (Santiago de Compostela, 1972), pp. 142–3 (§viii.16); *CIH*, p. 341.1–2.

[25] A. Dooley and H. Roe (trans.), *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A New Translation of Acallam na Senórach* (Oxford, 1999), p. xxi; cf. Dooley, 'The Date and Purpose of *Acallam na Senórach*', *Éigse*, 34 (2004), 97–126. This position has been further developed by A. Connon, 'The Roscommon *locus* of *Acallam na Senórach* and Some Thoughts as to *tempus* and *persona*', in A. Doyle and K. Murray (eds), *In Dialogue with the Agallamh: Essays in Honour of Seán Ó Coileáin* (Dublin, 2014), pp. 21–59.

[26] W. Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Acallamh na Senórach*, *Irische Texte*, 4, 1 (Leipzig, 1900), ll. 6380–81: '*Ni ben tširrachtach tšidhe mé, acht mad do Thuaith dé Danann*

⅂ *mo chorp féin umum*.' I discuss this and some related passages in '*Acallam na Senórach*: A Conversation between Worlds', in Doyle and Murray, *In Dialogue with the Agallamh*, pp. 76–89.

27 Stokes, *Acallamh*, ll. 5376–8: '⅂ *iss é do bói ann .i. Donn mac Midir,* ⅂ *tuc a chenn a n-ucht Patraic,* ⅂ *tuc comus Túaithe dé Danann dó,* ⅂ *ro slechtsat uile do Pátraic*.'

28 Ibid., pp. 98–9.

29 Ibid., p. 219: a condition of this marriage is that Aillenn abandon her 'delusive druidical belief' (*creidem doilfi drai[d]echt*).

30 Cf. Dooley and Roe, *Tales*, pp. xxix–xxx.

31 Stokes, *Acallamh*, ll. 3906–9: '*Do fuil a adhbhur sin acum . . .* ⅂ *ní lucht comaimsire sind,* ⅂ *do Tuathaib dé Danann iss í,* ⅂ *nemirchradach iat sein,* ⅂ *missi do clannaib Míled,* ⅂ *dimbuan irchradach iat.*' Cf. ibid. pp. 195–6, where the Túatha Dé Donann offer to change Caílte's shape so that he will be youthful and active, but Caílte declines to take on a 'druidical shape' (*deilbe druidechta*) rather than that given by the Creator.

32 Stokes, *Acallamh*, ll. 75349–50: '*Cuirfid Túaith dé Danann ind-étnaib cnocc* ⅂ *carracc acht muna ḟaice trú tadhal talman do thaidbsi.*'

33 E.g. Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (first published 1920; reprint Toronto, 1976), p. 142: 'Surely there are many taken; my own sister that lived in the house beyond, and her husband and her three children, all in one year. Strong they were and handsome and good – the best – and that's the sort that are taken.'

34 O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, I, pp. 349–50.

35 Discussion in J. Carey, 'Origin and Development of the Cesair Legend', *Éigse*, 22 (1987), 37–48 (42–43).

36 O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, I, p. 352: '*Ocus is ann adhnaicfetsa do chorpsa . . . ocus ticfa th'anam lemsa conicce so, ocus géba corp étrom áierda umat iar sin. ocus beimít sunn co lá in mhesraigte.*'

37 O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, I, p. 350: '*ní mór mad do lúbad rinn an fheoir álainn uaine fó bonnaib mine maeithgela na lánaman sin.*'

38 N. Ní Shéaghdha (ed. and trans.), *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, ITS, 47 (London, 1967), p. 100: '*Adubhairt Aonghus nach leigfeadh corp Diarmada leó* ⅂ *go mbéradh fén leis é don Bhrugh ós Bóinn, "* ⅂ *ó nach éidir leam a aithbheódhughudh arís cuirfead anam ærrdha ann ar chor go mbia ag labhairt ream gach laoi".*'

39 Ynglinga saga, chapter 4: Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Heimskringla: Nóregs Konunga Sogur af Snorri Sturluson*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1893–1900), p. 13. The possibility of 'Celtic' influence is considered, with some scepticism, by J. Simpson, 'Mímir: Two Myths or One?', *Saga-Book*, 46, 1 (1962), 41–53 (44–46); a more positive view is taken by G. Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts – A Survey of Research* (Reykjavík, 1988), pp. 81–2.

40 Macalister, *Lebor Gabála*, IV, pp. 138–41.

41 O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, I, pp. 391–2.

42 LU 2702–10; cf. Whitley Stokes's edition, 'Tidings of the Resurrection', *RC*, 25 (1904), 232–59 (250).

[43] W. Stokes (ed. and trans.), *In Cath Catharda*, *Irische Texte*, 4, 2 (Leipzig, 1909), pp. 56–58: '*Is ed atbertis trena fesaibh demhnacdaibh anmanna in lochta ba marbh isin mesraighthisea do breith tresin tendtigi fodes ┐ a tabairt i corpaibh eile isin mesraighthi descertach.*'

[44] For a more detailed discussion see Carey, 'Ireland and the Antipodes'.

4

STAGING THE OTHERWORLD IN MEDIEVAL IRISH TRADITION

Joseph Falaky Nagy

It is a great honour for me to engage in this exchange of ideas on the topic of Celtic religious thought under the auspices of the University of Helsinki, which has made such a profound contribution to the study of folklore and mythology, and which has now also emerged as a major centre for innovative Celtic studies. (I should add that the gracious hosts of the meeting for which this paper was written have themselves notably contributed to this innovation.) In the following, I will be applying to the complex topic of our conference some of the insights scholars have gained from comparatively studying the reflexive portrayal of performance in various traditions. This performative focus took shape in the last fifty years on the far side of the Atlantic, but it has been bolstered and extended in its applications and implications by distinguished Finnish folklorists, ethnographers and scholars of comparative religion.[1]

I must confess that for me, a scholar who studies stories and the art of storytelling as reflected in medieval Irish and Welsh texts, the prospect of taking the issue of approaches to the study of Celtic religion as reflected in these literatures is more than daunting, given that the term encompasses so much more than myth, saint's legend and heroic tale, the narrative genres on which I have focused my attention over the years. Nearly stopping us dead in our tracks in the pursuit of a comprehensive knowledge of specifically pre-Christian Celtic religions, whether continental or insular, is our inability to observe these systems by way of any substantial body of contemporary and/or 'native' documentation. All that we have for reconstructing the belief and ritual systems of the pagan Celts are the archaeological record, the written observations of classical ethnographers, the occasional relevant inscription and the witness of lexical items (including toponymy) that with the help of the comparative method and Indo-European reconstruction can give us insights into at least some religious ideas and institutions. This situation constitutes a

paucity of data contemporaneous with the object of study by any standards, especially for those of us looking for the narrative 'meta-structure' of a religious tradition – that is, a mythology. In light of these challenges, I admire all the more those who have tackled pre-Christian Celtic remains in search of religious artifacts and have gleaned as much of value as they have from these remains.

There is of course the database of medieval Irish and Welsh literature and what it purports to tell us about the pagan past, including an ample supply of stories that are presented as having their origin in the days before the coming of Christianity. Only rarely presented as tales known only 'now' and not 'back then', these are in effect offered by early Celtic literary traditions to posterity as the myths passed down by the pagan progenitors of the Irish and Welsh literati (Christian ecclesiastics for the most part), who claim not to have invented, but to have preserved this narrative lore. Though observed many times before, it is still worth noting that, as extensive as some of these cycles of stories are, they do not include what we might consider a standard component of any mythological corpus, namely an overt 'creation of the world' myth, in the way that, for example, the thirteenth-century *Edda* by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson and his much later Finnish counterpart Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* do. Perhaps, from medieval Irish and Welsh writers' perspectives, this would have been going too far in representing the pre-Christian past, or it would have constituted a validation of what could no longer be considered at all valid in the early Christian milieu, especially if not all overt traces of pre-Christian thought and practice had been extirpated from the cultural landscape. Or, the omission could be a valuable clue as to a distinctive aspect of Celtic religious thought. In any event, this is a subject that deserves further consideration, at another time.

Searching for correspondences among this narrative corpus, the archaeological record and classical ethnography can bear much fruit, as the work of pioneering twentieth-century scholars has shown. The resemblances, for example, between the goddesses enshrined in the Celtic hydronymic evidence and the female protagonists associated with rivers, lakes and the sea in medieval Celtic story, or between the seated, horned Cernunnos figure of continental iconography and Irish figures such as the hero Conall Cernach of the Ulster cycle and the lad Derg Corra of the Fenian cycle, or again between Caesar's Gaulish Mercury and the Welsh Lleu/Irish Lug of medieval literature, have a resonance that reshapes and enriches our insight into these figures and their possibly religious significance.[2] And yet, while shared Celtic trends have been brought to

light by the scholars mentioned above, how much of a system resembling a mythology, let alone a system even more complex such as a 'religion', can we reconstruct for all or any of the Celtic peoples?

Few of those committed to piecing together reconstructions of chunks large and small of the pre-Christian edifice will, in the face of this tempting literary treasure trove, be willing to limit their pursuit to bits of pre-Christian religion that are corroborated by the genuinely pre-Christian evidence. Medieval Celtic literature, especially Irish, offers us considerable information about the heathen days of old, including religious beliefs, stories and practices, some of which, our texts claim, even survived into the Christian era. There is, for example, the famous passage in the ninth-century Cormac's Glossary, where we are told that, while mysterious mantic practices such as *imbas for-osnai* and *teinm laído* could not be kept into the Christian era on account of their idolatrous implications, the pre-Christian practice known as *díchetal dí chennaib*, having nothing religious and therefore objectionable about it, was allowed to continue. I always prefer to give our sources the benefit of the doubt and so am inclined to accept this fascinating bit of cultural history as fact. It is, however, legitimate to wonder whether the author of this entry conferred a *nihil obstat* on *díchetal dí chennaib* because he or his sources did not know as much about it as they did about the other mantic practices, or because the assumption was made that its continuing into Christian times vouched for its inoffensiveness.[3]

However informed or uninformed our sources were, the responses expressed in medieval Celtic texts toward these elements of a supposedly outmoded world-view or even a forbidden religion do not constitute a 'party line', consisting as they do of a wide range of attitudes. This diversity presents us with a remarkable opportunity to learn about the early medieval Celtic *mentalité*, even if the stories, beliefs and practices to which our authors are responding in various ways were to turn out to be more figments of their imagining the pagan past rather than accurate recollections of that past. These responses include outright rejection of, contempt for and ambivalent expression of prurient interest in these waifs and strays of paganism. This range of responses also includes an almost scholarly impartiality, that is, presenting the purportedly pre-Christian data without directing the reader as to what to make of it. Or, to put this contrast in terms of formulae from popular American television broadcasting, the controlling intelligence behind medieval Celtic literature sometimes appends the warning to the apparently pagan bits, 'Kids, don't try this at home!', but at other times adds no warning at all

or occasionally only the coy, 'This station is not responsible for the views expressed herein'.

These are, however, the most easily identifiable in a range of attitudes, which are oftentimes mixed and even self-contradictory. Alongside a continuum from outright hostility to curiosity about or even respect for cultural data, we also find various degrees of engagement, 'fiddling' even, with the material being passed on to posterity. The undeniable reality of authorial intervention in medieval Irish literature became (back in the second half of the twentieth century) the flashpoint for so-called 'anti-nativist' revisionism, an assault on what was perceived to be scholarly orthodoxy. Though given to making straw men of the objects of attack (most of whom would never have dreamt of themselves as 'nativists'), nevertheless anti-nativism ushered in a healthy reassessment of scholarly goals and methods.

Whatever we are offered in medieval Irish literature as representing the ways, beliefs and stories of the distant past, including the religious and narrative traditions predating the coming of Christianity and the establishment of the literary tradition, anti-nativists saw as so garbled, so censored and so removed from the milieu from which it purported to derive that it had virtually no worth as a sampling of what there really was by way of religion and mythology in pre-Christian Ireland and Britain. Even for those of us who do not accept it, there is a constructive side-effect to this potentially devastating assertion, reminding us as it does of the powerful filters and formative influences working in each medieval Celtic literary tradition. Whether operating in Latin or in the vernacular, medieval Irish and Welsh authors undeniably took many of their cues from biblical, classical, and late-antique/early medieval models, as well as perhaps from the parallel Celtic tradition(s) across the Irish Sea. Anti-nativists, however, took the implications of this dependency too far, claiming that by the very nature and function of literature in early Christian Celtic cultures, 'native' tradition played a minimal role in the unfolding drama of textual production, far behind the evangelists, Moses, Virgil and Isidore of Seville, to name but a few of the real 'stars of the show'. If native tradition or even any innovation at all was to be seen in medieval Celtic literature, it would only be (and I use the Pauline expression ironically) through a glass darkly.

Another critical school of thought that emerged in the last century, not quite as given to rebellious manifestos as were the anti-nativists but equally sceptical of the chances of pre-Christian tradition having made it on board the train of literary tradition in a form even remotely faithful to

the original, viewed the past appearing in medieval Irish or Welsh texts as a palimpsest for political concerns topical and compelling for those composing our surviving texts and their recensions. Antiquity, especially myth and legend, merely offers, according to this 'historicist' school, raw material for contemporary commentary or even propaganda. Hence this antique body of story is liable to be stretched, shortened distorted, or even counterfeited in order to fit on the procrustean bed of the medieval authors' agenda, shared with or even dictated by the patrons and patronal institutions that subvented literary production.

Certainly some of our medieval texts invite this interpretative tack, namely, reading the past in the text in terms of the present of its context and vice versa, for example the Middle Welsh *Breudwyt Ronabwy* ('Rhonabwy's Dream'), a time machine that takes its protagonist and its audience on a trip from a Wales wracked by war and dissension back into the heroic, almost otherworldly Britain of Arthur, a place which, as the dream unfolds, turns out to be more like Rhonabwy's world than we might have at first thought.[4] There is also the strategy of many an Irish bardic poem, where the poet cites an episode from the story of a long-ago figure in order to establish precedent or paradigm for the living poetic subject and his actions.[5] There is no doubt that in the cases of these and many other less overtly multilayered texts, our understanding of how these works might have been interpreted by their original audiences has benefitted from scholars' patient identification of the subtle devices for indicating crossover from past to present (such as the pointed placement of toponyms, genealogical information, and anachronisms). And yet surely we have reason to balk at the wholesale reductiveness that this approach has sometimes encouraged, a whittling down of tradition to mere motival pegs on which medieval writers could hang glowing (or in some cases not so complimentary) portraits of their clients.

Still, to give credit where credit is due, historians and historically minded critics of medieval Celtic literature have usefully reminded us that real tradition is indeed much more plastic than the implacable monolith some earlier scholars have made it out to be. Tradition-bearers, whether oral or literary, are not without licence to change what they bear, and a young written tradition, no mere amanuensis to the spoken, does indeed aspire to gain control over the oral tradition that both preceded and coexists with it, sometimes to the extent of turning that oral tradition into something completely different from what it originally was. Moreover, these hard-won scholarly truths about the struggle between written and oral as well as about the impact of textualisation upon tradition are

on display even in cultures that did not undergo the radical ideological change experienced in early medieval Ireland, where the development of a vernacular literature came about under the auspices of an altogether new religion.

As for the 'anti-nativist' approach described above, according to which all literary claims to authenticity and accuracy vis-à-vis the representation of the pre-Christian past are dismissed as mere pretence, I must confess that I have actually always found something appealing about its implications. In regard to medieval Irish literature in particular, we may well speculate whether the 'backward look'[6] this corpus maintains is catching a glimpse of the real Eurydice among the shades, a genuine pagan tradition from long ago, or is it instead inducing a vision of a hypothetical Eurydice, of what Eurydice might look like *if the Christian Irish literati could actually remember her*? While it still seems to me highly unlikely that the past enshrined in medieval Irish literature is a total forgery, even if it were completely artificial I would deem this representation of a past an eminently worthy subject of study, and the product of a remarkably bold cultural and literary project that finds few if any parallels or precedents in the late-antique and medieval European world. This experiment in past-building, furthermore, would need to have been a well-organised conspiracy on the part of the Irish literati, since the past they inscribed into the literary record over the long, eventful period stretching from the emergence of a vernacular literature to the coming of the Normans, evinces, when all is said and done, far more consistency than inconsistency.

It is in fact this consistency of the literarily represented pre-Christian Irish past, an integrity maintained not just internally for several centuries but even beyond the medieval milieu and the literary medium itself – I am referring to the persistence of this pagan past into many of the customs, beliefs and stories of Gaelic-speaking folk of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – it is this tenacity that in my opinion most effectively militates against the view that pre-Christian religion and its mythology as presented in medieval Irish literature are impostors. If we consider all the evidence – ancient, medieval and modern – then, despite the distraction in the search for an explanation of this consistency afforded by the resort to the ubiquity of international tale types and motifs, or to a 'trickle-down' heuristics that posits the literary tradition as the source for much if not most post-medieval oral narrative material, we will reach the conclusion that much of the pre-Christian world view and the accompanying body of story packaged in medieval Irish literature, even if sometimes dismissed by the literati as a mere dimly remembered vestige, actually did live on

in segments of Irish society beyond the elites involved in literary production, and still figured in the collective lives of folk communities studied in modern times.

The part of this 'package' that I will examine in the rest of this presentation involves a concept replete with significance for the comparative study of religious thought – namely, the otherworlds of Irish tradition, especially as humans intentionally or accidentally encounter them in stories both medieval and modern. More specifically, I propose that scenes of otherworldly encounter in medieval Irish literature and modern traditional Gaelic storytelling feature a deeply engrained exchange operating in the relationship between the human and the supernatural, whereby, in response to what proves to be a riveting display or concert, a single or collective human audience gives the otherworldly performer its undivided attention. In this scenario, being dumbfounded by what one sees or hears sometimes gives way to action and initiative, with the human watcher or listener breaking the spell by disrupting, intervening in or abandoning the magically arresting performance. In these stories of encounter, however, the human audience is just as likely to stay reactive or even passive as opposed to switching over to a 'proactive' mode. Sometimes, the decision to respond or not to respond, or when or how to respond, is pivotal to the plot and outcome of the story.

Conceptualising the confrontation with the otherworld as narrated in Irish story in the way described above allows us to talk about this kind of narrative episode in terms of *performance*. This model, which has proven very useful for dramaturges and scholars alike in the last few decades and has given rise to a field in its own right, gives us a different way of thinking about the otherworld, its relationship to this world and the possible correspondence between contact with the otherworld as expressed in narrative and the experience of the supernatural as it might have been realised in ritual, the latter an aspect of pre-Christian Celtic religion about which we know very little. Examining these encounters as performances, moreover, opens up the possibility of talking in terms of the dynamic between performers and audiences, and of examining the complex dynamic between them, including details such as what facilitates the performer's 'breaking through' into performance. Some of these encounters, as we shall see, also conjure the related concept of *cultural performance*, used by anthropologists and folklorists to designate situations in which culture is 'rehearsed' in a stylised fashion and where the representation of cultural values is deemed as important as or even more important than the performer's living up to the audience's aesthetic

expectations. An awareness of the performative dimension to the manifestation of the supernatural in Irish stories both medieval and modern invites the use of other useful heuristic devices from performance studies, such as the contrast between an 'accidental' and an 'integral' audience, that is between a person or people who just happen or elect to witness a performance, versus an audience the presence of which is an integral part of the performance, and without whom the performance would serve no purpose. Often an 'integral' audience, which validates a performance by its presence, paradoxically practices 'selective inattention', tuning in and out of a performance, the performer(s) carrying on with the job of communicating and entertaining notwithstanding. An 'accidental' audience, on the other hand, has chosen (or merely happens) to attend a performance and, lacking the connoisseurship of the 'integral' audience, cannot enjoy the luxury of not paying attention.[7]

Before proceeding to some representative instances of the theatricality of the otherworld in Irish storytelling tradition, I would highlight the very strong, persistent and presumably ancient conceit to be found in Celtic tradition that music, the art of making music and musicians themselves somehow originate in the otherworld. This notion, verging on religious belief, forms an important part of the syndrome here under consideration. The audience in many narrative cases encounters the otherworld by hearing it via musical performance, which is hard to ignore (no 'selective inattention' here), universally appealing (breaking down the distinction between 'accidental' and 'integral' audiences), and downright debilitating in its effect – music can make its audience laugh, cry or sleep; in other words, the auditors cede control over the circumstances in which they find themselves to the otherworldly music and its performer.[8]

The otherworld's presentation of itself to humans as musical performance constitutes one of the longest-lived themes in Irish and Scottish Gaelic storytelling.[9] Perhaps the earliest surviving story to tell of an encounter between mortal and supernatural being, the famous Old Irish *Echtrae Chonnlai* ('Connla's Adventure'), casts its otherworldly heroine as a performer whose lyrical come-hither not only seduces its 'integral' audience, the son of a legendary pre-Christian king of Tara and the only human who can see her, but also calls forth a poetic response, a 'counter-performance', from her 'accidental' audience, bystanders who can only hear and cannot see her, as she tries to take Connla away from his world. (Whether this supernatural female is in fact a representative of the pagan past or of the Christian future is not at issue here; in either case, she is clearly not of human origin.)[10] On the other end of the historical

continuum of attested stories, in the oral tradition collected from Gaelic storytellers and tradition-bearers up to recent times, musical performance still functions as an irresistible lure that attracts unsuspecting humans into a timeless supernatural dimension from which they are freed only with difficulty, if they win back their freedom at all.[11]

A vivid example of music as the medium by which the otherworld reveals itself to humans can be found in the medieval *Acallam na Senórach* 'The Conversation of the Old Men', a huge compendium of Fenian lore that was put together in the twelfth or thirteenth century, and one of the most sophisticatedly reflexive compositions to have emerged in medieval literature in general. This work is framed by the premise that by taking advantage of the warm relations between the hero Finn's *Fían* or 'warband' and the people of the *síd* ('otherworldly mound, domain', referring to the habitations of the Túatha Dé Danann), a few survivors of the *Fían* who escaped the cataclysm that destroyed Finn and their colleagues were able to live on as guests of the *síd* long enough to meet St Patrick and to join him in his proselytising tour of Ireland, telling him stories of Fenian adventure along the way and experiencing new adventures in the course of this epic journey. Just as Caílte, Oisín, and the other *Fían* oldtimers require dramatically public exorcism and baptism before they can be deemed fit companions for Patrick,[12] so too their stories and Patrick's listening to them require Christian justification. This is provided by the text early on, courtesy of two angelic messengers who reassure Patrick that it is fine to listen, provided that the stories are written down and preserved for the 'enjoyment' of generations to come.[13] (We will return to the matter of just how the angels and the audience of the *Acallam* would understand this 'enjoyment'.)

The angelically conveyed *nihil obstat* is not the only one issued in the *Acallam*. Prominently performing his way into the hearts and good graces of Caílte, Patrick and the text itself, we find the musician (*airfitech*) Cas Corach, a *bona fide* member of the Túatha Dé and denizen of the *síd*, who presents himself to Caílte as an eager acolyte in search of any and all Fenian stories and trivia Caílte is willing to impart. Cas Corach seals the deal whereby he gains rights to the old Fenian's repertoire (not to mention becoming his faithful companion) with an expert performance on his *timpán* (a kind of stringed instrument).[14] Shortly thereafter, when Caílte introduces his new supernatural friend to Patrick, the latter requests a demonstration of his musical skill and Cas Corach gives one so powerful that he changes what the readers of the *Acallam* might have expected from this clerical audience (namely, a definite 'no' to this otherworldly

seduction) to a 'yes', with Patrick acceding to the *síd* musician's request that he be granted heaven and his musical successors respect and appreciation in the Christian future that Patrick is inaugurating. All this is given to Cas Corach and his profession without his having to be exorcised or baptised, as were Caílte and his fellow ancients. It is an extraordinary concession on Patrick's part, and a remarkable admission on the part of the composer(s) of the *Acallam* as to where their sympathies lie, and with whom they associate the primary interest in and oral transmission of the material conveyed in the text. Patrick does in fact grumble somewhat about the element of *síd* magic in Cas Corach's music, but on this point the saint is challenged by, of all people, his own scribe Broccán, who is usually too busy fulfilling Patrick's refrain-like order to write down Caílte's stories to have any lines of his own in the 'script' of the *Acallam*. Here, however, Broccán speaks up, thereby drawing attention to the importance of this episode. He calls Patrick's bluff and forces him to concede that whatever qualms Patrick might have about its magical effect, he has no intention of banning musical performance.[15] We note in passing that the legendary Broccán's real-life counterpart, who wrote down the *Acallam* in the Laud 129 MS (which Stokes, the modern editor of the *Acallam*, followed for this portion of the text), does some highlighting of his own. In his estimation, both the introduction of Cas Corach on to the scene, resulting in his meeting with Caílte, *as well as* his initial encounter with Patrick merit titles, which the scribe has written in the margin.[16]

Much later in the *Acallam*, Cas Corach receives another opportunity to demonstrate the persuasive, even disarming effect of his supernaturally tinged performances. When Caílte and his musical sidekick go forth to rid one of their hosts of three lupine marauders, Cas Corach proves to be a master hunter, and his music the perfect lure. He reveals that the wolves in question are women of the *síd* in disguise, and that with music they can be turned into a passive and harmless audience. Caílte, however, wants these dangerous women to let their guard down completely, and so he instructs Cas Corach to urge them to remove their wolfskins, so that they may enjoy the performance all the more. The ruse works, and Caílte transfixes all three women with his spear. Musician and warrior then congratulate each other on their teamwork.[17]

Why would these *síd* women enjoy the performance even more 'if you were humans', in Cas Corach's words (*damad dáine sib*), or why do they so gullibly believe that they would?[18] And do Caílte and Cas Corach want them to shed the wolfskins because the latter render the wearers invulnerable? Or is it a question of propriety, and the realisation underlying

the proceedings that, in our terms, a musical performance is also a *cultural* performance, and that it behoves the audience to be what the performance requires and the performer envisions? Are we humans the designated and 'integral' audience for music, whether performed by Cas Corach or any other professional?

If so, then this humanising, homogenising effect of musical performance, bringing performer and audience closer together and even rendering them each other's mirror image, leaves its cumulative mark on Cas Corach, not just on the wolves. When he enters the *Acallam* stage left, he is the heir apparent to the top-ranked position (*ollamnacht*) of entertainers among the Túatha Dé; when he exits, stage right, he is off to a glorious career as chief entertainer of *Ireland*, per proclamation of the high king, and married to a beautiful human princess, a match arranged for him by Caílte.[19]

Returning to the she-wolves episode, I would add that the transformation of the three-dog audience into humans entails a second performance, a 'strip-show' as it were, turning Caílte, Cas Corach, and us, the audience/readers, into voyeurs, and adding a sensual element to what we are vicariously experiencing as 'listeners'. Such synaesthesia is not at all atypical in the staging of supernatural musical performances in Irish narrative, and it reminds us that, as profoundly affecting and redolent of the otherworld as music characteristically is in this tradition, the human encounter with a performative otherworld more often than not also involves the faculty of *sight*, and the musical performance is a *spectacle* for a human audience.

Final act, final scene. I hope that the proposed framing of otherworldly epiphanies as 'performances' and the characterisation of the otherworld of Irish narrative tradition as highly theatrical do not have the effect of secularising the implications of supernatural encounters, diminishing their mystery and numinosity, or trivialising the impact of such encounters upon those who experience them, whether characters in the narratives themselves or those receiving the narratives in written or oral form. What we see here is a traditional equation that has been examined in many ethnographic studies as well as evoked in innumerable music and theatre reviews claiming that a good performance verges on or actually is a *religious* experience. The terms we still use to describe the impact of such a performance on an audience point to this nexus. English *entertain*, for example, from late Latin *intertenēre*, has at its core the sense of holding, sustaining, supporting – as in 'entertaining' a thought or a guest, or the sense of the French derivative of the Latin verb, *entretenir*. This sense not only takes us back to the definition of performance as a 'heightened mode

of communication', but also to the hold an entertainer has on an audience, and the audience on an entertainer, a relationship that adumbrates key elements in what we might devise as a definition of *religion* – especially the bond (the meaning of Latin *religio*) between the worshipper and the worshipped – or even of *culture* itself, as that which keeps us all 'entertained' and 'on the same page'.

If we turn to the semantics of terms used in our Irish texts to designate the effect of a good performance, we find *gairtiugud*, the word used by the angels in the *Acallam* episode mentioned earlier to describe what a written record of Caílte's stories will provide for future generations. In this passage *gairtiugud* is usually taken to mean 'delight, pleasure', but what it means literally is 'shortening' (from *gairit* 'short'),[20] as in what a good musician, a good storyteller, and/or a stint in the *síd* or with the 'fairies' in Irish folk legend are often supposed to bring about: the unnoticed shortening or passing of time. Moreover, *gairtiugud* is how the *Acallam* designates the joy Caílte and Cas Corach bring to Patrick when they return to him after their extended furlough, including the episode of their triumph over the she-wolves, and tell him of their adventures.[21] Elsewhere in the text, it is used to describe the effect of music played for the women working in a veritable factory dedicated to the making of clothes for the *Fían*.[22] Hence, the effect of entertainment in the *Acallam* is to overcome the tyranny of temporality for its audience, whether it be workers for whom labour passes by imperceptibly, or reunited friends no longer aware of previous sadness. The time-travelling *Acallam* itself, which the angels authorising Patrick to listen to the stories it contains (provided he has them written down) guarantee will be a source of *gairtiugud*, flouts the barriers of time most flagrantly, bringing about cultural and metaphysical fusion between 'pagan' and 'Christian', as well as transporting celebrated figures of the past, along with their vast store of knowledge, into the narrative 'present'. Through the miracle of the meeting of Patrick with the heroes of yore, and the subsequent composition of the *Acallam*, previously dichotomous categories engage in a cordial dialectic in, through, and even beyond this text and its characters. Etymologically speaking, now *that's* 'entertainment'.

Notes

[1] The best survey of performance studies, terminology and theory is R. Bauman (ed.), *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-centered Handbook* (New York, 1992). The leading performance scholar Bauman's definition of performance given in this work will serve us

in good stead: 'An aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience' (p. 41). The late Lauri Honko, one of the most esteemed folklorists Finland has ever produced, contributed extensively to comparative performance studies with his publications; see, for example, *Textualising the Siri Epic* (Helsinki, 1998).

 I should also mention here, as the most ambitious attempt published so far to consider 'performance' as a relevant cultural category in the study of pre-modern Irish culture, the chapter 'Drama and the performing arts of Gaelic Ireland' in A. J. Fletcher, *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* (Toronto, 2000), pp. 9–60.

² The best available arguments for the validity of these and other comparisons are to be found in three works that have maintained their value for scholars over several decades: A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1961); A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London, 1967); and P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970).

³ On the *imbas for-osnai* entry in this text, and others similarly having to do with poets and magical powers, see P. Russell, 'Poets, power and possessions in medieval Ireland: some stories from *Sanas Cormaic*', in J. F. Eska (ed.), *Law, Literature and Society,* CSANA Yearbook, 7 (Dublin, 2008), pp. 9–45 (36).

⁴ Edited by Melville Richards (Cardiff, 1948). For an insightful discussion of this text and its playful approach to legend, history and genre, see C. McKenna, '"What dreams may come must give us pause": *Breudwyt Ronabwy* and the Red Book of Hergest', *CMCS*, 58 (2009), 69–99.

⁵ Damian McManus examines some aspects of this rhetorical correlation constructed by bardic poets between the traits and actions of ancient heroes and those of the poets' patrons in 'Good-looking and Irresistible: The Hero from Early Irish Saga to Classical Poetry', *Ériu*, 59 (2009), 57–109.

⁶ This is of course the writer-critic Frank O'Connor's term for the orientation of the medieval Irish literary tradition, with special reference to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. For an attempt to understand this 'look' as a kind of nostalgia, see this author's 'Introduction', in J. F. Nagy (ed.), *Memory and the modern in Celtic literatures,* CSANA Yearbook, 5 (Dublin, 2006), pp. 7–14.

⁷ R. Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2nd edn (New York, 1988), pp. 218–22.

⁸ The otherworldly musician of Irish tradition can even be as deadly as the sirens of Homer's Odyssey – see the sinister use to which the hall-burning Aillén puts his musical talent in an episode from the *Acallam*, a text to be discussed below; J. F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 186–8.

⁹ See K. Ralls-MacLeod, *Music and the Celtic Otherworld, from Ireland to Iona* (Edinburgh, 2000).

¹⁰ Edited, with translation and commentary, by K. McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland* (Maynooth, 2000).

¹¹ For many of the legendary human harpers and pipers featured in Daniel F. Melia's study 'The Lughnasa Musician in Ireland and Scotland', *Journal of*

American Folklore, 80 (1967), 365–73, their own performance of music allows them to penetrate the otherworld themselves, and to protect their fellow human sojourners into supernatural realms from harm. Such performance, however, ultimately seals their fate as captives or victims of the worlds they so successfully enter but cannot escape.

[12] Edited by Whitley Stokes, in Stokes and Ernst Windisch (eds.), *Irische Texte* 4, 1 (Leipzig, 1900), pp. 1–438 (ll. 64–71, 304–28). In this latter scene, in which the old heroes are baptised, Patrick receives a very handsome gift from them in return for his ritual 'performance'.

[13] Stokes, *Acallam*, ll. 290–304.

[14] Ibid., ll. 3345–56. Cas Corach's first peformance for Caílte and company puts them to sleep, one of the magical effects attributed by Irish tradition to music and musicians of supernatural origin.

[15] Ibid., ll. 3453–86.

[16] Ibid., ll. 3345, 3453–54.

[17] Ibid., ll. 7674–725.

[18] Ibid., l. 7704.

[19] Ibid., ll. 7410–546, 7889–95. For other instances of Fenian adventure where the hero is 'audience' as well as or even more than 'actor', see the author's 'The wisdom of the couch potato', in J. F. Eska (ed.), *Narrative in Celtic Tradition: Essays in Honor of Edgar M. Slotkin*, CSANA Yearbook, 8–9 (New York, 2011), pp. 191–200.

[20] *DIL* s.v. *gairtiugud*. The serious, even edifying nature of *gairtiugud* and of the entertainment Caílte and company provide in the *Acallam* is noted by Patrick Sims-Williams and Erich Poppe, 'Medieval Irish literary theory and criticism', in A. Minnis and I. Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, II (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 291–309 (303–5).

[21] Stokes, *Acallam*, l. 7753. *Gairtiugud* for Patrick is clearly no longer a guilty pleasure, as it is the first time the word is used in the text, shortly before the visit of the angels, when Patrick describes his response to Caílte's presentation of a poem listing the horses of the *Fían* (ll. 286–89).

[22] Ibid., l. 5549. Tellingly, the (female) musicians singing and playing the music for the workers are described as the daughters of a human king, but what they perform is said to be music of the *síd* (*céol sirrachtach sidhe*, l. 5553).

5

THE BIBLICAL DIMENSION OF
EARLY MEDIEVAL LATIN TEXTS

Thomas O'Loughlin

It is a truism among contemporary scholars of the post-classical Christian world that 'the Bible was at the heart of culture and learning'. This was not always recognised to the extent that it is today, but a greater awareness of how medieval Latin texts come from 'a foreign country' has driven scholars to note the use of biblical images, annotate quotations and become increasingly aware of how narrative patterns, for example in a saint's *uita*, may be formed in imitation of biblical stories. Today, we take it for granted that a medievalist has a copy of the Vulgate on her/his reference shelf and has ready access to a computer concordance of the Latin bible. This biblical awareness has paid handsome dividends: we have editions where the imagery being evoked by the author is made plain for the modern reader – often someone far less familiar with biblical narratives than earlier readers would have been – by its biblical origins being made plain; the relationship of texts to their immediate models is often facilitated by noting their common usage of sets of scriptural imagery; seeming irregularities in Latinity are cleared up by acknowledging the desire to use biblical phrases; while our appreciation of the complexity of apparently 'simple' texts has been transformed by noting the ingenuity with which authors recycled biblical documents within their own works.

However, while the new awareness of the biblical dimension of medieval texts is producing fascinating results for many investigators, it is worth noting that in some cases this is often little more than adding another layer of footnotes or a variation on that favourite desk-game of medievalists called 'Spot the Source!' In such instances, identifying the source becomes an end in itself, rather than being a preparatory step in appreciating what is unique to the text being examined in the way it used the biblical quotation or image, how the text relates its message to the use of the scriptures within a tradition, and understanding how the text under examination constitutes an exegesis of its biblical sources and

thereby may reveal its author's attitude to many issues not addressed in the surface of the text.[1]

However, that the biblical dimension may appear to be little more than another level of apparatus is perhaps inevitable. On the one hand, many of those who work specifically with medieval biblical materials – biblical commentaries for example – see themselves as biblical scholars or theologians or liturgists first and foremost, and only medievalists *per accidens*, and consequently, have not made explicit to others many notions that are taken for granted within their trade. On the other hand, many medievalists encounter the biblical dimension as simply one more layer within a text. When they are engaged with, for example, a chronicle, they may view the biblical allusions and quotations are simply borrowed motifs rather than evidence for an important part of the original author's world view. Moreover, medievalists often have a meagre base knowledge of the history of biblical use by Christians, the content of the texts being used, or the technical skills assumed as necessary by contemporary biblical scholars. More serious dialogue between these disciplines is long overdue and it is as an argument in favour of that dialogue that this paper is written.

The scope of the question

By the end of the fourth century an attitude had developed among Latin-speaking Christians that 'the scriptures'[2] – taken as a single whole[3] – formed a unique source of authority within their inheritance.[4] In 'scripture' was to be found the words of God and the source of authority in teaching. The contents of the scriptures were not only internally consistent, but their teaching was coherent with all other true knowledge; and, as the inspired revelation available to the Church, scripture was capable of disclosing all that was necessary for human happiness. In such a world, the process of exegesis of those texts became the central activity of learning and the most significant task facing anyone engaged in learning.[5] The most obvious result of this was the production of formal commentaries on the scriptures.[6] These can be divided into three categories. First, and most simply, those that are technical analyses of the sacred texts – Jerome's Old Testament commentaries are typical of this material.[7] Second, explorations of the difficulties (textual,[8] historical,[9] or theological[10]) presented by particular scriptural books – many of the works of Ambrose and Augustine would be typical of this class of commentary. Third, works which aimed to convey the meaning of particular books in relation to the larger context of Christian belief. Collections of sermons or homilies are the most

common form of this species of commentary; the great commentary cycles of Augustine or Cassiodorus on the Psalms would be typical.[11]

These traditions of commentary continued, usually in large measure through the process of recycling the illustrious *auctoritates* of the tradition,[12] within the insular world and have left us a body of texts that constitute an important, if still neglected, element for the construction of the intellectual history of the period. While the extent of the body of texts that can be definitely located as originating in the insular world is the subject of on-going dispute, that there are examples of the various kinds of commentary is not disputed.[13] Moreover, since this material is in Latin, the division that runs like a seismic fault within so much insular scholarship – between Celtic Studies and Anglo-Saxon Studies – is largely irrelevant. As research into medieval commentaries proceeds, it becomes ever clearer that people, books and ideas circulated with more freedom and ease in the seventh and eighth centuries in the British Isles than often between the respective university departments today. When thinking of commentaries, students whose backgrounds lie in Celtic Studies must be as attentive to the works of Bede as to any of the anonymous works linked with Ireland by Bernhard Bischoff in his now famous '*Wendepunkte*' study.[14] Likewise, Anglo-Saxonists need to be aware of their tendency to note with care links from the continent, while placing materials from other parts of the insular world in a different category of obscure, insular texts.[15] However, from whatever quarter one approaches the topic it should be noted that the study of biblical commentaries, in the strict sense, is far less advanced than is often recognised: witness the number of Bede's commentaries that are without modern editions. Moreover, since these works are, usually, only of direct interest to historians of theology – and often of only marginal value to historians of society and vernacular literatures – there are very few translations available.[16] This hampers both their study by theologians, who increasingly assume that their sources are available in English, and makes it less likely that other scholars will engage with texts they do not see as central to their work.

However, while commentaries may be the most obvious expression of scriptural expertise in the early medieval period, the range of texts that express the value placed on the scriptures and that depend on the same assumptions about scripture and display the same technical skills in the manipulation of scripture is far wider. In turn, any medievalist working with such texts needs familiarity with their biblical resources, their perceptions of scripture, and their exegetical methods – all factors that can come into play in texts that are *prima facie* far from works of biblical

exegesis. Here I want to illustrate this diversity by looking, briefly, at four texts which taken together exhibit virtually every aspect of medieval exegesis.[17]

Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae* is the first major Latin work by an insular theologian; coming from the sixth century, it is our basic source for 'dark age' Britain and holds a key place in the histories of all the peoples of the British Isles. However, the work is not a history of its times but an indictment of the failures, understood as 'sins', of the rulers, secular and ecclesiastical, of Britain. The book's central concern is to show those leaders a way towards redemption for their past sins and to provide a guide to a new life of grace. However, since sections 2–26 (out of 110 sections) are understood as setting the scene for the present state of the British as a *gens sancta*, it has been a quarry for the history of the period since Bede. It is this historical prologue that attracts virtually all attention and few note that more than three-quarters of the book is comprised of biblical quotations (*testimonia*) and paraphrases (*exempla*). These uses of scripture are frequently complex linkages of various texts to make specific theological points. Gildas displays not only a thorough knowledge of the scriptures and the tradition of interpretation, although the book is almost devoid of quotations from non-biblical sources, but explicitly uses the terminology of historical, spiritual and moral exegesis.[18]

Once a scholar has located the text within the larger tradition of *testimonia* literature,[19] one has in the *De excidio* an almost complete tour through the ways late patristic/early medieval writers used scripture. In addition, because Gildas used a slightly larger canon than many medieval writers, had a different view of apostolic witness (it was the information related to the apostle that constituted the witness, as distinct from the later attitude which placed the value of witness on the biblical book which was the source of the information), and used both Vulgate and Vetus Latina texts, his book is also an introduction *par excellence* to the technical aspects of the history of biblical usage.

Adomnán's *De locis sanctis* (along with its summaries by Bede in his *De locis sanctis* and in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*) is another work that prima facie has little to do with scripture except that many of the places mentioned in it are also mentioned in the scriptures. Indeed, so attractive is the notion that it is a pilgrim's story that it is usually studied as itinerary literature or as a guide to Syria from soon after the Arab conquest. However, the amount of attention devoted to particular places is a function of the problems relating to biblical texts which are linked to those places, rather than to the interest those places might have for a

seventh-century pilgrim. While one cannot reduce the *De locis sanctis* to be an ancillary tool for biblical interpretation, this is its key purpose and it was as just such a work that it was put to use from the very beginning.[20]

With an ever increasing sense that the biblical text was not only inspired but inerrant,[21] Latin writers found themselves devoting more and more attention to the resolution of 'apparent' contradictions between biblical passages.[22] If the biblical text's contents were true, then these passages had to be consistent; any contradiction would argue against this consistency and, therefore, undermine the claim to truth; this was seen as challenging their inspiration and consequently calling the whole of Christian revelation into question. In the face of this frightening prospect, the resolution of *antikeimena* became the first line of defence. Augustine had noted the utility of knowledge of the places where events took place for understanding their scripture record,[23] and Adomnán combined that suggestion with creative attempts to resolve *antikeimena* from both Old and New Testaments. It is because of this biblical dimension of his work that the *De locis sanctis* was so highly valued[24] and Adomnán considered an illustrious author.[25] The *De locis sanctis* should serve as a warning to medievalists that the technical issues of exegesis were never far away for medieval authors, but can be, more often than many suspect, partially hidden from us.

From the same period and milieu as the *De locis sanctis*, we have Muirchú's *Vita Patricii*. As with Adomnán's book, this too has rarely been recognised as a work relating to biblical scholarship, attention having focused on it as the primary witness to the Patrick legend. While it was commonplace for hagiographers to borrow narrative forms and images from the scriptures, Muirchú was confronted with more problems than most. Muirchú needed a single apostolic figure to link his church – which he conceives as a unity coextensive with the geographical unity of the island[26] – with every other church, and all he had by way of historical evidence was a few lines by Prosper of Aquitaine and the *Confessio* of Patrick. This gap was filled from three sources of undisputed value: the scriptures, the liturgy, and the writings of John Cassian. From these he could build a convincing picture of how an apostolic figure should behave and the tribulations he might have to endure, and know the divine pattern in which events such as the baptism of a nation – we should note that the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel is that the apostles should go and baptise all *nations* (*omnes gentes*)[27] – should take place.[28]

When Muirchú explicitly invites his audience to note similarities between his hero and those found in the scriptures it is relatively simple

to find the passage he had in mind, to add a note in the apparatus and to ascertain how Patrick and the biblical character share specific gifts.[29] However, there are passages in the *Vita*, such as the trials of Patrick before Loegaire, *imperator barbarorum*[30] or the method of determining where Patrick should be buried,[31] which seem to be wholly the work of Muirchú. However, a second look shows that these scenes – and many others – are, in fact, reworkings of biblical scenes. Recognising this not only demonstrates to us Muirchú's inventive and literary skill as an author, but allows us to see that he uses this biblical material in a way that is consistent with how it was interpreted at the time. Muirchú in his borrowing shows that he was a trained exegete and we need to appreciate these intellectual skills when we read him.

Jesus was remembered by his followers as having come not 'to abolish the law and the prophets . . . but fulfil them' (Mt 5:17). He was the giver of the new commandments (Mt 22:40 and Jn 13:34) who established the new law (e.g. Heb 9:15). By the early middle ages the collection of early Christian texts that make up the New Testament canon were being viewed as the Christian law, while the scriptures, taken as a totality, were being viewed as the Law of God. It is, therefore, not surprising that the scriptures form the single largest source of material for the *Collectio canonum hibernensis*, a systematic collection of canon law that originated in Ireland around the end of the seventh century.[32] However, for most contemporary scholarship, the domain of scripture and that of canon law are virtually exclusive of one another.

When we examine the relationship of the *Collectio* to the scriptures we see, almost at once, that nowhere was the question 'what is scripture?' explored in greater depth than here; it is a direct source of law, the authoritative witness to the basis of the authority of office holders and a source of legal precedents on everything from kingship to burial practices. Furthermore, in the way that it uses scriptural *testimonia* and *exempla* we see the way that the Church conceived itself, and the characteristic ways that it interpreted the relationship of scripture, as its source of tradition, and its practices. Indeed, historians of theology of later periods, when perplexed by church practices that appear to be 'without scriptural warrant', would do well to look at how those practices were justified within the relationship to scripture that underlies the *Collectio*. It was not that later centuries 'discovered' the importance of relating practices to scripture, but that they had a different view of scripture and a different hermeneutic which made the relationships assumed in the *Collectio* appear tenuous and fragile, but that earlier usage was characteristic of the exegesis of its time.

These four texts, viewed together, demonstrate that the need for competence in handling biblical and exegetic materials should not be confined to historians of biblical interpretation, but is rather a skill needed in handling the whole range of Christian religious texts. In the scriptures they found an irreproachable centre for interpreting their world; in acknowledging this and pursuing its implications we are enabled to interpret that world to ourselves.

The fundamental assumptions

It may seem presumptuous to attempt a description of the attitude of Latin Christians to the scriptures in the period after the fourth century; however, if we do not make such an effort then we tend to fall back on labels that are even more misleading. Frequently, modern scholars fall back on comparisons such as that medieval authors read the scriptures in much the same way as [modern] 'fundamentalists'. This is true in so far as many early writers, but not, for example, Augustine,[33] would have accepted the historical accuracy of the Gen 1:1–2:4 account of the creation with a similar attitude to facticity as contemporary Christian fundamentalists. But once one has noted this clichéd example, there is very little that is held in common. Contemporary Fundamentalism is founded on the assumption that there is a clash between 'faith' and 'science', and that when this disparity occurs between the Bible and other knowledge, then one simply accepts the Bible and declares the other either false or irrelevant. This is wholly at odds with the early medieval situation where the desire, stretching back among exegetes to before the time of Jesus, was to integrate secular knowledge and biblical information so that they could form a unity.[34] Positively, this was based on their belief in the unity of truth as a function of their belief in a single, wholly transcendent Creator; while negatively, it was driven by the apologetic need to show that secular knowledge could not undermine the scriptures.[35] Unlike many contemporary admirers of the Bible whose work begins with an assumption of a clash of cultures, early medieval writers were most anxious to pursue 'apparent differences' with the aim of showing that there was no contradiction. Medievalists can see this agenda at work in annals, the *Annals of Inisfallen* for example, and histories, Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum* for example, which begin with Adam and proceed to integrate all historical memories within an overarching chronology from the scriptures. All such historical works depend on the *Chronici canones* of Eusebius/Jerome, which sought to integrate secular and biblical chronologies along with

competing biblical chronologies,[36] and as such were seen a basic exegetical tool by Augustine.[37]

Another common description is that early medieval Latin writers had a 'Pre-critical' understanding of the scriptures.[38] However, apart from stating the obvious fact that they wrote prior to the intellectual developments that transformed biblical studies in the late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth centuries, this term is misleading. It suggests that there is a continuity of approaches to scripture from the patristic until the modern period – characterised by this privative term – and so we can approach such exegesis as a unity. In fact, the study of scripture in the period between the Reformation and the nineteenth century was dominated by the desire to show that 'theology' (thought of as 'dogmatic theology') was based upon, and flowed from, the scriptures in the particular tradition of the scholar concerned. As such, scripture was held to be somehow distinct from theology as its foundation, its warrant, or as 'revelation' (contrasted with 'interpretation'). Parallel to this sense of the distinction between 'scripture' and 'theology' went an apologetic concern that while scripture should be the basis of theology, theology was to be seen as based on, rather than informing exegesis. However, in the early medieval period there was no sense that the various sources of information were so linked in one-way relationships; the language of the conciliar christology could inform the reading of any of the gospels, while the structures of Christian faith could be seen in any book of the Old Testament. This integration of the various strands of Christian tradition – most plainly seen in the way later theology could inform earlier biblical texts – is one of the most alienating aspects of this early material for modern theologians, and for those modern writers who admire this form of exegesis it constitutes the major hermeneutical obstacle they must overcome.[39] It is always worth recalling that Melchior Cano's *De locis theologicis* – the first systematic arrangement of the sources of theology – was not published until 1563, and there is no equivalent to it from the patristic or early medieval periods.

Other designations, such as that early medieval exegetes read scripture 'historically' or 'literally', are closer to the mark in so far as they designate an attitude to reading, but we should bear in mind that both terms were used by medieval exegetes and that what they meant by those terms varied between writers. There never was any single and ubiquitous set of 'senses' and studies that import such schemata as fixed elements of interpretation may fail to appreciate the particularities of the text being examined.[40]

An adequate description of the work of Latin exegesis in the late patristic and early medieval period must take account of four elements.

First, they had an impossible model of inspiration, summed up in the phrase 'All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:16). This spilled over into a doctrine of inerrancy, which meant that they were ever seeking to demonstrate the consistency of the scriptures lest they, and, consequently, the whole of Christian faith, might seem false.[41] This may have begun with a real apologetic concern in the third and fourth centuries, but subsequently it became an obsession in its own right.[42] This desire had the effect of turning the task of understanding into the pursuit of an ever-receding horizon, while transforming the scriptures from a collection of narratives into a heap of logical propositions which could be combined randomly while still conveying truth.

Second, the Christ-event – and so the record of that event both in the scriptures and the practices of the Church – was seen as a wholly coherent and wholly sufficient basis for the whole of Christian faith and questioning. The effect of this assumption was to engender a belief that there were solutions in the scriptures to any problem that arose about faith or practice, then to accept any set of 'solutions' their exegetical method could generate, no matter how tenuous, and then to use that as a guide to future practice.

Third, an assumption, justified by their beliefs about the consistency of the Christ-event, that their inherited tradition was authoritative and indeed spoke with one voice. As a result, disagreements between the Fathers were often not acknowledged and it was increasingly seen as the task of exegesis to accumulate and reconcile opinions rather than to decide between them.

The fourth element – and that which distinguished Latin Christianity from the churches of the East – was their pitiful philological skill in comparison to their exegetical aspiration. Even for those for whom Latin was not in some way a 'native' language, there was the constant awareness that they worked with translations and indeed stood in a tradition of translating, the '*Hebraica ueritas*' becoming the Septuagint (and other translations), then the '*Itala*,' and finally arriving at their own version: the Vulgate.[43] But they lacked the skills to distinguish between these languages, and what skill they did have was often impeded by the authority they gave to earlier writers using other versions.[44] When we recall that a Greek exegete at the same time was using the New Testament writings directly, and using the Septuagint without the hesitations about its relationship to the 'original Hebrew' that was generated by the existence of the Vulgate, we glimpse the problems that confronted Latin exegetes.

Only by keeping these four factors before our minds can we appreciate the agenda and difficulties of the work of any exegete between Augustine and the Scholastics. Moreover, these common elements in their relationship to the scriptures are far more significant than any more specific attributes that we might claim for any particular group of exegetes – this is the underlying, but often ignored, basis of the long-running arguments between those who are 'Celtophiles' and those who are 'Celtiophobes' regarding the extent of insular exegesis.

The milieu of scripture

Since the twelfth century the study of the scriptures has been, for most purposes, distinct from their use in public worship. Therefore, we think in terms of two distinct realities: first, the scriptures which can be studied as a theological source and used in a variety of ways in public and private; and second, the different aspects of the religious cult, at various levels, which may then make use of the scriptures to varying extents. Scripture is one thing, liturgy another.

However, the more that one looks at either of these topics, scripture or liturgy, in the period prior to the twelfth century, the more it becomes obvious that one cannot understand one without the other. Just as books only ceased to be records of sounds with the new reading agenda of the Victorines in Paris,[45] so the scriptures only ceased to be approached as sounds in the-liturgy-as-their-perfect-expression at that time. Conversely, when we look at a High Cross and see biblical scenes, we think of the ritual object 'using the scriptures', but rather we should think of object and stories of the book as belonging to a single reality: Christian memory and imagination.[46] This memory and imagination became actualised in the practice of liturgy, and it is this liturgical setting that must be seen as the basis both of their interpretation of the texts, and our interpretation of their use of those texts.

This notion that we must study all references to the scriptures within the liturgical imagination might seem too far-fetched; while obviously the psalms were read as a central part of the monastic day, and there were snippets of the gospels used every day, perhaps the rest remained in the classroom and far away from the chapel! However, this is to assume that the link between the scriptures and the liturgy was simply a functional one: the former were used in the latter. The relationship between the two aspects of Christian practice was both more profound and less obvious than this.

The first element in their imagining of scripture was that its truth was not open to the ravages of time and was appropriate in their 'now', their today, as it was in the original time of the narrative. This approach is quite distinct from seeing the scriptures as vehicles of 'timeless' truth or some sort of eternal revelation; medieval readers were too well trained in theology to fall into such traps. Rather, the pattern of the relationship between them and the Word, whose mind was expressed in the scriptures, was one that was similarly available to all who, as baptised Christians, were disciples. So just as every actual liturgical gathering for the Eucharist was one with the gathering in the Upper Room (there was only one Eucharist in the most real sense), so it was equally true for them that all that they found in the scriptures they considered part of their own 'now'. Their experience related to the scriptures, and *vice versa*. Just as in the liturgy they stepped out of the limitations of time/place into a more real time/place, the church as the prolepsis of the New Jerusalem, so in their reading they entered that world and understood their own limited world through their reading.[47]

The liturgy and the study of the scriptures can also be seen in terms of conversation which was imagined as taking place between God and the Church. A central text for the medieval interpretation of scripture is this Easter Sunday statement by Luke:

> And [Jesus] said to them, 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Lk 24:25-7).

This incident not only acted as underpinning for reading the Old Testament in its entirety as having a christological significance – it had once, as a matter of apostolic fact, been so decoded – but came to imply that any scriptural text could be read in this way.[48] Christ was the focus and key to interpretation. Therefore, exegetical strategies/methods were not raw hermeneutical tools of the questioning reader but rather established practices with the specific and attainable goal of understanding Christ.[49] This gave the scriptures the same availability as an intermediary between Christ and the Church as was offered by the liturgy. Indeed, because of this availability, their power of making Christ present in the community, we should not see the scriptures being 'used at the liturgy' or the scriptures being 'similar' to the liturgy, but place both within a more

all-embracing category of the presence of Christ to the Church. From this perspective we can more readily understand the constant investment of energy made in the study of the scriptures, and the confidence of early medieval Christians that it was a worthwhile endeavour.

Since this encounter with Christ, in both liturgy and in the scriptures, was an ongoing one, with the distance in time dissolved, the medieval Christians in their Eucharist were at the same meal as the one in Emmaus in Luke 24 and therefore inhabited the same geography. Their own monastery, and its church building, was the Jerusalem, they walked in the presence of the prophets, the apostles and Christ, just as those who heard them preaching in the times recorded in the books had done. Their own place and time were perched precariously – for the time of the final age was running out – between the original earthly events, signified by the city of Jerusalem in Syria, and the more real New Jerusalem that was coming down from heaven,[50] and their time and place were revealed to them and given structure for them by the scriptures.

This scriptural/liturgical world of imagination can be seen as a *tour de force* in a text like the *Nauigatio sancti Brendani*,[51] but it is such a common element of the early medieval mentality that it is more appropriate to comment on evidence for its absence than its presence.

'The highest truth and true sublimity'

When Bede in the opening chapter of his history of his nation as a church presented Latin as the unifying language of the peoples of the British Isles and the study of the scriptures as the unifying task by which they now had access to 'the highest truth and true sublimity',[52] he was not only making a religious claim for his own historical moment but was also identifying the central element in their mental world. The Christian scriptures located them in space and time, informed their laws, acted as a paradigm for their customs and absorbed a massive proportion of the labour of those writers through whom we now have access to those times. Our attention to their appreciation, examination and use of those scriptures is, therefore, the necessary response to them if we are to understand their writings and enter their world.

Notes
[1] For example, Gildas makes reference to the example of Jephthah (invoking both Jds 11:1–40 and Heb 11:32) and thereby reveals his attitude to paternal figures and authority over women; *De excidio Britanniae*, ed. T. Mommsen,

MGH AA, 13 (1898), 25–85 (70). On this passage, see T. O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures: Observing the World through a Biblical Lens* (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 272-3. There is no study, to date, of the significance of the story of Jephthah's daughter in early Christian exegesis against which we can study Gildas's use of the story; however, see E. Fuchs, 'Marginalization, Ambiguity, Silencing: The story of Jephthah's Daughter', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 5 (1989), 35–45, which examines some of the implications of the story.

2 The term 'the scriptures' is to be preferred to 'the Bible' as (1) it was in constant usage among medieval writers following passages such as Lk 24:27; and (2) the notion of 'the Bible' supposes a single book and is best kept for the age of print and the attitudes to that book that emerged in the sixteenth century.

3 They assumed that both testaments formed a unity and, as such, that the best interpretation of any part was to be found in another part, and in relating the part to the whole. This was made explicit by Augustine in *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. J. Martin, *CCSL*, 32 (Turnhout, 1962), 2.6.8.

4 This is most succinctly expressed by Cassiodorus who makes the scriptures the explicit focus of all educational endeavours in the *Institutiones*.

5 See T. O'Loughlin, 'Early medieval introductions to the Holy Book: Adjuncts or hermeneutic?', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Studies in Church History 38: The Church and the Book* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 22–31.

6 'Commentary' is, necessarily, a wide concept, for it must embrace both discursive works that explain the scriptures (e.g. Ailerán, *Interpretatio mystica progenitorum domini Iesu Christi*) and works that are technical keys to facilitate the study of the scriptures (e.g. Ailerán, *Carmen in Eusebii canones*); cf. T. O'Loughlin, 'Harmonising the Truth: Eusebius and the Problem of the Four Gospels', *Traditio*, 65 (2010), 23–5.

7 E.g. Jerome's *Commentarii in Ezechielem*, ed. F. Glorie, *CCSL*, 75 (Turnhout, 1964).

8 E.g. Jerome's *Liber quaestionum hebraicarum in Genesim*, ed. P. de Lagarde, *CCSL*, 72 (Turnhout, 1959), pp. 1-56; cf. C. T. R. Hayward, *Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis: Translated with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1995).

9 E.g. Eusebius [and Jerome], *Chronici canones*, ed. J. K. Fotheringham (Oxford, 1923).

10 E.g. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, ed. J. Zycha, *CSEL*, 28, 1 (Wien, 1894).

11 Commentaries on the psalter were, because of the way the psalms were understood, able to embrace almost the whole range of Christian belief; on the psalter in its insular setting, see M. McNamara, *The Psalms in the Early Irish Church* (Sheffield, 2000).

12 See T. O'Loughlin, *Teachers and Code-Breakers: The Latin Genesis Tradition, 430–800* (Turnhout, 1999), pp. 273–96.

13 The debate alternates between the 'Celtophiles' (e.g. Bernhard Bischoff) and the 'Celtophobes' (e.g. Michael Gorman) because the question is framed on the assumption that biblical commentary from Ireland must be distinctly identifiable, but this misses the unity of discussion that was provided by Latin and travel. See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Latin sources of medieval Irish culture', in K. McCone and K. Simms (eds), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth,

1996), pp. 91–105; P. Sims–Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *CMCS*, 36 (1998), 1–35; and M. Richter, *Ireland and her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* (Dublin, 1999).

[14] 'Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter', *Mittelalterliche Studien: Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, I (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 205–73 [first published in *Sacris Eruditi*, 6 (1954), 189–279].

[15] See the note on p. 506 of the edition by B. Colgrave's and R. A. B. Mynors of *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford, 1969); for a more perceptive view, see J. E. Cross, 'On Hiberno–Latin texts and Anglo–Saxon writings', in T. O'Loughlin (ed.), *The Scriptures and Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout, 1999), pp. 69–79.

[16] The practice found in the series *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* of Latin-with-facing-page translation is the ideal. However, most biblical commentaries appear in the '*Scriptores Celtigenae*' sub-series of *CCSL* and are without translation. Hopefully, more editors will follow the example of the late Michael Cahill, who produced his edition of the *Expositio euangelii secundum Marcum* in *CCSL* in 1997 and then *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation* (Oxford, 1998).

[17] It would be tempting to taken a string of sample problems from each text to illustrate the problems in biblical exegesis they present, but this would require far more space than is available here; the reader is encouraged, rather, to read portions of these texts and note how extensive is the range of biblical materials they present.

[18] The sources of Gildas's knowledge of exegesis are obscure as he does not cite secondary writers in his work; however, he did know Jerome's and Cassian's work and from these he could have derived the generic terminology; cf. O'Loughlin, *Teachers and Code-Breakers*, pp. 166–8.

[19] This task was first taken up, in a summary way, by F. C. Burkitt, 'The Bible of Gildas', *Revue Bénédictine*, 46 (1934), 206–15, who located Gildas's work against his background; T. O'Loughlin, *Gildas and the Scriptures* examines all the *testimonia* and *exempla* used by Gildas.

[20] See T. O'Loughlin, *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Location of the Biblical Drama* (London, 2007).

[21] See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Controversy over Methuselah's Death: Protochronology and the Origins of the Western Concept of Inerrancy', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 62 (1995), 182–225.

[22] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Julian of Toledo's *Antikeimenon* and the Development of Latin Exegesis', *Proceeding of the Irish Biblical Association*, 16 (1993), 80–98; and O'Loughlin, 'Biblical contradictions in the *Periphyseon* and the development of Eriugena's method', in C. Steel, J. McEvoy, and G. van Riel (eds), *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena and the Scriptures* (Leuven, 1996), pp. 103–26.

[23] *De doctrina christiana*, 2.16. 23.

[24] See T. O'Loughlin, 'The Diffusion of Adomnán's *De locis sanctis* in the Medieval Period', *Ériu*, 51 (2000), 93–106.

[25] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Adomnán the Illustrious', *The Innes Review*, 46 (1995), 1–14.

[26] See T. O'Loughlin, 'The myth of insularity and nationality in Ireland', in

J. Nagy (ed.), *Myth in Celtic Literatures*, CSANA Yearbook, 6 (Dublin, 2007), pp. 132–40.

[27] Mt 28:19.

[28] See T. O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (London, 2005), pp. 121–9.

[29] For example, the pagan seer who can predict the truth of Patrick (*Vita Patricii* 1,10, ed. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin, 1979) is modelled on the diviner, a female slave, in Acts 16:16–18; and cf. T. O'Loughlin, 'Muirchú's Poisoned Cup: A Note on its Sources', *Ériu*, 56 (2006), 157–62.

[30] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara-event within its background as a biblical "trial of divinities"', in J. Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff, 2003), pp. 123–35.

[31] This is the *topos* of untamed beasts being able to express the will of God based on 1 Sam 6.

[32] See L. Breatnach, 'Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *Bretha Nemed*', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 439–59.

[33] See his *De Genesi ad litteram* where he sought to show that the creation took place *omnia simul*; cf. W. A. Christian, 'The Creation of the World', *Harvard Theological Review*, 46 (1953), 1–25.

[34] The biblical Book of Sirach is an early example of this process.

[35] This was not just an idle bogeyman, but originated in the very determined assaults on the integrity of the scriptures by Porphyry in the third century; cf. R. M. Berchman, *Porphyry against the Christians* (Leiden, 2005), especially, pp. 56–71.

[36] See B. Z. Wacholder, 'Biblical Chronology in the Hellenistic World Chronicles', *Harvard Theological Review*, 61 (1968), 451–81.

[37] *De doctrina christiana*, 2.39.59.

[38] See, for example, D. C. Steinmetz, 'The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis,' *Theology Today*, 37 (1980), 27–38.

[39] This is the major problem with the approach of those scholars who imagine that medieval-style exegesis can still be used in theology and who appeal to the method laid out by H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* (Paris, 1959) without recognising that at the heart of this work is the assumption that there is a divine providence ordering the deeds (recorded in texts) of the pre-Christian covenant to those in the Christian covenant.

[40] See H. Caplan, 'The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Medieval Theory of Preaching', *Speculum*, 4 (1929), 282–90.

[41] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Tradition and exegesis in the eighth century: the use of patristic sources in early medieval scriptural commentaries', in T. O'Loughlin (ed.), *The Scriptures and Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout, 1999), pp. 217–39.

[42] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Harmonising the Truth'.

[43] See J. H. Petzer, 'The Latin version of the New Testament', in B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes (eds), *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), pp. 113–30.

[44] In O'Loughlin, 'The controversy over Methuselah's death', can be found many examples of how respect for sources combined with insufficient philological skill rendered the solution of problems impossible.

[45] See P. J. Achtemeier, '*Omne verbum sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109 (1990), 3–27; and I. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago, 1996).

[46] Note the approach of E. Ó Carragáin, 'The necessary distance: *Imitatio Romae* and the Ruthwell cross', in J. Hawkes and S. Mills (eds), *Northumbria's Golden Age* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 191–203, who sees the literary/scriptural and liturgical aspects of his study as integral to one another.

[47] See O. Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship and Other Writings* (London, 1962).

[48] The significance of this gospel scene is examined in T. O'Loughlin, 'Christ and the Scriptures: The Chasm between Modern and Pre-modern Exegesis', *The Month*, 259 (1998), 475–85.

[49] See T. O'Loughlin, 'Christ as the focus of Genesis exegesis in Isidore of Seville', in T. Finan and V. Twomey (eds), *Studies in Patristic Christology* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 144–62.

[50] See Gal 4:26.

[51] See P. M. Rumsey, *Sacred Time in Early Christian Ireland* (London, 2007).

[52] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. Colgrave and Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 1.1.

ANCIENT IRISH LAW REVISITED: REREADING THE LAWS OF STATUS AND FRANCHISE[1]

Robin Chapman Stacey

The past several decades have been a fruitful period for research on early Irish law. Since the publication of D. A. Binchy's *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (*CIH*) in 1978, our understanding of the nature and origins of the written legal tradition has undergone a seismic shift. Earlier presumptions about the verbatim transmission of ancient oral law from one conservatively minded generation of jurists to the next have been permanently transformed by the work of Liam Breatnach and others on the role played by churchmen in shaping the corpus as we have it today.[2] And while we are still dependent to some degree on editions done in the first half of the twentieth century,[3] the questions we ask of this material have changed dramatically since that time. Historical linguistics has traditionally loomed large in early Irish legal studies. Given the difficult nature of the language in which the laws were penned, this is not surprising; a degree of linguistic expertise is still a *sine qua non* for working with these complex texts today. However, for many early specialists in the laws, historical linguistics provided not merely access to the language of the sources, but a methodological model governing the questions that should be asked of them. As late as the 1970s, scholars might focus as much on the Common Celtic or even Indo-European elements in the law as on their more contemporary aspects. Maria Tymoczko has remarked on the curiously nineteenth-century aspect of Celtic studies as a discipline;[4] one can still hear echoes of the Victorian preoccupation with ancient law and institutions in, for example, Binchy's essay on Celtic and Indo-European suretyship (published in 1970 and reprinted in 1972), or the 1973 reprinting of Thurneysen's 40-year-old lecture on 'Celtic Law.'[5]

Comparisons between the 'Celtic' legal institutions of Ireland and Wales still feature to some degree in contemporary scholarship,[6] but today there is much less consensus on the value of this as a methodological approach.[7] The nativist/anti-nativist controversy that picked up steam

in the 1980s challenged head-on several aspects of traditional scholarship on the laws, among them the tendency to focus on the distant Celtic past rather than on the period in which the laws were actually written. Anti-nativists argued that a truly native past was probably no longer recoverable, given the extent of ecclesiastical involvement in the laws; nativists responded in turn that the similarities between Celtic legal traditions were too great, and the 'secular' elements in early Irish law too numerous, to warrant jettisoning the traditional approach entirely.[8] At stake in this debate was not only how individual sources were to be read, but how medieval Ireland itself was to be imagined. Was it, as it appeared in anti-nativist writings, a land of literate, clerically educated, cosmopolitan intellectuals with close connections to Latin Christianity and the continent? Or was the earlier view of an island rife with ancient rituals and sophisticated oral traditions closer to the truth? A key – though usually unarticulated – aspect of the question was the manner in which such differing conceptualisations of the past might reflect on identities in the present. The mythic landscape inevitably played a significant role in the modern-day fight against the construction of the M3 and other aspects of the Celtic Tiger, for example,[9] and T. M. Charles-Edwards has suggested that the popularity of anti-nativism in the 1980s might be linked to diminishing urgency over the question of Irish identity and an increasing sense of Ireland as a citizen of Europe.[10]

Law has always played an important role in such discussions, although scholarship on the laws has moved on from the extremist positions articulated in the earliest days of the anti-nativist controversy. Today it would be rare to find a scholar denying the sourcing of the laws in native tradition altogether or, conversely, characterising the written laws as uncomplicatedly oral in origin, focusing on their shared Celtic heritage at the expense of their medieval content. The debate centres instead on the number and significance of the texts that can be shown to have originated in a Latin ecclesiastical environment, and on the question of education and whether the authors of the law tracts were necessarily clerics. All scholars would now agree that at least some of the lawbook authors had access to elements of ecclesiastical education. Some scholars believe it possible to identify a 'secular' legal tradition differing significantly in its priorities and approach from that of the Church, while others hold that the tradition was largely ecclesiastical in inspiration.[11] The controversy may continue for some time yet, and the debate has stimulated excellent research on both sides. The questions historians pose today are more sophisticated and open-ended than the ones with which Binchy was

concerned: in many ways, the field as practiced today seems hardly to resemble the field as it was fifty years ago.

And yet there are some senses in which relatively little has changed. There has always been a heavily 'textual' element to the study of early Irish law; the complexities inherent in even the most basic legal tracts are so great that the situation could hardly be otherwise. Scholars such as D. A. Binchy, Liam Breatnach, John Carey, T. M. Charles-Edwards, Johan Corthals, Fergus Kelly, Kim McCone and Neil McLeod, all of whom hold different views on the nature and origins of the written laws, have all produced valuable editions and textual commentaries. New editions and reference materials continue to come out on a regular basis,[12] and there are already signs that the question of *how* texts should be edited will likely become fresh matter for controversy over the next decade. Tymoczko pointed out in 2002 that Celtic studies was not yet *au courant* with theoretical trends in editing already being taken for granted in other humanistic disciplines;[13] the recent debate in the pages of *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* over Kevin Murray's edition of *Baile in Scáil* suggests that the battle has now been joined on this front.[14]

That so much attention has been given to textual matters is exactly as it should be; high calibre editions constitute the foundation on which historians of the future will inevitably build. What does seem very odd, however, is how relatively small a role has been played to date by the methodological and theoretical perspectives that have become so much a part of scholarly discourse in other non-Celtic medieval fields. In fact, it would be difficult to overstate the methodological gap separating early Irish legal historians from their continental and British counterparts. Tymoczko's observations about the continuing 'positivism' of Celtic studies are particularly pertinent here.[15] In 1970, the very year in which Binchy made his case for the Indo-European origins of 'Celtic' suretyship, Fredric Cheyette used the pages of *French Historical Studies* to call for a rethinking of the traditionally institutional approach to medieval legal history in continental Europe.[16] Cheyette's suggestions were subsequently embraced by a new generation of legal scholars whose perspectives on the law were heavily informed by social anthropology and historical sociology. The year 1986 saw the publication in England of the Davies and Fouracre volume *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*, a collection that consciously eschewed the law codes in favor of the dispute-focused approach advocated by legal anthropologists. Ireland was represented in that volume by an excellent article by Richard Sharpe who, following the methodological remit of the book, doggedly tried to deduce the basics of

early Irish dispute settlement from the few remaining medieval charters. However, as Sharpe himself seemed to acknowledge in his opening sentence ('Ireland is different in very many ways from the other areas treated in this volume'), his contribution sat oddly with the rest.[17]

And in truth, anthropological models were far from the minds of most Irish historians in that year. The nativist/anti-nativist debate was then in full swing,[18] and while the following decades saw some use of methodologies current in other social science fields,[19] by and large the gap separating the study of early Irish law from that of its continental counterparts continued to grow. These differences in approach became particularly noticeable as feminist and post-colonialist perspectives began to be incorporated into the study of continental history and law. Fergus Kelly's monumental *Early Irish Farming*, a comprehensive survey of agricultural life as explicated in the laws, appeared in 1997, six years after Kathryn Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, one of a number of recent works probing issues of genre and gender in medieval legal and literary texts.[20] Both were excellent books; however, the methodological contrast between Kelly's rather literal approach and Gravdal's concern with symbolic rhetoric could not be greater. Over the past several years, Celticists in a variety of non-legal fields have begun to embrace contemporary trends in critical theory, taking up issues of gender, environmental theory, colonialism and semiotics, to name but a few.[21] However, those writing on the laws by and large have continued for the most part to follow the methodological paths carved out for them by their predecessors. Neither of the two most recent reflections on the historiography of the laws (appearing in 1996 and 2003) even mentions the word 'gender,' for example,[22] and in the 2007 collection edited by Karl and Stifter, *Theory in Celtic Studies*, the only 'theory' mentioned with respect to the laws is that relating to the nativist/anti-nativist controversy.[23]

What I wish to suggest here is that there is something to be gained by incorporating these newer methodological approaches into our study of the laws. To say this is not to endorse the view voiced by some scholars that the early Irish laws are so stylised and artificial that they have little to offer the historian. Alfred Smyth, for example, dismissed them as little more than 'rambling discussions . . . border[ing] on the unreal,'[24]and Breatnach has quite rightly taken him to task for that statement. On the other hand, in Breatnach's view, it is simply disrespectful to question the literal 'reality' of the laws.[25] Fergus Kelly also defends the basic realism of the laws, although he acknowledges that law tract authors occasionally distorted details in order to present a 'neat and tidy' picture of Irish

society.[26] What the newer theoretical approaches offer scholars is the opportunity to strike a balance between these two extremes: between a more or less literal reading of the laws on the one hand, in which they are treated as acts of reporting rather than of interpretation, and an approach that condemns them outright as Utopian fictions on the other. These texts may or may not *reflect* historical reality. However, they clearly *represent* it – possibly in ways different from what we have traditionally understood. Focusing as much on issues of textual representation as on the institutions these texts purport to describe offers us a new perspective on the jurists and their work.

One of the tried and true chestnuts of early Irish historical studies is the law of status, on which we are fortunate to possess three different tracts dating to the eighth or ninth centuries: *Críth Gablach*, *Uraicecht Becc*, and *Míadshlechtae*. Two of these are widely known and have been the subject of modern scholarly studies;[27] the third, *Míadshlechtae*, has been only partially translated and has garnered less focused attention.[28] Among the most valuable of these recent studies are Charles-Edwards's two articles on *Críth Gablach*, published in 1986 and 1994.[29] These significantly enlarged our understanding of several important topics in early Irish history, but it is their methodological implications that stand out from this distance as most crucially important, for these pieces marked a radical departure from the approaches then (and, it must be said, for the most part now as well) current among early Irish legal historians. Charles-Edwards went beyond a literal reading of *Críth Gablach* to treat the text as a work of 'social analysis' rather than as a simple reporting of fact. For him, the text was 'an attempt to understand a social system' rather than an accurate reproduction of that social system per se, a stance that he acknowledged might be somewhat disturbing to 'positivist' historians wishing to maintain their faith in the basic 'realism' of the text.[30]

Charles-Edwards's approach, while innovative, was in no sense postmodernist. Despite viewing the text as a work of personal analysis, he clearly was not inclined to venture too far into the realm of symbolic representation. For him, the issue was largely one of selective emphasis and omission: the *Críth Gablach* compiler deliberately chose what to highlight or omit in accordance with his own particular vision of how status worked within early Irish society. Hence the focus on the laity only rather than on hierarchies 'of sacred office or skill,' and hence also the compiler's failure to mention such things as farm buildings owned by nobles. His point was not that nobles lacked such buildings, but rather that lordly status was rooted in control over persons rather than involvement in agriculture.

Occasionally, the compiler prioritised the needs of his theoretical schema over what archaeology would suggest obtained in real life. For the most part, however, he does not appear in Charles-Edwards's account as actually having invented what he records. The text still reflects something fundamentally 'real,' even though the lens through which we perceive that 'reality' is a distinctly personal one. Indeed, the picture with which the compiler leaves us is one that Charles-Edwards argues would be familiar to almost any historian of the period: 'the classic linkage of house and land found almost everywhere among the early medieval European peasantry.'[31]

Charles-Edwards leaves open the question of how future scholars should approach these texts. One would likely infer from his study that historians may – with caution and an awareness of the nature of their sources – continue to draw on them to fashion arguments about actual social practice such as, for example, whether a free client's cows all came from his lord.[32] This is, of course, an entirely defensible point of view. The idea that something 'real' lies at the base of our sources is one that most historians would embrace in some form or the other. However, 'reality' is an elastic concept. None of the early Irish status tracts is an impartial witness to what it describes. They all constitute particular and very different imaginings of the social order, and what they tell us about individual honour price, or items owned by persons of specific ranks, is a representation of the 'truth' rather than a dispassionate historical account. To say this is not in the least to disparage the value of these sources, or to imply that they are somehow lacking in credibility. It is, rather, to enlarge our sense of the sophisticated ways early Irish jurists represented the culture in which they lived.

Recent scholarship on gender and political space offers us a way to approach these juristic truths.[33] All three of the status texts present early Ireland as a fundamentally male world, one in which women have no visible place. This is not merely a matter of leaving women out from their lists of social ranks. When *Críth Gablach* describes the possessions associated with the freeman's (*mrugfer*) household, for example, it mentions only those items used by men or, at best, by both halves of the couple: a vat, a cauldron, knives, a candle, tools and the like.[34] Items used or owned primarily by women, such as woad and other dyes, yarn, fleeces, weaving equipment and the like – all of which are mentioned elsewhere in the laws[35] – simply do not appear. The only possessions women are depicted as having in this text are their clothes and their lapdogs, the former because they are a means by which to display the status of their husbands, the

latter because they construct women as belonging uniquely to the domestic sphere and constitute a gendered contrast to the hunting animals mentioned as standard equipment for the aristocratic male.[36] Indeed, for men of this rank, women themselves are represented as standard domestic equipment, mentioned in the same breath as bridles and ploughs.[37] This idea is less visible in *Uraicecht Becc* and *Míadshlechtae*, where items owned by the various ranks are not as central a theme, but there also women appear only in relationship to men.[38]

To observe that women are absent from these texts is not merely to comment on their subordinate status; gender inequality was a universal aspect of European life at the time, so this can hardly be regarded as a surprise. It is, rather, to underscore the fact that the social order described in these tracts is not one that ever actually existed in real life. These are not accurate reflections of early Irish society; they are carefully constructed visions of a political order that the compilers have deliberately gendered male. Women are missing from these texts not because they were regarded as too subservient or unimportant to mention, but because the compilers wished to portray early Irish political life in a particular way. It is worth remarking on how deliberately crafted this vision is, at least in *Críth Gablach*, where it permeates all layers of the text, from the lists of ranks to the descriptions of household items. Women are not simply forgotten, they are deliberately omitted. Despite its value as a source of information about the early Irish agricultural economy, this is ultimately a text about authority and social order rather than a description of everyday life.

Paradoxically, while women per se may be missing from these sources, gender itself is depicted as an essential part of status and lordship. To be male is not necessarily to be of high rank; all of these texts mention lower-class men whose claim to status and franchise was limited by their age, wealth, or place of residence. On the other hand, to be of high rank is, for all of these compilers, of necessity to be fully and sexually male. The idea is developed in various ways across all of these texts, though it is most clearly expressed in *Uraicecht Becc* and *Críth Gablach.* In those texts, men of low status – whether by virtue of age, occupation, or finances – are imagined as only partially male, or even as not male at all. Thus whereas the normal Irish freeman receives his honour-price in cattle, the low-status *inol* of *Uraicecht Becc* receives only a fleece, a ball of yarn, or a non-laying hen – items that construct him either as female or infertile, or both.[39] Similarly, the honour-price due to the most junior *fer midboth* of *Críth Gablach* – a status explicitly defined in that text by boyish

beardlessness – ranges from a sewing needle to a female yearling heifer, while the customary food-rent of the *óenchiniud*, a minor without living ascendants, is a male, but castrated, sheep (*molt*).[40] And the *bogeltach* of *Míadshlechtae*, who grazes cows on the land of others, is explicitly said to have no honour-price or franchise because 'it is the work of a child or a woman that he does.'[41]

If status entails masculinity, lordship itself is grounded in fertility, in the sense both of being in an authorised sexual relationship oneself, and of exercising authority over the licit relations of others. This is clearest in *Críth Gablach*, where control over sexuality is deliberately portrayed as a crucial part of what it means to exercise authority even at the lower social levels. As an individual's status advances, so also does his control over sexual acts that are sanctioned, potentially fertile, and of service to household and community. None of the *fer midboth* ranks of *Críth Gablach* are depicted as capable of farming, entertaining or marrying on their own. The next rank up, a lesser freeman known as the *ócaire*, can engage in farming and has a fourth of a share in items of essential male farming equipment (plough, kiln, mill, barn and the like). However, as befits such a 'partial' male (prosperous freemen had full shares in plough, kiln and barn), a lawful wife is not listed amongst the attributes of his status.[42] On the other hand, the *ócaire* is explicitly described as possessing male and female cows and pigs (and probably sheep as well) – animals capable of breeding and thus of bringing prosperity to his farm. Charles-Edwards points out that the idea that a man would possess as many pigs and sheep as he did cattle is 'demonstrably false,' in that it does not accord with the archaeological evidence. [43] Equally artificial, I would suggest, is both the omission of mention of lawful marriage for the *ócaire* and the explicitly gendered identities of his animals. Regardless of what might actually have obtained in real life for members of this rank, these are mentioned here because they form part of the textual connection the compiler is making between gender and political authority.

Human sexual relations, sanctified by marriage, enter the picture with the next rank up, that of the freeman. Here again, a hierarchy of relationships is visible. One of the status attributes of the commoner known as the *aithech arathreba a deich* is said to be a *lánamnas choir*, 'proper marriage.' However, the highest form of marital relationship, *cétmuinteras*, is not mentioned as an attribute of rank until the highly prosperous freeman known as the *mrugfer*. From that point on in the hierarchy, both *cétmuinteras* and the possession of breeding pairs of animals seem to be a presumption for those of higher rank.[44] Charles-Edwards queries whether

the ability to enter into a *cétmuinteras* relationship was for the compiler of *Críth Gablach* 'a cause, a consequence, or merely a concomitant' of the *mrugfer*'s social rank.[45] Another way to approach this issue would be to note that textually, *cétmuinteras* forms part of a gendered hierarchy of sexual relationships running throughout the text as a whole. Rank implies coupling; higher rank implies higher status coupling – and authority over the fertility of others. For just as freemen from the *ócaire* upwards are surrounded by male and female animals for whom they provide provision and support, so also are lords by human couples. The lowest person of lordly rank, the *aire désa*, is said to travel with a company of ten married couples from New Year's Day to Shrovetide, claiming hospitality for them from his base clients. Other ranks of lord do similarly, in numbers that increase from rank to rank up to the king, who of course has authority over all seven grades of the *Féni* with their various divisions and gendered pairings.[46]

Such a consistent gendering of authority can hardly be accidental. Nor is it mere hyperbole that enjoying the company of his wife is listed in *Críth Gablach* as part of the weekly order of the king. Charles-Edwards relates the 'high living' implicit in this paragraph to sacral kingship ideas about the fertility of the land under its rightful king, and given the ubiquity of the topos in medieval Irish literature, this seems likely to be right.[47] However, with respect to *Críth Gablach* at least, there is likely more to it than that. Sexual relations here form part of an intricately gendered political schema embracing all free classes of men, from the lowly *ócaire* to the king himself. Equally interesting is the manner in which authority is depicted in this text as being rooted in the household. As recent work by Joan Scott, Peter Brown, Lyndall Roper, Diane Owen Hughes and others has shown, the prosperity of individual states has historically often been perceived by rulers to be linked to the microcosm of the properly ordered household. Rulers from ancient Rome to Reformation Augsburg went to great lengths to promote the ideals of marriage and family because to them, the realm of the domestic was the realm of the political; it was impossible effectively to separate them.[48]

An examination of political space in *Críth Gablach* suggests that the household serves similarly in that text, as both a metaphor for political order within the *túath* and a means for bringing it about. It is surely no coincidence that *Críth Gablach* alone of the three status tracts focuses attention on the farms and outbuildings associated with the social ranks it discusses. As Charles-Edwards notes, the basic dividing points here are the *mrugfer* (prosperous freeman) and the king. There is a big difference

in size between the *ócaire*'s and the *mrugfer*'s houses, and another big gap between the houses of nobles and those owned by kings. However, there is not much difference in house size between the *mrugfer* and the highest rank of noble.[49] This in itself would point to the freeman and royal ranks as symbolically significant within the tract. However, there are other indications as well. By far the two longest sections of the tract are those which deal with the *mrugfer* on the one hand, and the king on the other. The length of these sections alone is such as to call attention to them as passages of heightened importance within the tract: seventy-six lines in the modern edition in the case of the *mrugfer* and 162 lines in the case of the king. Were this a work of fiction, these passages would stand out unmistakably as the major climaxes of the text; clearly they were intended to be read as parallel to one another.

This is significant because at the heart of each of these two sections lies a detailed depiction of the households associated with each rank – by far the most extensive accounts of this sort anywhere in the tract. The two households are described in very different terms; however, when one looks beneath the surface, it becomes clear that precisely the same concerns are being addressed in both passages. The description of the *mrugfer*'s household is accomplished through a listing both of the buildings and items he possesses and of the fines to be paid for breaking into his house and precinct.[50] Among his possessions are all the basic agricultural necessities – a plough with its accoutrements, cauldrons, vat, axes, billhooks, grindstones, a fire burning perpetually on the hearth. In part, the point here is self-sufficiency; unlike lesser freemen, the *mrugfer* does not need to share in plough or kiln. However, the household as imagined here contains everything necessary for civilised life: the clearing and cultivating of the earth, the conversion of raw materials into socially useful products, the hospitable sharing of that produce with others. It is a source of fertility and stability not merely for the *mrugfer* himself, but for the community of which he is a part. What we have here, I would suggest, is not a stylised description of a freeman's farm but, rather, the household imagined as the political community in microcosm. This is why it contains what it does; it is also why it contains no items belonging exclusively to women who were, by virtue of their gender, excluded from political life.

The royal household is imagined less in terms of possessions than of the clients, guards, hostages and social dependants who inhabit it.[51] As Charles-Edwards has pointed out, for the *Críth Gablach* compiler, livestock is the basis of the status of the freeman ranks, while lordship over people constitutes the foundation for nobility.[52] The compiler's deliberate

juxtaposition of the *mrugfer*'s farm, filled with the necessities of settled (male) agricultural life on the one hand, and the royal feasting hall, filled with the dependants from whom the king's status derives on the other, shows just how deeply embedded within the text these ideas about gender and politicised space really are. The only woman mentioned in the hall is the king's wife, and she appears only to accompany him at the feast. Of particular interest is the unusual emphasis placed in both household descriptions on the possibility of intrusion from outside. There is nothing like it in the discussion of any other rank, and the language in the *mrugfer* passage calls attention to itself not only by its length, but by the use of alliteration and other rhetorical figures.[53] The manner in which these intrusions are imagined as being warded off reflects in both cases the way in which the two households have been constructed by the compiler. Thus the freeman's house is not only defined but largely protected by material goods, in this instance the payments owed for damage to individual items. By contrast, it is people, not possessions, who defend the royal hall. Guards whose primary function it is to defend against external attack sit in the northern precinct of the hall, while those whose duty is to protect the physical person of the king sit in the south. [54]

What is most interesting about this – apart from its internal consistency – is the fact that both households are being constructed in thematically parallel ways. In their essence, they are places of safety and refuge; however, they are also both vulnerable to assault from outside. The assault on the *mrugfer*'s household is imagined in intricate detail, proceeding literally wisp by wisp (*dlai*) through the breaking of the wattle and the damaging of pillow and bed. In the case of the royal hall, the text is obviously concerned both with internal and external attack, specifying the type of guards on whom a king may feel comfortable in relying, as well as those most likely to betray him.[55] On the whole, danger seems to be imagined as coming primarily from outside the household and, by extension, the *túath* or province. Kings of all ranks are depicted as driving out foreign invasions, acting as liaisons on behalf of their people in treaty and legal negotiations and making provisions against plague.[56] On the other hand, the possibility of internal dissension is never far away, whether expressed through the figure of the betraying guard or through the image of *túatha* in revolt.[57] Vigilance is required in order to ensure the safety of the household, as of the polity it represents. On the whole, military activity plays a relatively small role in this text. Indeed, warfare is not even listed as part of a king's weekly routine, while judgment is listed twice.[58] On the other hand, violence contained and deployed in the service of order is imagined

as a necessity. Perhaps this is why the mysterious *aire échta*, the 'noble of vengeance,' an obscure figure operating in circumstances of inter-*túath* blood-feud, is given such prominence within the text.[59]

Críth Gablach's emphasis on the household is both unusual and exceptionally well realised. Charles-Edwards is surely right in labeling it as an 'outstanding [piece] of social analysis.'[60] The other two status tracts, *Uraicecht Becc* and *Míadshlechtae*, are not nearly as complex or consistent in their symbolism. Gender is, as we have said, an issue in all three of these tracts. The household, however, is not. The farms and outbuildings that are so much a part of *Críth Gablach*'s discussion of status are simply not present in the other two. Rather, *Uraicecht Becc* gives only the honour-price, *bíathad* (number of people who accompany each rank on hospitality visits) and *turtugud* (legal protection) for the ranks it discusses, and *Míadshlechtae* merely the *bíathad* and the honour-price due for physical or satirical attacks (*sarugud, esain, ainmed, diguin*). And whereas *Críth Gablach* is exclusively concerned with the laity, *Uraicecht Becc*'s aim is in part to reconcile the lay ranks with other hierarchies such as the church and poets. *Míadshlechtae*, which may have originated in the same legal school as *Uraicecht Becc*,[61] is similarly broader in its focus, discussing the ranks of ecclesiastical scholars, poets and churchmen as well as laymen.

Despite the fact that these texts take such a different approach to the ranks they describe, comparison between them is still very useful in light of what has already been argued, for it alerts us to a possibility not broached in earlier scholarly discussions of these texts – specifically, that *Uraicecht Becc* and *Críth Gablach* seem to disagree on a very important issue: social mobility. In fact, I would argue that *Uraicecht Becc* is largely *about* social mobility, particularly within and among the craftsman classes. The text begins by observing that law and judgment themselves are grounded in the *nemed* class. Usually the word *nemed* refers to privileged (places or) persons such as high-status clergy or lords; in *Uraicecht Becc*, however, the term encompasses persons who are professionals in the sense of being proficient in particular crafts or occupations, even though they may not be of high social status otherwise. [62] A large portion of this relatively short text is taken up with such persons; indeed, it does not seem too much of an exaggeration to say that the text is in large part concerned with the possibility of them rising in status and honour-price as they gain proficiency in one craft or learn others.

In fact, the main point of the tract would seem to be that status and its perquisites are not fixed. There are several statements to this effect in the text, and they often take the form of proverbs set apart rhetorically

from the rest, as though designed specifically to catch the eye. The first such statement comes very close to the beginning of the tract:

> *Acht i[s] saer cid cach creanus a suiri dia dan. Is de ata: saer i suidiu ndaeir acus daer i suidiu saeir. Saer cach o mainib, daer cach o mbelaib; saer i suidiu nda[e]ir: fear reanus a tir no a deis no a corp i fognum. Daer i suide saeir ceta-mus: fear creanus tir no dliged no suiri dia dan no dia treabad no dia tallaind tidnaic Dia do. Is de ata: fearr fear a ciniud.* [63]

> For whoever purchases his privilege with his art is free (*sóer*); it is of this that it is said: 'the free in the seat of the unfree and the unfree in the seat of the free.' Each [can become] free by his wealth; each [can become] unfree by his lips. 'The free in the seat of the unfree': [that refers to] a man who sells his land or his rights or his body into service. 'The unfree in the seat of the free', moreover: [that refers to] a man who buys land or entitlement or privilege with his art or his farming or with the skill that God gives him. It is of this that it is said: 'a man is better than his birth.'

A similar statement occurs in the context of a discussion about the poetic ranks: *a teasband de foltaib caich, teasbaid dia cataid; a tormuig dia dagfoltaib tormaigid dia dagcataid*,[64] 'what is lacking from the wealth of every person is lacking from his dignity; what is added to his good wealth increases his good dignity.' When the text turns to craftsmen the point is made directly that increasing proficiency in a craft, or the learning of additional crafts, brings greater privilege and a larger honour-price.[65] The message is summed up near the end of the text: *[b]eas aendanach bid aendireach; beas illdanach bid illdirech; do formaig sairi*,[66] 'he who will have but one art will have one honour-price; he who will have many arts will have many honour-prices. [Art] increases privilege.'

The contrast with *Críth Gablach* could hardly be greater. Everything about the latter seems intended to communicate a vision of society as stable and unchanging. Craftsmen per se are only mentioned once, and that in a clause tying their compensation to the rank of the person for whom they work rather than to anything they themselves achieve.[67] Social mobility in the agricultural sphere is acknowledged as a possibility, but is mentioned largely in order that it might be contained. A freeman who becomes prosperous enough to take on clients may not himself claim noble rank; only after three generations of such prosperity can a family lay claim to such status.[68] Otherwise, individual ranks are depicted in *Críth*

Gablach as existing in a fixed relationship to one another, both within the household, and within the *túath*. Moreover, as we have seen, this is a hierarchy anchored not only in wealth and clientship, but in the seemingly immutable realities of gender and the household. Of course, it may be that the compiler of *Críth Gablach* was simply not interested in talking about craftsmen or reconciling different types of social hierarchy with one another.[69] On the other hand, *Uraicecht Becc*'s vision of society still seems greatly at odds with that depicted in *Críth Gablach*. *Bretha Nemed* texts are well known for the emphasis they put on poets and others of *nemed* rank; a tract advocating greater privileges for members of the artistic classes would not be surprising.[70]

No such craftsman-oriented agenda is visible in *Míadshlechtae*. In general, this text is the most difficult of the three to pin down to any particular message or point of view. As Charles-Edwards has remarked, two of the striking differences between *Míadshlechtae*'s discussion of the free laity and those of the other tracts are the existence of a military hierarchy and the fact that lordship over very dependant persons (*senchléithe*) is presented as a source of status.[71] Apart from this, the one clearly consistent theme is the association made in the text between high social status and personal merit and demeanor. A statement to this effect comes very near the beginning of the tract: the three qualities that bestow rank and honour are merit and worth and innocence (*airilliudh ⌐ indrucus ⌐ endce*), while the three that take it away are improper qualifications, bad skill and faulty behaviour (*anfolad ⌐ docerd ⌐ anendge*).[72] This is a point made also in *Uraicecht Becc* as part of its argument for an expanded honour price for craftsmen and other artists.[73] However, there is no sign that social mobility for craftsmen is similarly an issue in *Míadshlechtae*. Like *Uraicecht Becc*, the text acknowledges that farmers who sell or lose their land may see their status sharply diminish; however, movement in the reverse direction is described as taking place only over generations (as in *Críth Gablach*).[74] On the other hand, *Míadshlechtae* does seem invested in enlarging the boundaries of nobility in a way that includes persons who in other tracts would appear simply as prosperous freemen. It names three 'lord-like' (*flaithem*) ranks above the ordinary freeman, all of whom are paid their honour-price in cattle like freemen rather than in *cumal*s like lords. Persons of these ranks do not have base clients, but they do exercise lordship over very dependant persons, and incorporated into their name (*flaithem*) is the Irish word for 'lord,' *flaith*.[75]

Míadshlechtae's association between status and personal merit is no mere throwaway, but is rather embedded deep within the imagery of the

text. This tract alone of the three we have looked at envisages the economic spectrum in its entirety, from the king of all Ireland to homeless scavengers haunting the fens. Paradoxically, it seems to have relatively little interest in ordinary freemen; almost all its attention is focused on the royal and lordly classes on the one hand and the very lowest ranks imaginable on the other.[76] Unlike *Bríathra Flainn Fhína*, however, this text shows little sympathy for the poor; rather, their poverty appears here as the result of their own personal flaws or bad decisions. Whether because of bad management, a dubious choice of occupation or physical deformities, the destitute are presented here as having been in some sense complicit in their own misfortune.[77] It is even taken for granted the poor are also likely to be lawbreakers – one expression of a link between morality and status that is maintained consistently throughout the text.[78]

Míadshlechtae marks the gradations of status it discusses in a variety of ways, some of which we have not seen in earlier tracts. Thus status is communicated textually not merely through honour-prices and privileges, but through the speech associated with each rank as well. The language used to describe the overking (*triath*) is intensely rhetorical and marked by alliteration and other forms of linguistic ornamentation, while the descriptions of the other noble ranks incorporate similarly rhetorical quotations from poets known elsewhere in early Irish tradition.[79] Once one reaches the 'lord-like' ranks of the *flaithem*, however, these quotations disappear and the language becomes prosaic and functional (an indication that despite the name, those of *flaithem* rank were imagined by the compiler as falling more on the freeman than the noble side of the line). This equation of elaborate language and high status is well-documented in Irish tradition, as is its correlative belief that those of greatest intrinsic merit are also those most closely associated with intricate speech.[80] The point here seems to underscore in a particularly dramatic way the idea that those who currently occupy positions of authority are meant to do so. Their social superiority is grounded not only in tangibles like material goods, but in the much more ineffable qualities of speech and personal demeanour.

Status and hierarchy are, moreover, inscribed upon the landscape itself. An intricate political geography is at work in this text. The focus here is not the household, as it is in *Críth Gablach* but, rather, the island itself. Thus we move from the *triath* who rules Ireland from 'sea to sea,' to the lesser kings and high lords acting on behalf of their *túath* in inter-*túath* matters, to the minor lords and freemen who act within both *túath* and kindred (*fine*), and finally to those who have no permanent connection

with settled society at all, but tend cattle on the land of others or roam the hills and wastes living however they can. [81] The language in which these latter are described is not particularly rhetorical, but the images are stark. Many of these are men who have no independent substance of their own, even stooping so low as to scavenge crumbs from the cooking-fires of others in order to keep themselves alive. For persons of full status, such fires would function as hearths; for these wretched wanderers, they provide no warmth at all. The hierarchy we see in *Críth Gablach*, in which low-status freemen exercise authority over the animals in their care, is here taken one step further. These are men who are imagined as having become like animals, living outside the bounds of civilised society. Indeed, among this group is the professional contortionist, who abandons his proper human form for the amusement of others, and the *sindach broth-laige*, 'fox of a cooking pit.'[82] It is no accident that *Míadshlechtae*'s heptad listing the criteria by which men are judged begins with physical form (*cruth*) and ends with merit (*innrucus*).[83] With these men we have traversed not only the boundary between settled society and barren wastes, but between man and beast as well.

The compiler of *Míadshlechtae*, therefore, vests social order in land-scapes that are at once literal and symbolic: the settled regions of Ireland on the one hand, and the human body on the other. The patent artificiality of this imagined world underscores what seems actually to be at stake here: the preservation of the political status quo. Rulers rule because they are destined to do so – by their wealth, their physical form, their ability to use or understand language, their personal integrity. The ruled, by contrast, are imagined as displaying fewer and fewer of these qualities as one descends the social ranks, culminating finally in a creature who steals from others to feed himself and lacks even those things that make us recognizably human, such as our speech and physical form. Like *Críth Gablach*, this is a text not merely about status, but about the unchanging nature of the political order. *Míadshlechtae* does not highlight gender or the household in the way *Críth Gablach* does. However, both texts make appeal to the immutable realities of body and landscape in their repre-sentations of social order. By contrast, *Uraicecht Becc* seems not only to envisage social change but to lay the groundwork for it. Its emphasis is less on what exists at the moment than on what could be acquired through hard work, training, and practice. To remark on such differences is not in the least to dispute the 'realism' of these texts as historical sources. It is, rather, to read them in a way that goes beyond the issue of their relation-ship to real life to ask how and why they represent 'reality' as they do.

Notes

[1] Adapted from E. MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise', *PRIA*, 36 C (1923), 265–316.

[2] Most notably, D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and A. Breen, 'The Laws of the Irish', *Peritia*, 3 (1984), 382–438, and in that same volume, L. Breatnach, 'Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The significance of *Bretha Nemed*', 439–59. The best overviews of the law are Fergus Kelly's *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), Liam Breatnach's *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 2005) and T. M. Charles-Edwards' 'Early Irish law', in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland. I. Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford and New York, 2005), pp. 331–70.

[3] Most notably, editions done by Thurneysen between 1923–40 and by Binchy between 1936–78: full bibliographical references in Kelly, *Guide.*

[4] M. Tymoczko, 'What questions should we ask in Celtic Studies in the new millennium?', in J. F. Nagy (ed.), *Identifying the 'Celtic'*, CSANA Yearbook, 2 (Dublin, 2002), pp. 10–29 (pp. 13–20). See also H. L. C. Tristram, 'Celtic in linguistic taxonomy in the nineteenth century', in T. Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 35–60.

[5] D. A. Binchy, 'Celtic suretyship, a fossilized Indo–European institution?', in G. Cardona, H. M. Hoenigswald and A. Senn (eds), *Indo–European and Indo–Europeans* (Philadelphia, 1970), pp. 355–67; and articles by Binchy and Thurneysen reprinted in Dafydd Jenkins (ed.), *Celtic Law Papers: Studies Presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions xlii, Aberystwyth 1971* (Brussels, 1973).

[6] T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993); Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 267–72; R. C. Stacey, *The Road to Judgment: From Custom to Court in Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Philadelphia, 1994); Stacey, 'Ties that Bind: Immunities in Irish and Welsh law', *CMCS*, 20 (Winter, 1990), 39–60; Morfydd E. Owen, 'The *Excerpta de Libris Romanorum et Francorum* and Welsh law', in T. M. Charles-Edwards and P. Russell (eds), *Tair Colofn Cyfraith, The Three Columns of Law in Medieval Wales: Homicide, Theft and Fire* (Bangor, 2007), pp. 171–95; Owen, 'Celtic medicine', *Proceedings of the 34th Congress on the History of Medicine. Glasgow 4–8 September 1994* (1995), pp. 95–110; Owen, 'Some points of comparison and contrast between early Irish and Welsh law,' in K. Jankulak and J. M. Wooding (eds), *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 180–200.

[7] Three excellent recent discussions of this issue are: Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *CMCS*, 36 (Winter, 1998), 1–35; Sims-Williams, 'Celtic Civilization: Continuity or Coincidence?' *CMCS,* 64 (Winter, 2012), 1–45; and Sims-Williams, 'Post-celtoscepticism: A personal view', in Dónall Ó Baoill, Donncha Ó hAodha, and Nollaig Ó Muraíle (eds), *Saltair Saíochta, Sanasaíochta agus Seanchais: A Festschrift for Gearóid Mac Eoin* (Dublin, 2013), pp. 422–8.

[8] Several key articles in the nativist/anti–nativist dispute are reprinted in Raimund Karl and David Stifter (eds), *The Celtic World: Critical Concepts in*

Historical Studies, 4 vols (London and New York, 2007), I, pp. 155–310. Breatnach's bibliography in *Companion* provides references to scholarship to 2005 (see especially works by Breatnach, Carey, Charles-Edwards, Corthals, Etchingham, Kelly, McCone, and Ó Corráin). Another recent discussion is Stacey's *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 57–60, 217–24.

[9] E.g. the publication in 2005 of Edel Bhreathnach's *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara* (Dublin, 2005).

[10] T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Views of the past: Legal and historical scholarship of the twentieth century', in M. Herbert and K. Murray (eds), *Retrospect and Prospect in Celtic Studies: Proceedings of the 11th International Congress of Celtic Studies held in University College, Cork, 25–31 July 1999* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 15–27 (pp. 24–25).

[11] Key works include: Breatnach, 'Canon Law and Secular Law'; Breatnach, 'The Ecclesiastical Element in the Old Irish Legal Tract *Cáin Fhuithirbe*', *Peritia*, 5 (1986), 35–50; Breatnach, 'The First Third of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*', *Ériu*, 40 (1989), 1–40; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Early Mediaeval Gaelic Lawyer* (Cambridge, 1999); Charles-Edwards, 'The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland', in H. Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 62–82; Charles-Edwards, 'Early Irish Law'.

[12] E.g. the Airgíalla charter poem in Bhreathnach, *Kingship and Landscape*; K. Murray, '*Catshlechta* and Other Medieval Legal Material Relating to Cats', *Celtica*, 25 (2007), 143–59; N. McLeod, '*Di Ércib Fola*', *Ériu*, 52 (2002), 123–216; Charlene Eska's *Cáin Lánamna: An Old-Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law* (Leiden, 2009); Fergus Kelly (ed.), *Marriage Disputes: A Fragmentary Old Irish Law-Text* (Dublin, 2014).

[13] Tymoczko, 'What questions', p. 26.

[14] L. Breatnach, 'Review of Kevin Murray, *Baile in Scáil "The Phantom's Frenzy"*' (London, 2004) , *CMCS,* 55 (2008), 75–82; K. Murray, 'Reviews, Reviewers, and Critical Texts', *CMCS*, 57 (2009), 51–70; L. Breatnach, 'Reviews, Reviewers, and Critical Texts: A Brief Final Response'; J. Uhlich, 'Reviews, reviewers, and critical texts: A brief final response', pp. 71–74 and 75–80 respectively of that same volume.

[15] Tymoczko, 'What questions', 13–20.

[16] F. Cheyette, '*Suum cuique tribuere*', *French Historical Studies*, 6 (1970), 287–99.

[17] R. Sharpe, 'Dispute settlement in medieval Ireland: A preliminary inquiry', in W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds), *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 169–90 (169).

[18] Breatnach, 'Ecclesiastical Element', p. 52.

[19] N. Patterson, *Cattle-lords and Clansmen: Kinship and Rank in Early Ireland* (New York and London, 1991); Stacey, *Road to Judgment*; Stacey, *Dark Speech*.

[20] F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-Texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD* (Dublin, 1998); K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991). Also in this same vein are R. F. Green, *A Crisis of Truth, Literature and Law in Ricardian England*

(Philadelphia, 2003); E. Steiner and C. Barrington (eds), *The Letter of the Law, Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, (Ithaca and London, 2002); N. J. Menuge, *Medieval Women and the Law* (Boydell, 2003); and A. Musson (ed.), *Boundaries of the Law: Geography, Gender, and Jurisdiction in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Burlington, 2005).

[21] E.g. J. F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Ancient Ireland* (Ithaca, 1997); C. McKenna, 'The colonization of myth in *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*', in J. F. Nagy (ed.), *Myth in Celtic Literature*, CSANA Yearbook, 6 (Dublin, 2007), pp. 105–19; A. Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'Togail Bruidne Da Derga and the Politics of Anatomy', *CMCS*, 49 (2005), 1–19; J. Lowe, 'Kicking over the Traces: The Instability of Cú Chulainn', *Studia Celtica*, 34 (2000), 119–29; J. Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997); E. Johnston, 'Transforming Women in Irish Hagiography', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 197–220; E. Johnston, 'Powerful Women or Patriarchical Weapons? Two Medieval Irish Saints', *Peritia* 15 (2001), 302–10; Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, 1996); L. M. Bitel, 'Convent ruins and Christian profession: Towards a methodology for the history of religion and gender', in L. M. Bitel and F. Lifshitz (eds), *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 2008), pp. 1–15; K. Ritari and A. Bergholm (eds), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008); A. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York, 2009); S. Sheehan and A. Dooley (eds), *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland* (New York, 2013).

[22] L. Breatnach, 'Law', in K. McCone and K. Simms (eds), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies* (Maynooth, 1996), pp. 107–21; Charles-Edwards, 'Views of the past'.

[23] Karl and Stifter (eds), *The Celtic World: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, 4 vols: *Theory in Celtic Studies*, vol. 1 (London, 2007) pp. 5–9, 333–46, 349–96.

[24] A. P. Smyth, review of K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, in *Studia Hibernica*, 13 (1973), 168–71 (170); quoted and discussed by Breatnach in 'Law', p. 116.

[25] Breatnach, 'Law', p. 116.

[26] Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 8–9; Kelly, *Guide*, pp. 237–8.

[27] Both translated by MacNeill in 'Ancient Irish Law'. For discussions, see Binchy's notes to his edition of *Críth Gablach*, MMIS, 11 (Dublin, 1941, repr. 1970), hereafter *CG*; Binchy, 'The Date and Provenance of *Uraicecht Becc*', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), 44–54; N. McLeod, 'Interpreting Early Irish Law: Status and Currency', *ZCP*, 41 (1986), 46–65, 42 (1987), 41–115; J. Grigg, 'The *nemed*, *Uraicecht becc*, and early Irish governance', in Pamela O'Neill (ed.), *The Land Beneath the Sea: Essays in Honour of Anders Ahlqvist's Contribution to Celtic Studies in Australia* (Sydney, 2013), pp. 87–100; the two articles by Charles-Edwards cited below in n. 29.

[28] Breatnach, *Companion*, pp. 264–5; Kelly, *Guide*, p. 267 and references there. Gerald Manning is currently working on an edition of *Míadshlechtae* for the DIAS Early Irish Law series.

[29] T. M. Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach* and the Law of Status', *Peritia*, 5 (1986), 53–73; Charles-Edwards, 'A Contract between King and People in Early Medieval Ireland? *Críth Gablach* on Kingship', *Peritia*, 8 (1994), 107–19.

[30] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 53–4, 73.

[31] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 54, 66–71; and see Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 8–9. Aidan O'Sullivan has recently explored the archaeology behind *Críth Gablach* (including a consideration of gendered objects within the household) in 'Early Medieval Houses in Ireland: Social Identity and Dwelling spaces', *Peritia*, 20 (2008), 225–56.

[32] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 68–71.

[33] Useful bibliographical starting points include Joan Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986), 1053–75; S. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zunigais (eds), *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2003); J. B. Harley and David Woodward (eds), *The History of Cartography*, *Volume I: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, (Chicago and London, 1987).

[34] *CG*, 171–99.

[35] E.g. in the tract on distraint: *CIH* 379.4–12.

[36] *CG* 347 and 407–8.

[37] *CG* 400–11.

[38] E.g. *CIH* 1607.4 and 584.37, respectively; and cf. *CG* 124–5, 199, 341, 482, and 595.

[39] *CIH* 1609.14–32.

[40] *CG* 66–69, 23–24 and 72–73 respectively.

[41] *CIH* 585.14–16.

[42] The text makes an offhand reference to his wife in the context of offences perpetrated against him, but a lawful wife is not said to be a characteristic of his status: compare *CG* 121–7 with 144 and, especially, 199–200.

[43] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 69, 71.

[44] For animals and equipment, compare *CG* 89–90, 95–7 with 194–6. For humans, compare *CG* 144 with 199–200, 346–7, 410–11, 433, 439 and 546. The fact that the animals owned by the free ranks above the *ócaire* were imagined as including both males and females is spelled out most clearly in the section on the *mrugfer* (*CG* 194–7), but is almost certainly to be presumed for the other freeman ranks as well (*CG* 132–3, 157–9, 250–2).

[45] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 56, 66–7.

[46] *CG* 334–5, 384–5, 399–400, 448–50.

[47] *CG* 542–7; Charles-Edwards, 'Contract', p. 114.

[48] Scott, 'Gender'; P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), pp. 5–32; L. Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1991); D. O. Hughes, 'Sumptuary law and social relations in Renaissance Italy', reprinted in P. Findlen (ed.), *The Italian Renaissance*, Blackwell Essential Readings in History (Oxford, 2002), pp. 124 –50.

[49] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 65–67.

[50] *CG* 172–99, 221–37.

[51] *CG* 577–97.

[52] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 57–67.

[53] *CG* 221–37 particularly.

[54] *CG* 577–82.

[55] *CG* 578–82.

[56] E.g. *CG* 514–24.

[57] *CG* 509–14.

[58] *CG* 542–7.

[59] *CG*, pp. 70–2; Kelly, *Guide*, p. 127; McLeod, 'Interpreting', pp. 46–50.

[60] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', p. 73.

[61] Stacey, *Dark Speech*, pp. 182–6.

[62] The 'free' or 'noble' *nemed* and the 'dependent *nemed*' (*sóernemed, dóernemed*): *CIH* 1590–1593.10. See also Grigg, 'The nemed'.

[63] *CIH* 1593.15–1594.32.

[64] *CIH* 1606.33–38.

[65] *CIH* 1612.11–12; 1616.1–1617.7. See also 1618.36–40 on smiths and others who are enfranchised by the *túath*.

[66] *CIH* 1617.5–7.

[67] *CG* 486–7.

[68] *CG* 248–76 on the *fer fothlai*, and 328–36 on the *aire désa*.

[69] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 54–5.

[70] Stacey, *Dark Speech*, pp. 182–6.

[71] Charles-Edwards, '*Críth Gablach*', pp. 59–60.

[72] *CIH* 583.5–6. Cf. *CG* 1–4.

[73] *CIH* 1613.17–18 (where *idnae*, 'purity' substitutes for *enncae*, 'innocence').

[74] *CIH* 585.5–6 and 583.33 respectively.

[75] *CIH* 584.21–26.

[76] Compare the fifty-three lines given to kings and nobles to the seventeen lines accorded the *flaithem* and freeman grades together and to the thirty-three lines accorded those too low to have honour–price: *CIH* 583.7–584.38.

[77] *CIH* 585.1–33; C. Ireland (ed.), *Old Irish Wisdom Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: An Edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu* (Tempe, Arizona, 1999), pp. 13–20. Note particularly the similarities to *Uraicecht Becc*.

[78] *CIH* 585.27.

[79] *CIH* 583.7–12; 583.13–584.20.

[80] Especially in *Bretha Nemed* texts, of which this might well be one: Stacey, *Dark Speech*, pp. 95–171, 197–217.

[81] *CIH* 583.7–8; 583.13–27; 583.28–584.38; and 585.1–33 respectively.

[82] *CIH* 585.25–26, 30–31.

[83] *CIH* 585.32–33.

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7

A DIRTY WINDOW ON THE IRON AGE? RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PRE-ROMAN CELTIC RELIGION

Jane Webster

I am sceptical that there is anything we can label as
'Celtic religion'.
(JOHN COLLIS, 2007)[1]

Introduction

The first part of this contribution briefly summarises some key recent developments in the archaeological study of religious belief and ritual practice in Iron Age Britain.[2] Direct evidence for both comes almost entirely from archaeological sources, yet for many later prehistoric archaeologists in Britain today the very phrase 'Celtic religion' is itself intensely problematic. In the last two decades, new archaeological work – both in the field and resulting from the embrace of new theoretical and interpretative perspectives – has undermined the belief that Iron Age Britain was populated by a single people with a shared ethnic identity and belief system: the Celts. At the same time, many British archaeologists have come to see 'religion' not as a discrete category of human experience in the Iron Age, but as largely embedded within, and inseparable from, the world of the everyday. In much of western Europe, by contrast, faith in the Celts as 'the first Europeans' – the Iron Age ancestors of the modern EU – remains (largely) unshaken, as does the notion that Celtic religion can best be studied by excavating sites apparently dedicated wholly to ritual activities.

The second section of this paper will comprise a case study on the epigraphy and iconography of pre-Roman 'Celtic' deities. My aim here

will be to explore changing attitudes to the nature of the Iron Age gods and to the interplay between Roman and Celtic religion following the Roman conquest. In asking questions about this cultural dialogue, one necessarily opens a can of methodological worms of direct relevance to the present volume. This is because much of our understanding of Iron Age deity worship has been obtained by squinting back at the past through a window provided by Roman era sculpture, epigraphy and texts. This is a difficult prospect for many archaeologists; context and contingency normally underpin our methodology, yet in this instance we work retrospectively, looking backwards on the Iron Age gods from the period which followed. In exploring this issue, my aim will be to demonstrate that today we glimpse those deities through a particularly grimy window, muddied in ways that were not even recognised twenty years ago, but which (via post-colonial theory) are now seen as presenting hitherto unrecognised productive challenges and opportunities for archaeological research.

Post-conquest texts and artefacts are not of course the only weapons in the battery of retrospective inference that has traditionally underpinned the study of pre-Christian Celtic ritual and religion. More than forty years ago Kenneth Jackson famously posited that medieval texts offered a 'window on the Iron Age',[3] a claim that many prehistoric archaeologists would question today. That is not the case for all, however, and in the final section of this paper, I will examine the methodologies informing selected recent archaeological studies employing medieval source material in interpreting Iron Age sites and finds. Here and throughout, I hope to show that many of the concerns that have been raised in recent years regarding the role of Graeco-Roman and medieval data in the study of Iron Age religion are equally relevant for other 'Celtic' disciplines. These concerns centre on the failure to address the context of production of commentaries on aspects of Celtic belief and practice, and the difficulties that arise when one group attempts the linguistic and cultural translation of another.

Recent archaeological developments

Everywhere in Gaul there are only two classes of men who are of any account of consideration. The common people are treated almost as slaves . . . The two privileged classes are the druids and the knights (*equites*). The druids officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate public and private sacrifices, and give rulings on all religious questions . . .

The second class is that of the knights. When their services are required in some war – and before Caesar's arrival in the country the Gallic states used to fight offensive or defensive wars almost every year – these all take to the field, surrounded by their servants and retainers, of whom each knight has a greater or smaller number according to his birth and fortune.[4]

Scepticism regarding the validity of a 'Celtic' Iron Age was one of the defining characteristics of British Iron Age archaeology in the 1990s and 2000s. Debate was stimulated by wide-ranging interest in the relationship between archaeology, European ethnicity and modern-day claims on the prehistoric past,[5] and also by work on the construction of modern 'Celtic' identities by scholars such as Malcolm Chapman.[6] One of the first papers bringing new insights about the construction of Celtic identity to bear on archaeological data was Merriman's 1987 piece 'Value and motivation in prehistory: the evidence for "Celtic" spirit'.[7] Merriman argued that prehistoric material culture, Classical ethnography, medieval texts, folklore and nationalist politics had all played their part in the formulation of an a-historical pastiche of the 'Celtic' character that was employed uncritically by archaeologists attempting to infer the values and motives underlying the actions of Iron Age peoples. Reliance upon this a-temporal template, as Andrew Fitzpatrick went on to argue in an important contribution,[8] had resulted in a widespread failure to deal with the historicity of the Iron Age itself. Fitzpatrick also turned his attention to religion,[9] arguing that here too, notions of a timeless and traditional pan-Celtic Iron Age and an uncritical reliance on chronologically disparate textual sources had led archaeologists to regard 'Celtic' ritual as little more than a means of creating and perpetuating a long-lived dominant ideology. In addition, he suggested, this approach had also fostered an unhelpful dualism between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. I come back to both of these points below. For the present, it is simply necessary to reiterate that at the heart of these critiques lay a shared key point: that time, place and contingency – the bedrock of archaeological methodology elsewhere – had, for a variety of reasons, been rendered incidental when it came to the Iron Age Celts.

Merriman's paper demonstrated clearly that archaeological interpretations of both Iron Age art and social organisation had been very heavily influenced by text-driven notions of the 'Celtic spirit'. Much subsequent critique has similarly focused on art and social structure. Debate concerning the value of the label 'Celtic art', a phrase used since

the nineteenth century to embrace material ranging from the La Tène metalwork of the later European Iron Age to the insular manuscript art of Medieval Ireland, has been notably ferocious. The depth of feeling here can best be gauged by reading some of the exchanges between Vincent and Ruth Megaw on the one side, and John Collis and Simon James on the other.[10] As the title of one recent synthesis would suggest (Harding's 2007 *Archaeology of Celtic Art*)[11] not all scholars are willing to dispense with tradition entirely,[12] but a number of innovative new studies on ornate artefacts, including martial metalwork and mirrors,[13] suggest that, in Britain at least, the scholarship of 'Celtic Art' is slowly shedding its art-historical foundations in favour of a more contextual-ised approach. Melanie Giles's contribution on the meaning of colour within Celtic Art, and the 'technology of enchantment' through which marital objects were designed to achieve specific effects on the observer, is a case in point here, moving beyond aesthetics to reconnect decorated metalwork with violence and bloodlust.[14]

The notion of a pan-Celtic social structure – comprising volatile war-rior elites, druids and oppressed commoners, much as described by Julius Caesar in his account of Northern France on the eve of its conquest in the 50s BC[15] – has been questioned in detail in a series of publications by John Collis[16] and in work on the Atlantic Celts by Simon James.[17] Much of this work has explicitly criticised the model of Celtic warrior society formu-lated by Barry Cunliffe.[18] J. D. Hill's critique of Cunliffe's model, made in the context of his reanalysis of the function and status of hillforts, has been particularly influential in shaping reassessment of the nature of British Iron Age society.[19] Raimund Karl has recently suggested that Hill's alternative, household-based model finds close analogues in Medieval Irish and Welsh accounts of Celtic social structure.[20] From Karl's perspec-tive, this is because these analogies are in reality homologies: the result of a shared ancestry. From the perspective of Iron Age archaeologists, however, the explanatory value of Karl's observation is unclear: *how* might these 'striking similarities' – whatever their origin – help us to interpret sites and finds of Iron Age date? I come back to this point at the end of this paper. For the present, it is simply necessary to state that whilst there has thus been something of a counter-attack of late on the notion of an egalitarian, pacifist Iron Age,[21] most later prehistorians accept the argument that traditional understandings of Iron Age social structure are the result of dubious methodological reliance on undifferentiated 'Celtic' textual sources. This point notwithstanding, the 'Celtic' *religious* elite (the druids) continue to fascinate many of us.

Druid hunting

Once in a while, excavation uncovers the remains of Iron Age individuals who excite special interest. As a rule, the more unusual the manner of death and the more inexplicable the grave goods, the more likely an individual is to be proposed as a member of the well-documented[22] but archaeologically elusive druidic elite. The case of 'Lindow Man', whose partial remains were recovered from Lindow Moss (Cheshire) in 1984, is instructive here. This 'bog body' owes its extraordinary state of preservation to 2000 years of anaerobic incarceration in bog peat, a medium which preserves soft tissues and effectively 'tans' the skin.[23] A comprehensive battery of scientific techniques has been brought to bear on Lindow Man, who undoubtedly remains the most intensely studied individual from Iron Age Britain. His body has been contour mapped; his head and face have been reconstructed; his anatomy has been studied in depth; and forensic archaeologists have investigated the manner of his death (on which more below). His stomach contents have been analysed and peat macrofossil analysis has been undertaken in order to gain a better view of the environment in which he died. Radiocarbon dating suggests that his death occurred between 2 BC and AD 119.[24]

Lindow Man was about twenty-five years of age at the time of death and did not die gently. He was initially stunned with two blows, possibly from an axe, which fractured his skull at two points and drove bone fragments into the brain. He was then garrotted with a cord made from animal sinew, resulting in a fracture of the neck. His throat was also cut to the right of the larynx, perhaps with the explicit intent of exacerbating bleeding at the climax of the sequence of events resulting in his death. Both of the first two injuries would have been fatal, and the theatricality of his despatch makes it likely that Lindow Man was a sacrificial victim. The suggestion of sacrificial ritual and the presence of mistletoe pollen in the barley 'cake' that comprised the victim's last meal led quickly to speculation concerning druidic involvement in events, the druids (as Caesar informs us) being responsible for 'Celtic' sacrifice, and (as a well-known passage from Pliny suggests) also having a keen interest in mistletoe.[25] Lindow Man's body revealed no sign of hard physical labour and his hands and nails were beautifully cared for, suggesting, perhaps, that he was a member of the social elite. On the grounds that warrior, bard and priest were apparently the only careers open to Celtic 'aristocrats', one well-known study of the 1980s cast Lindow Man as both prince *and* druid. Other planks in this argument included the presence of mistletoe pollen (noted

above) and the fact that the man wore a fox fur band on his arm. The 'druidic' relevance of the latter was not, however, explained at the time.[26]

The 'doctor's grave' at Stanway (Colchester), dating to *c*.AD 50, has also recently been suggested as the resting place of a druid. This burial is one of a group of high status, conquest-era cremations, placed within wooden chambers inside ditched enclosures and yielding an impressive array of exotic and unusual grave goods. The 'doctor' has been so dubbed because his grave goods included the earliest set of medical instruments to be discovered in Britain.[27] The grave also produced a set of copper alloy rods, subsequently interpreted (via Tacitus' *Germania*) as divination rods. On the basis of the latter, it is suggested that the Stanway doctor 'was a druid, or at least . . . belonged to a stratum of society that comprised Druids, diviners and healers'.[28]

In both of these examples, interpretation has been driven principally by accounts of the social structure of Iron Age and post-conquest Gaul found in the texts of classical authors. The writings of Caesar, Tacitus and Pliny have fuelled scholarly attempts not only to find buried Iron Age druids but to forge an association between excavated artefacts and druidic practice. Archaeologists have variously examined, in this context, the presence of astral signs on Iron Age short swords; the calendars from Coligny and Villards d'Heria; a range of spoons and headdresses accompanying certain British Iron Age inhumations; pre-and post-conquest figured iconography; a third-century BC model oak tree found at Manching in Bavaria in 1984 and the well-known carved stone head from the *Viereckschanze* (rectilinear enclosure) at Mšecké Žehrovice in Bohemia.[29] Fitzpatrick's study of astral (lunar) symbolism on anthropomorphic swords is perhaps the most considered of these studies, making a careful temporal distinction between the date range of his (largely pre-conquest) sample and the (largely post-conquest) documentary record hinting at druidic involvement in astral prediction. Venclová's study of the Mšecké Žehrovice stone head lies at the opposite end of the spectrum. The third-century BC carved figure is identified as a druid on the basis of a 'band' hairstyle, which is argued to show elements of the tonsure of monks in the early Christian Church of Ireland. The latter, in turn, is said to owe its origins to a hypothetical form of (possibly druidic) tonsure. The results of all these attempts to associate material culture with druidic practice remain at best inconclusive, however, and as Fitzpatrick has persuasively argued, there is little to support the notion of a *specialist* priestly class in Iron Age Britain, at least.[30] In this respect as in so many others concerning Iron Age Britain, then, the sacred and the profane appear to have been intertwined.

The once intense British debate on the 'Celtic question' has abated in the last few years (though see discussion of the work of Raimund Karl, below). Its legacy has been a widespread acceptance that the concept of a Celtic Iron Age is one that requires considerable qualification. Certainly, many archaeologists now feel that the interpretation of sites and finds can be actively hampered by the notion that Iron Age Britain (and indeed Western Europe) was peopled by a single ethnic group. Whilst it is accepted that there were things – artefact categories and languages – that were shared by different peoples in parts of Iron Age Europe, many British archaeologists today place less emphasis on these points of similarity, and more on understanding and explaining points of difference, at both the regional and international level. This is an understanding predicated on the last two decades of Iron Age field archaeology, which have brought into much sharper focus the heterogeneity of settlement forms and social practices within Iron Age Britain.[31] At the same time, interpretative analysis has sharpened our understanding of the extent to which religious belief and ritual behaviour were embedded in the world of the everyday, and the dangers of polarising the 'sacred' and the 'profane' in exploring the social worlds of the Iron Age.

Funerary archaeology: underworlds and afterlives

Nothing about the Celts is more certain, Mac Cana once remarked, than that they believed in life after death.[32] Certainly, Roman textual sources point to a belief in the immortality of the soul, but these sources have little indeed to say regarding Iron Age conceptualisations of the afterlife.[33] Grave goods might reasonably be hoped to yield some insights here, but one of the reasons that human remains such as those from Lindow Moss and Stanway excite so much interest is that visible funerary ritual is near-absent from most regions of Iron Age Britain. It is likely that excarnation (exposure, which rarely leaves archaeological trace) was the dominant funerary practice in many areas.[34] The once tiny database of Iron Age cemeteries has increased in recent years, in part thanks to radiocarbon dating, which has made it possible for archaeologists to secure dates for some unfurnished and thus otherwise updateable cemeteries.[35] Some regional funerary practices can be isolated, including the middle Iron Age (*c.*400–200) square barrow inhumation tradition of East Yorkshire, and the Late Iron Age (*c.*100 BC–AD 60) 'Aylesford Swarling' cremation deposits of south-eastern England. These discrete funerary traditions are so localised that we cannot regard them as providing evidence for widespread

'British' (let alone 'Celtic') practice, but they nevertheless reveal important insights into Iron Age funerary practice.

Recent work in East Yorkshire has yielded fascinating insights into orientational cosmology and the structured deposition and symbolic meaning of animals (notably pigs and sheep), whose remains were placed with the human dead in graves in this region.[36] The Yorkshire cemeteries are often associated with linear earthworks, sinkholes and seasonal watercourses known as gypseys, suggesting that points in the landscape at which water appeared and disappeared may have been seen as entrances to the underworld.[37] This possibility is strengthened by growing evidence for the significance of water in the positioning and use of pit alignments (rows), which were a common component of the farming landscape of the Yorkshire Wolds and East Midlands. At Gardom's Edge in Derbyshire for example, aligned pits were deliberately lined with clay, thereby creating reflective watery pools. The intention here was perhaps to facilitate communication with otherworld beings.[38]

Cremation cemeteries begin to appear in the south-eastern counties towards the end of the Iron Age and these produce a wide variety of grave goods, many of them connected either with feasting, or with personal appearance and hygiene.[39] Notable recent sites include the cemetery at Westhampnett, West Sussex,[40] and the elite cremation complex at Stanway (Colchester), mentioned above.[41] Several of the Stanway cremations produced continental (Gallo-Belgic) ceramics, gaming sets and other personal possessions suggestive of a powerful desire for 'Romanised' material possessions, both in this life and the next.

As the pioneering work of J. D. Hill has demonstrated, human remains are not restricted to cemetery contexts in the Iron Age but also occur in a variety of settlement contexts. In the early Iron Age the partial or complete remains of a small percentage of the human dead (perhaps no more than 5 per cent of the total living population of any given site) begin to be placed at the base of some reutilised grain silos in southern Britain. At Danebury hillfort (Hampshire), for example, the remains of seventy individuals have been found in pit fills. These human remains are often associated with animal bone, but as Hill has conclusively demonstrated, they cannot simply be regarded as the result of 'rubbish' disposal. Instead, they are the product of complex, structured depositional practices which follow discernible rules.[42] Similar finds occur on open village sites on the Thames gravel terraces. Stanton Harcourt Gravelly Guy is a good example here.[43] In use from the Middle Iron Age Roman period, this settlement produced the remains of at least seventy individuals, fifty-one of whom

were children. It is possible that these people – placed at the base of former grain storage pits and lacking grave goods – were in some way outcast from societal norms, and were perhaps afforded a non-normative burial rite to prevent them from entering the Otherworld. As Hill has noted, however, that there is little to distinguish between the treatment of animals and humans in these pit deposits, and the remains of both might be regarded as deriving from similar ritual processes of feasting and sacrifice. Whatever the answer here, the 'pit burial' tradition once again emphasises the permeability of the boundary between domestic and 'ritual' practice in Iron Age Britain. There is much to suggest that ritual activities became increasingly focused on the domestic sphere as the Iron Age progressed, a point which may help to explain the lack of evidence for specialised cult sites.

Bounded ritual: sanctuaries and other 'cult' sites

If religious specialists such as druids have proven elusive in Iron Age British studies, then so too have ritual sites. Indeed, specialised 'cult' sites are a distinct rarity in England and Wales, where only a handful of pre-conquest structures have been argued to be shrines, temples or other spiritual centres. (The situation in Ireland is more complex, as discussed below with reference to Navan Fort). Amongst the most recent English contenders are the rectilinear structures discovered at Heathrow (Middlesex), Danebury (Hampshire), Hayling Island (Hampshire) and South Cadbury (Somerset).[44] The difficulties of identifying the latter securely as a shrine are highlighted in an excellent study by Jane Downes.[45]

At first glance, the situation in England appears markedly different from that in Western Europe, where Iron Age 'sanctuaries' seem to abound and where ritual itself often appears to be bounded, in the sense that these sites are not found in the domestic sphere, and seem to be intentionally separated from it. The Swiss lakeside site at La Tène, which gives its name to the metalworking style virtually synonymous with the Iron Age Celts, has long been understood to have been a focal point for the deposition of metalwork and is now regarded as a *trophaeum* (a locus for displaying warrior hardware). In northern France, a celebrated series of Iron Age rural sanctuaries came to light in the course of large-scale excavations in the 1980s. Examples here include Gournay-sur-Aronde (Oise), and Ribemont-sur-Ancre (Ardennes.).[46] These sites emerged in the fourth century BC and most began life as enclosures demarcated by ditches and, subsequently, palisades. Into the ditches were placed deposits of weapons,

tools, human and animal bones, and sometimes jewellery. Groups of pits were placed at the centre of most of these enclosures and these were modified over time, eventually being realised as formal structures. At Ribemont-sur-Ancre, deposits of human bone (in the form of box-like constructions, fashioned from long bones) were placed in the corners of the enclosure at around 200 BC. Similar sites have since been uncovered in other areas, including Mormont (Vaud, Switzerland). Here, more that 260 pits were dug between 120 and 80 BC and were filled with the remains of animals.[47] Finally, in Bavaria and eastern France, a series of small rectilinear enclosures known as *Viereckschansen* have also been proposed as ritual sites. These enclosures, about a hectare in size, are again delimited by banks and ditches, but the latter were not employed as repositories for structured deposits.[48] The best-known example is the Bavarian site of Holzhausen, where one of two excavated enclosures produced three deep shafts, sunk in the later Iron Age. One of these shafts contained an upright wooden stake organic remains, and a metal flesh-hook. At the more recently excavated site of Fellbach-Schmidden (Baden-Württemberg), fragments of three deer figures, dateable by dendrochronology to 123 BC, were recovered from an oak-lined shaft.

Nothing similar to these continental sites has yet been found in Iron Age Britain, where, as suggested above, 'ritual' appears more firmly embedded in domestic life. The ritualisation of the domestic sphere is a well-documented phenomenon in later Iron Age Britain and was encountered above in examining the structured deposition of human remains on settlement sites. There is growing evidence that a similar development may also have taken place in continental Europe. The ditch of the D-shaped sanctuary excavated at Acy-Romance (Ardennes), for example, was a focus for the structured deposition of animal remains, but was located at the highest point in a village dating to the later La Tène. Human bones were also dispersed throughout the village and the cemeteries surrounding it, and as the excavators have persuasively argued, the interrelated ritual processes here can only be understood by setting the sanctuary in its wider settlement context.[49] In a study critiquing the assumption that ritual was cut off from everyday activity in later prehistoric Europe, Richard Bradley[50] has turned his attention to the interpretation of *Viereckschanzen* (*c*.1ha rectilinear enclosures), noting that the argument that these are specialised ritual monuments or shrines is largely dependent on the findings from the Holzhauzen excavation, mentioned above. No other excavated site has produced clear-cut evidence for ritual activity, leading archaeologists to suggest that *Viereckschanzen* may have been used for food storage

and redistribution, or were simply small farms.[51] But as Bradley suggests, the perceived difficulty here – the lack of evidence for specialised ritual use – arises only because of the expectation that there must be an absolute separation between the sacred and profane. This was clearly not the case for many *Viereckschanzen*, some of which were located in, or on the edges of, larger areas of domestic activity. There is also a clear overlap between the contents of *Viereckshanzen* and domestic sites, and Bradley argues that archaeologists must study that relationship in itself; it is far more revealing about Iron Age lifeways that any doomed attempt to isolate a discrete category of ritual site. As Bradley also notes, the pit burial tradition, once thought limited to southern Britain, is beginning to be recognised on the continent, with human remains now having been found in re-used grain storage pits in a region extending from the Rhineland to Normandy, and from the channel coast into central France. Bradley argues that here and in Britain silos took on increasing significance in ritual practice because, having once been used to store grain, they provided 'a potent metaphor for human fertility and also for the continuity of life'.

From Romano-Celtic to Celtic:
Looking back on the Iron Age gods

The important body of work on Celtic religion by Anne Ross and also (with the qualification below) by Miranda Aldhouse-Green exemplifies a long-lived and much-employed methodology for determining the character and function of Iron Age deities.[52] In the work of these scholars, pre-Roman, Roman and medieval data, comprising iconography, epigraphy and more sustained textual accounts, routinely jostle together in the manner outlined above. The resultant 'Celtic gods', like the 'Celtic spirit' critiqued by Merriman, lack contingency and context. Most importantly, the synthesis between Romano and Celtic religion is rarely problematised. The Romans and the Celts were both polytheistic peoples and deity synthesis has traditionally been regarded as an inevitability, facilitated by Rome's apparently benign willingness to accommodate alien gods into its pantheon.[53] The conquest is regarded, moreover, as an archaeological bonus, in that the Romans introduced new material technologies of religious observance – anthropomorphism, sculpture in stone and writing – that for the first time gave the shadowy gods of the Celts material expression.

The Iron Age peoples of Western Europe were non-literate, and their gods have no written mythology. At the same time, the corpus of Iron Age deity imagery is notably slim, amounting to little more than occasional

finds of bronzes and stone sculptures and a handful of regionalised sculptural trends, such as the fashion for torc-wearing torso-figures in central France and the highly localised, Hellenised sculptural tradition of the Marseille region.[54] There is not a single firmly dated Iron Age example of figured, freestanding deity imagery from Britain itself. For the post-conquest period, by contrast, we have abundant sculptural and epigraphic evidence for deities with Celtic names and/or apparently Celtic attributes, such as triplication of form or associated wheel symbolism. Some of these deities are also given Roman attributes such as *cornucopiae* and *paterae*; some (like Sulis or Lenus) are equated or paired with perceived Roman equivalents; some goddesses (like Rosmerta) are paired with male Roman consorts, and other deities (including Epona, Sucellus and Cernunnos) seem to owe little to the Roman world. But all – by virtue of their Celtic names or associated attributes – are traditionally regarded as *Iron Age* gods, repackaged to varying degrees, and in a variety of ways, in 'Romanised' form. They appear to offer, in other words, a window on Iron Age belief.

Much has changed in the last twenty years, a period within which many archaeologists have come to regard Romanisation – the once-dominant model for provincial contact and culture change – as a defective paradigm. This change of heart is firmly grounded in the application of post-colonial theory to the Roman Imperial project. The rise of the 'post-colonial' perspective in Roman archaeology is a process that has been well documented elsewhere and need not be reiterated here.[55] I need simply stress that it has brought fundamental challenges to the notion of acculturation (one-sided cultural change) by identifying alternative narratives of adaptation, resistance and contestation, and giving voice to subaltern experience within Roman provincial society. The key point for present purposes is that, as belief has faded both in acculturation and in a simplistic synthesis between 'Roman' and 'Native' culture, the archaeology of Roman-Celtic religion has undergone a radical transformation. This change, in turn, has led archaeologists such as myself to question the extent to which the nature and function of Iron Age deities can (or even should) be determined by looking back at prehistory from the Roman period. Before turning to a case study summarising some of my own work, I should note that the impact of these changes can also be felt by examining the more recent work of Miranda Aldhouse-Green, which foregrounds the Roman conquest as a point of religious change and contestation in a way that her earlier studies did not. A good example here is Aldhouse-Green's excellent analysis of gender ambiguity in Romano-Celtic

divine imagery, wherein she explores the possibility that gender manip-ulation was employed to demonstrate specific attitudes to the Roman colonial presence.[56] Aldhouse-Green has also recently employed an explic-itly post-colonial perspective in an analysis of 'resistant iconography' in Roman Europe. Her stated aim here is to relate 'notions of acculturation, appropriation, cultural synthesis, domination, protest and resistance to the specific arena of imagery in Roman Gaul and Britain and to attempt an exegesis of apparently syncretistic representation within a colonialist and post-colonialist context'.[57] To read this work is to appreciate how much has changed since Green's first major synthesis, *The Gods of the Celts,* was published in 1986. To give just one brief example, in the 1986 study the well-known image of Esus on the *Nautes Parisiacae* (Fig. 1: a pillar erected in AD 26 by the guild of Seine boatmen) is interpreted, in a section of Green's book exploring aspects of tree iconography, as follows: 'It may be that here the Tree of Life is being felled, but with its constant regeneration symbolised by the birds in a life-death-rebirth message.'[58] In returning to this image in 2004, Green plausibly suggests that the tree is being pol-larded, rather than felled, and remarks:

> It is possible to read such an image according to oppositional perspec-tives: on the one hand, pollarding exercises control over the environ-ment and the 'disorder' of natural growth; on the other hand trees, like limes, frequently subjected to pollarding display tenacious capaci-ties for regeneration . . . The control/pollarding is perhaps countered by the tree's ability to renew itself, in an allegory of Gaulish self-determination. It may even be appropriate to read into such imagery a 'discourse of tolerance' in which power balance and the 'politics of difference and identity' are acknowledged and fostered.'[59]

The interpretative problems presented by this monument are fascinating, yet we know far less about the vast majority of Romano-Celtic deities than we do in Esus' case. Many deities exist only as epigraphic attestations: names carved in stone, sometimes with associated imagery. The majority of these names are attested only once or at best a handful of times, lead-ing many scholars to suggest that the Celtic gods were highly localised, and possibly multi-functional, 'deities of place'.[60] Some of these deities were explicitly equated, or paired, with gods from the Roman pantheon, and this process has often been argued to shed light on the character and function of the Celtic 'partner' in these equations. As explored below, my own work has attempted to problematise these divine pairings, and to
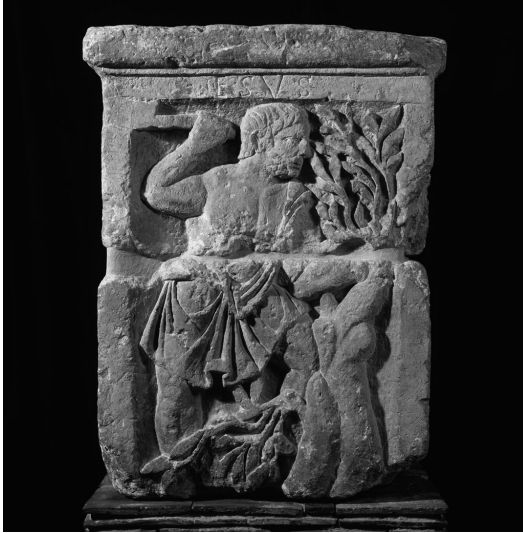
Pilier des Nautes: Pierre de Jupiter. Photograph © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée de Cluny – Musée National du Moyen-Âge)/Jean-Gilles Berizzi/Gérard Blot.

resituate them as evidence not for a simple mutual recognition of religious similarity, but as the product of a sometimes contested colonial encounter. In advancing this argument, I have never sought to suggest (*contra* Green) that 'religion in Roman Britain (and Gaul) was *entirely* the result of coercive colonial domination'[61]: rather, my point has been that the religion of *Roman* Britain is precisely that. The 'gods of the Celts' as we see them after AD 43 exist in a contingent, and contested, moment in space and time. To assume that the Iron Age gods persisted largely unchanged during the encounter with Rome is simply to delude ourselves about the nature of colonial contact, and its impact upon indigenous religions.

Interpretatio Romana:
mutual accommodation or resisted strategy?

In the Roman Empire, with its many religions and social traditions [the] quest for metaphysical knowledge normally included the identification of foreign 'unknown' gods with those of Italy and Greece. Such a process is best described by the phrase, derived from Tacitus (*Germania* 43), *interpretatio Romana*, which it is probably best to take literally as the Roman interpretation of alien deities, and of the rites associated with them.[62]

Esus is one of only a handful of Romano-Celtic gods to be named both on a stone monument and in a textual commentary, appearing alongside Teutates and Taranis in Lucan's *Pharsalia* (1.441–446) as one of three deities to whom the people of Gaul sacrificed human victims. Many years later the ninth-century Berne Scholiasts, commentating on Lucan's text, would attempt to render these deities more intelligible to their readers by suggesting Latin equivalents, putting forward both Mars and Mercury in Esus' case.[63] The Berne Scholiasts were engaging, somewhat late in the day, in their own version of *Interpretatio Romana*, the 'interpretation' of alien deities. *Interpretatio* has traditionally been seen as providing insights into the character and function of deities with Celtic names – who lack documented mythologies – simply by virtue of their being paired with better-documented Classical gods. Thus, the numerous Celtic deities twinned with Mars (including Lenus and Cocidius) are assumed to have been martial/healing gods, like Mars himself. Similarly, the functions of the goddess Sulis (twinned with Minerva at Bath) are read in terms of those of the Roman goddess of wisdom. Moreover, despite the fact that in the vast majority of cases we have no evidence at all for the *pre*-conquest existence of the Celtic partners in these parings, they are all assumed to be Iron Age gods, emerging from the shadows into the light of written history, thanks to the introduction of Latin epigraphy.

My own work on the pairing of Celtic and Roman deity names has attempted to resituate *interpretatio* as a post-conquest discourse, generated in the context of unequal power relationships and resisted by many Britons. The first point to make here is that deity name pairing was not a common practice in Roman Britain. Writing in 1995 I was able to isolate 246 examples of Celtic divine appellations or epithets, and in 169 cases these were made without any reference to 'equivalent' Classical gods.[64] Second, name pairing is notably absent for some of the best-attested Romano-Celtic (and Germanic) deities in Britain – including the Matres (mothers), the Veteres, Belatucadrus, Cocidius and Coventina. Third, it is important to note that *interpretatio* was largely the preserve of Roman soldiers, most of them stationed in the Hadrian's Wall military zone. This alone helps to explain why so many dedications were made to the war god Mars or his perceived Celtic equivalents, calling into question the common assertion that the Celtic gods were as 'warlike' as the Celts themselves. But there is a more important issue at stake here. In her early work, Miranda Aldhouse-Green suggested that an *Interpretatio Celtica* (an indigenous interpretation of Roman deities) ran alongside and complemented the *Interpretatio Romana*, pointing to a mutual accommodation of the gods of

the 'other'.[65] My own work has demonstrated that the *epigraphic* strategy of pairing Roman and Celtic gods was in fact employed almost wholly by high-ranking members of the Roman army or civil administration.[66] I have suggested that this is because deity naming and deity syncretism, were clearly perceived to be manifestations of power. Syncretism itself suggests a cultural arrogance – the belief that all gods are really the same as one's own – and in the Roman world this was not a naïve belief. Rome demanded that her armies win over foreign gods, for example, and formulae were pronounced to this effect when cities were besieged. To equate an alien deity with one from the Roman pantheon was not simply a benign act of accommodation, therefore; it was also a controlling strategy, bending that god to fit the demands of a particular understanding of the divine 'other' and its destiny under Rome. *Interpretatio* thus tells us a good deal about Roman understandings of the politics of cosmology, and very little indeed about the gods of the pre-Roman Celts.

The reluctant synthesisers: the creole gods of the Roman west

The discussion of *interpretatio* above has raised some fundamental issues regarding the Romano-Celtic gods, their Iron Age antecedents and the problems which vitiate simplistic attempts to 'read off' the latter from the former. The most fundamental of these is that, in the vast majority of cases, we have no certainty that deities first documented in the Roman era actually existed in the Iron Age. Many may well have done, but conquest creates gods and may certainly have done so in Roman Britain, as polytheistic incomers attempted to identify the names of the *genii loci* ('spirits of place') in their adopted corner of a foreign land, and – crucially – began to realise these beings anthropomorphically. This raises a second fundamental point; the conquest and the Roman presence *transformed* existing Iron Age gods in ways that were not simply cosmetic. Their names were written down for the first time; they were realised iconographically for the first time; and as explored below there is much to suggest that many were given human form for the first time. This process created *creole* deities, neither Celtic nor Roman, but a complex, and sometimes confrontational, mixture of both.

Creolisation is a term referring to the process by which elements of different cultures are blended together to create a new culture. In the 1970s the term was widely adopted by linguists, who used it to indicate the merging of two languages into a blended dialect (a creole language). Since

that time creolisation has emerged as an important paradigm throughout the social sciences.[67] It is employed today in varied ways by anthropologists, ethnographers and archaeologists working on multicultural adjustment in a wide range of colonial and post-colonial contexts. Creolisation theory has had a formative impact upon my own work on Romano-Celtic religion, because it offers a way to explore the complex, asymmetric dialogue between the belief and culture of a colonial elite and that of a subaltern population.[68] More specifically, I have suggested that post-colonial studies on the emergence of creole belief and practice in early modern colonial Latin America, the Caribbean and West Africa can offer important insights into the dialogues which informed and shaped Romano-Celtic religion. These religious encounters – occurring in very different places and at very different times – share important contextual similarities, and the discursive strategies employed by both colonisers and the colonised were often surprisingly alike. In many colonial contexts, for example, we see the emergence of creole deities who embrace and conform to certain aspects of a dominant religion (Christianity, or the Roman nexus of the Capitoline Triad and Imperial cult), yet in other ways remain embedded in an indigenous belief system and are clearly the focus for countercultural or oppositional 'popular' religious movements. The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Mexico), and the orishas (spirit guides) of Cuban Santeria are cases in point here.[69]

A similar interplay can be seen at work in the Roman west, where some Celtic deities adopt key 'Romanising' features – including sculptural representation in human form – but nevertheless appear to resist other technologies of Graeco-Roman deity worship (including epigraphy), and can be argued to float free of the constraints of the Roman pantheon in important ways. This group of deities includes several of the best-known gods and goddesses of Roman Gaul, including the horned god Cernunnos, the hammer god Sucellus and the horse-goddess Epona. The latter is one of the best-attested and most widespread of all Romano-Celtic deities, with more than 300 images of Epona having been found in an area stretching from Britain to Dacia. The name Epona derives from the Gallic word for horse[70] and in Romano-Celtic iconography she is consistently associated with one or more horses. In Burgundy, where her cult appears to originate, she is frequently associated with a mare and foal, and here too we find some 'stand alone' mare and foal images that may be representations of this deity. Epona's Romano-Celtic identity is thus dependent on the horse emblem. As I have argued elsewhere and as Aldhouse-Green has also suggested, zoomorphic imagery is often found in association with

divine images dateable to the decades surrounding the conquest, hinting at the possibility that formally zoomorphic deities were beginning to be realised in human form towards the end of the Iron Age.[71] In the post-conquest period, as provincial populations encountered Graeco-Roman concepts of deity anthropomorphism, and as indigenous artisans began to experiment with mimetic representation, it appears likely that Epona and other previously zoomorphic deities began to be represented in human form on a consistent basis.

Revealingly, however, having undergone this most fundamental of changes, and despite being honoured in Rome itself,[72] Epona remained notably resistant to other key forms of deity 'Romanisation'. For example, there is not a single instance in which she is paired iconographically with a deity from the Roman pantheon. This is striking, given the frequency with which other Gallic goddess (such as Rosmerta, discussed below) entered into 'divine marriages' with Roman gods.[73] Second, images of Epona very rarely incorporate epigraphy.[74] Put another way, Epona's devotees pre-ferred to depict her without either Celtic or Roman partners and rarely added her name to her image. Returning briefly to *interpretatio*, we may also note that Epona is never equated or name paired with Roman deities. Drawing on these various strands of evidence I have suggested that Epona is neither a 'Celtic' deity nor a 'Roman' one but is a creole goddess, encap-sulating both the possibilities of, and the limits to, religious syncretism in the Roman West. Epona may have attained human form in the Roman period, yet she was not fully incorporated into the Roman pantheon. On the contrary, she reflects – like the Virgin of Guadalupe in colonial Mexico – an adaptive *alternative* to a dominant belief system. Careful exploration of Epona imagery, and an understanding of what is not present there, thus reveals her to be a product of complex spiritual negotiation. What she is *not* should also be clear. She is neither an 'Iron Age', nor a 'Celtic', deity, but something else entirely.

From all change to no change: recent archaeological dialogues with medieval texts

One of the legacies of two decades of 'Celtoscepticism'[75] is that any archaeologist working on Iron Age religion today feels obliged to insert a rider in his or her work noting a) that there is no such thing as pan-Celticity and b) that, accordingly, medieval Celtic texts from Ireland and Wales do not offer unqualified insights into prehistoric ritual and belief across the ancient Celtic world. Yet in can be stated with equal certainty

that, somewhere in their work, those texts will put in an appearance nonetheless.

I will end my contribution by examining three recent case studies, all of which employ medieval textual sources in interpreting aspects of Iron Age religion. These are Stephen Yeates's argument for continuity of belief in the Cotswold Severn region from the Iron Age to the early medieval period; Chris Lynn's interpretation of the extraordinary 'Forty-Metre Structure' at Navan Fort (Emain Macha), Armagh; and Raimund Karl's application of the 'Viennese' method – which advocates a diachronic, comparative approach to the integration of Iron Age and medieval data – to druidism, chariots, and other staples of 'Celtic' society. I should emphasise that I have singled out these studies not in order to criticise their findings, but to critique the methodologies they employ. All three of these scholars are aware of the grime that has settled on Jackson's 'window' on the Iron Age, yet peer through it nonetheless.

Rosmerta/Hwicce: the undying goddess?

Stephen Yeates has published two studies arguing that the early medieval population of the Costwold Severn area (the *Hwicce*) were direct descendants of the Iron Age *Dobunni*, a people first named by Dio Cassius in the first century AD.[76] In the first of his books (*The Tribe of Witches*), Yeates argues that these two peoples venerated a mother goddess whose cult persisted from the Iron Age to the early medieval period and beyond.[77] In the second book (*A Dreaming for the Witches*), he attempts to recreate the Dobunnic pantheon and primal myth. Yeates's work is impressively wide-ranging, employing data derived from archaeology, epigraphy, onomastics, iconography, folk tradition, landscape studies, the written history of the Roman and early medieval periods, and medieval Welsh literature (specifically, the *Mabinogion*). His work is of particular interest to me because the divine 'mother' at the heart of his study is the deity usually known as Rosmerta ('the Great Provider'), first attested in the Roman period as a consort of Mercury, and popular in central and eastern Gaul (Fig. 2).

Both Miranda Green and I have offered post-colonial readings of the 'divine marriage' between Roman gods and Celtic goddesses, arguing that these pairings may be understood in multiple ways, reflecting both Roman domination and indigenous resistance, and foregrounding the problems inherent in simplistic readings of Romano-Celtic deity syncretism. It is therefore interesting to see the Gloucestershire 'Rosmerta' interpreted here as the primal goddess of an Iron Age people. Yeates

suggests, moreover, that prior to being partnered with Mercury via the
interpretatio Romana, this divine mother was paired with an unidentified,
indigenous father. Yeates is well aware that his mother goddess lacks
pre-Roman attestation and is usually associated with Mercury, and he is
clearly fully conversant with recent work (my own included) problematis-
ing the Roman interpretation of Celtic deities.[78] Yet in his view, successive
reinterpretations of the gods of earlier times simply facilitated divine
survival.[79] Neither Roman, nor pagan Germanic, nor Christian readings of
the Dobunnic goddess changed her substantively, Yeates argues: rather,
she was absorbed by, or grafted onto, these later belief systems. As for
her post-conquest marriage to Mercury – her consort is not Mercury at
all, he suggests, but simply an Iron Age god portrayed (where she is not)
'in a wholly Roman guise'.[80] Moreover, since DNA evidence suggests that
(sub-Roman) Gloucestershire, like (Celtic) Wales was spared many of the
discontinuities resultant from population incursions during the Saxon
migration period, the *Mabinogion* is argued to offer useful pointers regard-
ing the primal mythology of this (Celtic) divine couple. In this way, the
pre-Roman mother and her consort are argued to have persisted, slumber-
ing but undying, from the Iron Age to the medieval period and even, via
the sacred vessel (*hwicce*) after which Yeates argues the early medieval
Hwicce people were named, to have inspired the Grail Quest.

Interesting though Yeates's work is, the underlying premise concerning the primal 'mother' is questionable. First, the goddess at the heart of Yeates's books is most widely attested in Roman Gaul and is likely to have been brought to Britain, by soldiers or civilians following the Roman conquest, a possibility that is not properly explored in his work. Second, this goddess emerges into history – via Romano-Celtic sculpture and epigraphy – as the consort of a god who is unquestionably the Roman Mercury, a process which may have changed the identity – and meaning – of the deity in the eyes of her devotees. In my view it is very likely that 'Rosmerta' was once, as Yeates argues, a powerful Iron Age deity, but the goddess as we see her through the Roman lens – the consort of Mercury – is the product of a post-conquest dialogue, represented with classical attributes (the *patera*, the *cornucopia*) and sometimes with a bucket or barrel, none of which can easily be regarded as markers of a localised pre-Roman character and role.[81] Moreover, Rosmerta's marriage defined (or redefined) her – not necessarily in the sense that she was subjugated to the will of Rome, or to the Roman pantheon (although that is one possible reading of her post-conquest status), but in the sense that we can only now understand her in terms of her Romano-Celtic persona. For Yeates, however, the profound theological upheavals that accompanied the Roman and Saxon incursions into south-western Britain appear to amount to little more than sticking plaster, easily ripped away to reveal the undying, Celtic goddess beneath.

Interpreting the Forty Metre Structure, Navan Fort

Navan Fort is one of the well-known series of Irish 'Royal' sites and has long been equated with Emain Macha, the home of King Conchobar, whose exploits are recounted in the Ulster Cycle. Chris Lynn has written up for publication the series of excavations undertaken at Navan by Dudley Waterman from 1961–71.[82] Here, Lynn outlines the complex sequence of activities which occurred at Navan Site B, the large mound inside the complex. The first substantive feature here was a 45m diameter ditched enclosure, dating to the Bronze Age. Subsequently, a series of 'figure of eight' buildings was constructed, one after another, on the same spot. The last of these ten phases of rebuilding extended into the Iron Age, taking place after 250 BC. A change then occurred. A 40m diameter timber structure was erected, comprising four concentric rings of oak posts surrounding a central post (the latter felled, as we now know, thanks to dendrochronology, in 95/4 BC: Fig. 3). Very soon after its construction, the interior of the structure was infilled with stones, creating a massive cairn. The concentric rings of timbers were then deliberately set on fire,
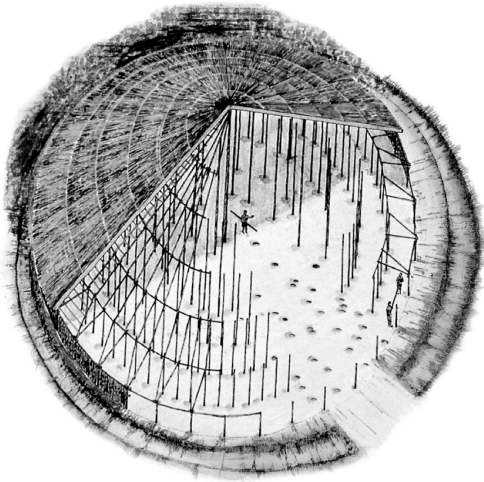
FIG. 3   A suggested reconstruction of the Forty Metre Structure.
Reproduced with the permission of the NIEA.

leaving a series of post-hole voids among the cairn stones. Finally an earth mound was constructed over the burnt remains.

How can we interpret this fascinating sequence of clearly ritual-ised activities? Lynn has produced numerous papers on the Forty Metre Structure, synthesising these in a book published in 2003.[83] Herein, Lynn is careful to acknowledge post-Jackson scepticism regarding the value of the Ulster Cycle as a window on the Iron Age, asserting at the outset of his two interpretative chapters that 'I plan now to try to develop an understanding of the ceremonial structures at Navan without reference to the early literary material because of the problems associated with its interpretation'. Instead, his aim is to approach Navan 'as if there was no tradition about what may have happened in Emain Macha or pre-literate Ireland generally'.[84] Yet Lynn's interpretative framework is based entirely on textual sources, fusing Caesar's account of eve-of-conquest Iron Age Gaul with data from the Irish insular tradition. The Navan mound, Lynn suggests, was constructed in a series of stages that seem to provide a monu-mental analogy with the 'wickerman' rite described by Julius Caesar in his account of Gaul. In this passage (*De Bello Gallico* 6.16.4-5) Caesar refers to a method of human sacrifice involving the construction of immense figures (*simulacra*), woven from twigs or wicker (*vimen*), which were filled with living men and set on fire. This is an intriguing suggestion, which draws on a near-contemporaneous description of ritual practice in Iron Age Gaul,

made by one of only a handful of Roman commentators on pre-conquest Celtic religion to have first-hand knowledge of the peoples he describes.

Even if we leave to one side the debate surrounding Caesar's debt to earlier classical ethnographers – and the likelihood that this section of his text was borrowed from the Greek ethnographer Posidonius, who wrote an account of Hellenised southern Gaul in *c*.120 BC[85] – it is very difficult to accept that Caesar's text might shed light on the Forty Metre Structure. First, Caesar's wicker constructions were clearly not buildings; the Latin word *simulacra* is generally employed in a mimetic, anthropomorphic sense, and Caesar explicitly refers to the *simulacra* as having *membra*, limbs. Second, these constructions were also filled with living men, whilst the Forty Metre Structure produced a single human clavicle: hardly substantive evidence for human sacrifice. Third, Caesar's account makes no reference to the use of stones, or indeed a mound, both of which appear to be essential components of the ritual sequence at Navan. Finally, later Iron Age archaeological evidence for human remains in association with deliberately infilled and burnt timber structures is lacking, both in Gaul and elsewhere in Ireland.

In seeking to plug these evident gaps, Lynn turns to the insular Irish literary tradition, which associates otherworldly royal courts with mounds, and places burning timber *bruiden* (hostels) at kingly sites, including Emain Macha. These tales were of course written down centuries after the Forty Metre Structure was created and describe Emain Macha as a royal fort and military headquarters – a reading entirely at variance with the Iron Age archaeological evidence, as Lynn himself admits. Yet by allying the medieval insular tales with Caesar's account of the 'wickerman' sacrifice (which points – although archaeological evidence does not – to the ritualised burning of timber structures in Iron Age Gaul), Lynn is able to conclude that the Forty Metre Structure 'was a model of the ill-fated hostels glimpsed in the later tales'.

In justifying his appeal to the insular tradition, Lynn suggests that:

Navan was completed in the 90s BC, (only) 500 or 600 years before the time when solid traditions about the site can be said to have emerged from the mists of prehistory. It is a long time, but not as long as a millennium. It is perhaps a period over which some traditions concerning the original significance of the place may have survived. As far as we know there was no major invasion of the area, displacement of population or imposition of a new language that might have caused a sudden break in the builders' tradition.[86]

This is the kind of sentiment that was once commonplace in Eurocentric writing about the indigenous peoples of pre-colonial southern Africa and Australasia; prior to colonisation, it was argued, these were peoples literally without history, time moved at a geological pace, the bottom rung of the evolutionary ladder was barely scaled and change was externally, not internally, driven. Whilst such notions have long been discredited elsewhere, they appear to persist for 'Celtic' Ireland. It is difficult to understand why; Ireland may have escaped conquest by Rome but, as several scholars have argued, the Roman presence in neighbouring Britain may have had a significant impact on Late Iron Age social organisation. And Ireland did of course Christianise, a development whose impact – not least on the redactors of the Ulster Cycle – is briefly mentioned, but only in order to underscore the extent to which, in Lynn's view, Iron Age ideologies persisted in the Early Christian period. As Newman and others have argued, however, the Irish royal sites have extraordinarily long and complex biographies, having been used and interpreted by successive generations both before and after the arrival of Christianity.[87] The Emain Macha of the Ulster Cycle owes its identity to all these processes, yet for Lynn, as for Yeates, an underlying strand of Iron Age belief and practice can be isolated therein by identifying perceived resonances not with contemporary archaeological data, but with a body of Classical writing generated in the context of Rome's conquest of Ireland's Iron Age neighbours.

In his work on the religion of the *Dobunni* (who escaped neither Roman nor Saxon incursions), Stephen Yeates makes strikingly similar claims for Celtic continuity, suggesting that the Roman conquest and the 'alleged' Saxon migration into the Costwold Severn area in fact brought minimal social and political upheaval. It is reasonable to suggest that many archaeologists today would take issue with the first, at least, of these claims, and with the underlying belief – which stretches as far back as the work of Francis Haverfield, the father of Romano-British archaeology[88] – that 'Celtic' culture persisted in a latent fashion, in backwaters little touched by Rome and amongst those who lacked incentives to 'Romanise'. Whatever interpretation one places on the Gloucestershire Rosmerta, it would surely be a mistake to regard her Romano-Celtic cult in such a passive light.

Diachronic homologies: the Viennese approach to 'Celtic' comparison

In the last ten years, Raimund Karl has produced a series of interdisciplinary papers arguing that we need to put the 'Celtic' back into the Iron Age, and attempting to rehabilitate insular medieval texts as a source on information on Iron Age social structure and material culture. In the course of

these studies he has addressed themes ranging from druids to chariots, and from fosterage to hillforts.[89] I have followed Karl's work with considerable interest because it involves diachronic comparison – a methodology which also informs my own work on Romano-Celtic religion, as outlined above. I have no quarrel at all with comparative analysis, obviously, but I strongly believe that comparison – like that more common staple of archaeological inference, ethnographic analogy – can offer real insight into the past only when societies are compared on the basis of demonstrable, contextual and discursive similarities.[90] I remain unconvinced that this is the case with Karl's work on the Celtic past.

Karl's method, which he has dubbed the Viennese approach to Celtic studies, is to create a frame of reference enabling comparison between data of two or more different types. This is done by developing ostensibly independent models based on each data set (for example, archaeological evidence for Iron Age chariots compared with medieval textual accounts of chariots[91] or archaeological models of Iron Age social organisation set against social organisation as depicted in the Ulster Cycle)[92] and comparing these models in order to isolate shared terminology and similar practices. The resultant similarities are neither random coincidences nor even analogies, Karl argues, because 'where we can find shared terminology, and shared practices, a common, indigenous origin for both . . . is likely'.[93] Similarity, in short, boils down to homology, and to understand the Celts is really an exercise in genetics. It would be interesting to speculate how far this rationale might extend, for example, to modern, transnational cultures who share a belief in Jesus, speak English and drink Coca-Cola, or indeed to the multitude of peoples absorbed by the expanding Roman Republic and early Empire who venerated Mercury, knew some Latin, and ate olive oil. Karl argues, notwithstanding, that points of similarity reflect (and reveal) a shared (Celtic) ancestry and open up new, multi-directional interpretational possibilities for scholars, with each point of similarity providing new information on the 'Celtic' topic in question. Quite what is revealed by points of divergence and dissonance remains unspoken.

It is particularly interesting, in my view, that the *temporal* distance between comparative datasets – a point which effectively obliges 'Viennese' scholars to engage with diachronic comparison – is side-stepped, yet again, by the familiar appeal to homology or (in Karl's most recent work) by suggesting that analogy and homology are largely interchangeable, when it comes to the Celts.[94] Yet as Karl himself notes, medieval texts 'are *not* a "window on the Iron Age", but are medieval creative constructs that need to be understood in their own – medieval – context.'[95]

Precisely for this reason, it is difficult to ascertain how, if at all, these accounts might amplify, or indeed qualify, archaeological interpretation of Iron Age sites and finds. Ultimately, as Karl himself notes in discussing 'common Celtic' terms for fosterage, 'this shared terminology does not necessarily tell us much'.[96] The archaeological questioning of the value of medieval texts and proto-Celtic philology that Karl dubs 'Celtoscepticism' lies here, not in the unwillingness of archaeologists to look beyond excavated data, nor in ideological positioning and disciplinary divides, but in genuine uncertainty as to what the supposed homologies identified by Karl tell us about the Iron Age itself.

Our ancestors, the Celts, again?

The common denominator in all the recent case studies considered above is an appeal to a cultural continuity that is perceived to be genetically based. For Yeates, the Hwicce are not Anglo-Saxon arrivistes but *direct* descendants of the Dobunni, maintaining the worship of an ancestral deity. For Lynn, similarly, medieval accounts of Emain Macha shed light on Iron Age practice at Navan because they codify a centuries-old ancestral tradition, uninterrupted by colonisation or inward migration. Karl's various studies also arrive at exactly the same point: similarities identifiable in the insular literary tradition and the Iron Age archaeological record are homologies, reflecting a shared past.

This line of argument might best be conceived as a family tree, wherein three quite different data sets – Romano-Celtic and later archaeological data from the 'Celtic' heartlands; Classical commentaries concerning a variety of 'Celtic' peoples conquered by Rome; and the insular Medieval literature of Ireland and Wales – are all the progeny of common Celtic parents. Moreover, cultural change is conceived to move at so glacial a pace for all Celtic peoples – whatever their level of interaction with incoming colonists or migrants, and with new religions, languages and legal systems – that the age of the children, relative to their parents and each other, is largely immaterial, and each child can therefore shed equal, retrospective, light on its own forebears. We return full circle, in short, to the notion of timeless Celticity with which this paper began.

Raimund Karl has suggested that 'Celtosceptic' archaeologists wilfully ignore non-archaeological data, including philology and documentary sources of all kinds, and wrongly privilege one source of information – the excavated past – over all others.[97] But the case is more complex than Karl suggests. For most archaeologists, interpretation is undeniably a matter

of working outwards from our excavated data (our starting point), adding layers of contextualised inference as we go, like ripples on a pond. Where we have a contemporary written record too (that is, where we can undertake fully fledged historical archaeology) archaeologists are more than willing to walk out into the textual hinterland beyond their own sites and finds; texts are artefacts, and artefacts are texts, and the two are employed in tandem.[98] Where we have no contemporary written record at our disposal (or where that record is particularly poor or inadequate) we build inference diachronically, either by employing ethnographic analogy (the only route open to prehistorians) or by undertaking comparative contextual analysis.

The first point to make here with reference to the Iron Age is that the pre-conquest 'Celts' were non-literate, and at the point of contact with Rome emerge not into 'history' but into a highly contextualised *proto*history; their lifeways and their religion documented, and interpreted, by a conquering power.[99] The insular Irish medieval literature is not the product of a comparable context. This brings me to my second point; for most archaeologists, diachronic comparison – the choice of what to compare – requires explicit justification. For example, the hunting strategies of the recent and modern Inuit may justifiably be argued to shed analogical insight on the hunting strategies of Mesolithic peoples in Scandinavia, because both groups have lived in similar cold environments, hunting similar animals. Or one may argue, as I have done elsewhere, that studies of the material world of eighteenth-century north American slaves might usefully inform work on the material strategies of their counterparts in the Roman world because the discourse of slavery was very similar in both contexts.[100] To come back to medieval textual sources, the issue for many archaeologists remains simply that the often-repeated appeal to a common ancestry – which remains the default position, as outlined above, in arguing that these sources offering a 'window' on Iron Age society – is antithetical to carefully justified diachronic comparison. Ancestry, ethnicity, culture and time collapse into each other in the world of the Celts, leaving archaeologists none the wiser as to whether *specific* points of apparent similarly in the philological, literary and material record are the result of latent cultural persistence, active resistance, modern wishful thinking or other factors entirely. Above all, this approach drastically underplays the impact of centuries of culture contact and culture change on the beliefs and practices of the 'Celts': a way of thinking that, for the 'post-colonial' generation of Iron Age and Roman archaeologists, is now unsupportable.

It should, I hope, be obvious from the above critique that the archaeology of Iron Age and Romano-Celtic religion sits at a crossroads today; on the one hand radically transformed by a series of interrelated paradigm shifts, yet on the other yearning, nonetheless, for the comfort zone provided by the entrenched notion of timeless, ancestral Celticity. Where we go from here remains to be seen, but Ian Armit's recently published study on Iron Age headhunting provides some clues as to the direction of archaeological travel.[101] Whilst the Irish and Welsh insular accounts of head-taking make their seemingly inevitable appearance here,[102] Armit's overall argument is framed with reference to anthropological theory, rejects any notion of a unified 'Celtic' cult of the head, and sets out the case that whilst the human head might have played a role in Iron Age cosmologies across Europe, it was only in Southern France that the head became central to formalised religious expression. Armit's diverse, fragmented communities stand at a considerable conceptual remove from the 'Celts'– and their homogenised religion – with whom this contribution began.

Notes

1. John Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths and Inventions* (Stroud, 2003), p. 214.
2. The Iron Age in Britain extended from *c.*600 BC to the Roman Conquest. Britain became part of the Roman Empire under Claudius, in AD 43.
3. K. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge, 1964).
4. Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 6.13–15.
5. Key volumes here include J. Atkinson, I. Banks and J. O'Sullivan (eds), *Nationalism and Archaeology* (Glasgow, 1996); M. Diaz-Andreu and T. Champion (eds), *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe* (London, 1995) and P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C. Gamble (eds), *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (London, 1996), all of which incorporate chapters on Celtic identities in Britain, Ireland and Europe.
6. M. Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (Montreal, 1978); M. Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (London, 1992).
7. N. Merriman, 'Value and motivation in prehistory: the evidence for "Celtic" spirit', in I. Hodder (ed.), *The Archaeology of Contextual Meanings* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 111–16.
8. A. Fitzpatrick, 'Celtic Iron Age Europe: The theoretical basis', in P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C. Gamble (eds), *Cultural Identity and Archaeology: The Construction of European Communities* (London, 1996), pp. 238–55.
9. See A. Fitzpatrick, '"Celtic (Iron Age) Religion" – Traditional and Timeless?', *Scottish Archaeological Review*, 8 (1991), 123–8, for a review of four 1980s publications on Celtic religion.
10. A sense of the passions raised here can best be gained by reading R. Megaw and V. Megaw, 'Ancient Celts and Modern Ethnicity', *Antiquity*, 70 (1996),

175–81, and R. Megaw and V. Megaw, 'The Mechanism of (Celtic) Dreams: A Partial Response to our Critics', *Antiquity*, 72 (1998) 432–35, with Collis, *The Celts*, pp. 195–204.

[11] D. Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art* (Oxford, 2007).

[12] For Harding's own – somewhat ambiguously stated – views on the viability of the term 'Celtic art' see ibid., pp. 3–9.

[13] See here the collection of papers in D. Garrow, C. Gosden and J. D. Hill (eds), *Rethinking Celtic Art* (Oxford, 2008).

[14] M. Giles, 'Seeing red: The aesthetics of martial objects in the British Iron Age', in Garrow, Gosden and Hill (eds), *Rethinking Celtic Art*, pp. 59–77.

[15] See in particular the so-called 'Celtic excursus' in *De Bello Gallico* 6.11–20.

[16] The most recent and substantive of these is Collis, *The Celts.* See pp. 133–94 for an excellent overview both of the nature of the Iron Age archaeological data and the impact of new understandings on the interpretation of the material record.

[17] S. James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London, 1999).

[18] See B. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Britain* (London, 1995), pp. 19–26 and 76–97 for a digest of Cunliffe's approach to social structure in Iron Age Britain. For a more detailed analysis, see the most recent (fourth) edition of Cunliffe's monumental *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (London, 2005) and particularly the sections on warfare and religion, both heavily reliant on continental classical documentary sources.

[19] J. D. Hill, 'How should we study Iron Age societies and hillforts?', in J. D. Hill and C. G. Cumberbatch (eds), *Different Iron Ages: Studies on the Iron Age in Temperate Europe* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 45–66.

[20] R. Karl, 'Random Coincidences or: The Return of the Celtic to Iron Age Britain', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 74 (2008), 69–78.

[21] See S. James, 'A bloodless past: The pacification of Early Iron Age Britain', in C. Haselgrove and R. Pope (eds), *The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 160–73, and Giles, 'Seeing red'.

[22] For a recent review of Roman writing on the Druids, see J. Webster, 'At the End of the World: Druidic and Other Revitalization Movements in Post-conquest Gaul and Britain', *Britannia*, 30 (1999), 1–20.

[23] T. J. Painter, 'Chemical and microbiological aspects of the preservation process in Sphagnum peat', in R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (eds), *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* (London, 1995), pp. 88–99.

[24] For a recent summary of work on Lindow Man, see M. Giles, 'Iron Age Bog Bodies of North-Western Europe: Representing the Dead', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 16, 1 (2009), 75–101.

[25] Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 6.17–18. Druids are first associated with mistletoe in Pliny's first century AD account of Gallic Druids cutting the plant with a golden sickle (Pliny, *Natural History* 16.249). On Lindow Man in the context of insular and Medieval Celtic tradition, see A. Ross, 'Lindow man and the Celtic tradition', in I. M. Stead, J. B. Bourke and D. Brothwell (eds), *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog* (London, 1986), pp. 162–9. It is suggested herein that the

triple death, the final meal of barley 'cake' and the mistletoe pollen point to a ritual sacrifice, with druidic supervision.

[26] Anne Ross and Don Robins, *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince* (London, 1989). Ross's more recent *Druids* (Stroud, 1999) does not perpetuate the claim of druidic status for Lindow Man.

[27] Phillip Crummy et al., *Stanway; An Elite Burial Site at Camulodunum*, Britannia Monograph Series, 24 (London, 2007).

[28] R. Jackson, in Crummy et al., *Stanway*, p. 250; an interpretation based on a reference to (wooden) divining rods in Tacitus' *Germania* 10.

[29] On calendars see A. Fitzpatrick, 'Night and Day: The Symbolism of Astral Signs on later Iron Age Anthropomorphic Short Swords', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 62 (1996), 373–98. On the possible druidic associations of spoons and headdresses in British Iron Age inhumations, see A. Fitzpatrick, 'Druids: Towards an archaeology', in C. Gosden , H. Hamerow, P. de Jersey and G. Lock (eds), *Communities and Connections: Essays in Honour of Barry Cunliffe* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 287–315. On Iron Age and early Roman images of druids and druidic badges of office see M. Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids* (New York, 1997), pp. 55–69. The model tree from Manching is discussed by F. Maier, 'Eiche und Efeu: Zu einer Rekonstruktion des Kultbäumchens von Manching', *Germania*, 79, 2 (2001), 297–307. On the Mšecké Žehrovice head, see N. Venclová,'The Venerable Bede, Druidic Tonsure and Archaeology', *Antiquity*, 76 (2002), 458–71.

[30] Fitzpatrick, 'Druids: Towards an archaeology', p. 307.

[31] For recent collections of papers on British Iron Age archaeology, see A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove (eds), *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies* (Oxford, 1997); B. Bevan (ed.), *Northern Exposure: Interpretative Devolution in the Iron Ages of Britain*, Leicester Archaeology Monograph, 4 (Leicester, 1999); Haselgrove and Pope, *The Earlier Iron Age*, and C. Haselgrove and T. Moore (eds), *The Later Iron Age in Britain and Beyond* (Oxford, 2007).

[32] P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1983), p. 122.

[33] On the immortality of the soul, see for example Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.14.5; Diodorus, *Bibliotheke*, 5.28.6; and Strabo *Geography*, 4.4.4.

[34] An interesting discussion of the transition from excarnation to cremation in the south-east of Britain can be found in G. Carr, 'Excarnation to cremation: Continuity and change?', in Haselgrove and Moore (eds), *The Later Iron Age*, pp. 444–53.

[35] An example here is Yarnton; see G. Hey, A. Bayliss and A. Boyle, 'Iron Age Inhumation Burials at Yarnton, Oxfordshire', *Antiquity*, 73 (1999), 551–62.

[36] M. Parker Pearson, 'Food, Sex and Death: Cosmologies in the British Iron Age with Particular Reference to East Yorkshire', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 9 (1999), 43–69.

[37] B. Bevan 'The landscape context of the Iron Age square-barrow burials, East Yorkshire', in J. Downes and T. Pollard (eds), *The Loved Body's Corruption* (Glasgow, 1999), pp. 69–93.

38 J. Rylatt and B. Bevan, 'Realigning the world: Pit alignments and their land-scape context', in Haselgrove and Moore (eds), *The Later Iron Age*, pp. 219–34.

39 J. D. Hill, 'The end of one kind of body and the beginning of another kind of body? Toilet instruments and "Romanization" in southern England during the first century AD', in Gwilt and Haselgrove (eds), *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies*, pp. 96–107.

40 A. Fitzpatrick, *Archaeological Excavations on the Route of the A27 Westhampnett Bypass, West Sussex: Volume 2: The Cemeteries*, Wessex Archaeological Report, 12 (Salisbury, 1992).

41 Crummy et al., *Stanway*.

42 J. D. Hill, *Ritual and Rubbish in the Iron Age of Wessex*, BAR British Series, 242 (Oxford, 1995).

43 Tim Allen and George Lambrick, *Gravelley Guy: Excavations at Stanton Harcourt* (Oxford, 2004).

44 For a recent review see A. King, 'Romano-Celtic temples in Britain: Gallic influence or indigenous development', in R. Haeussler and A. C. King (eds), *Continuity and Innovation in Roman Religion in the Roman West*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl. Ser., 67 (Portsmouth, RI, 2007), pp. 13–18.

45 See J. Downes, 'The shrine at Cadbury Castle: Belief enshrined', in Gwilt and Haselgrove (eds), *Reconstructing Iron Age Societies*, pp. 145–52.

46 For summaries see Jean-Louis Brunaux, *The Celtic Gauls: Gods, Rites and Sanctuaries* (London, 1988) and J. Webster, 'Sanctuaries and sacred places', in M. Green (ed.), *The Celtic World* (London, 1995), pp. 445–64.

47 H. G. Bandi, 'Mormont: Glanz und Elend eines helvetischen Heiligtums', *Helvetia Archeologia*, 39, 153 (2008), 18–26.

48 Archaeological work on *Viereckschanzen* is summarised in O. Büchsenschütz and L. Olivier (eds), *Les Viereckschanzen et les Enceintes Quadrilatérals en Europe Celtique* (Paris, 1989).

49 B. Lambot and P. Méniel, 'Le centre communautaire et culturel du village Gaulois d'Acy-Romance dans son contexte régional', in S. Verger (ed.), *Rites et espaces en pays celte et méditerranéen; Étude comparée à partir du sanctuaire d›Acy-Romance* (Rome, 2000), pp. 7–139.

50 R. Bradley, 'A life less ordinary: The ritualization of the domestic sphere in later prehistoric Europe', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 13, 1 (2003), 5–23.

51 N. Venclová, 'Celtic Shrines in Central Europe: A Sceptical Approach', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 12 (1993), 55–66.

52 See in particular Ross's seminal *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London, 1967). Key studies amongst many by Miranda Green include *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester, 1986); *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London, 1989); *Celtic Art: Reading the Messages* (London, 1996); and *An Archaeology of Images* (London, 2004). Note that Green has published as Aldhouse-Green since 1999.

53 See Green, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 36–8, for a clear expression of this viewpoint.

54 The torc-wearing figures from central France are discussed in D. Vuaillat, P. Leger, O. Hernandez and S. du Vigneau (eds), *Aspects des Ages du Fer en Berry*

et Limousin (Limoges, 1989). For the sculptural tradition at the mouth of the Rhone see F. Benoit, *L'art primitive méditerranéen de la Vallée du Rhône* (Aix-en-Provence, 1969) and M. Dietler and M. Py, 'The Warrior of Lattes: An Iron Age Statue Discovered in Mediterranean France', *Antiquity*, 77, 298 (2003), 780–95.

55 Studies here include J. Webster and N. Cooper (eds), *Roman Imperialism: Post Colonial Perspectives*, Leicester Archaeology Monographs, 1 (Leicester, 1996); D. Mattingly (ed.), *Dialogues in Roman Imperialism*, JRA Suppl. Ser., 23 (Portsmouth, RI, 1997); Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen: The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London, 2000); and David Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton, 2011).

56 M. Aldhouse-Green, 'Poles apart? Perceptions of gender in Gallo-British cult iconography', in S. Scott and J. Webster (eds), *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 95–118.

57 Aldhouse-Green, *Archaeology of Images*, p. 217.

58 Green, *Gods of the Celts*, p. 133.

59 Aldhouse-Green, *Archaeology of Images*, p. 227: with reference to P. van der Veer, 'Syncretism, multiculturalism and the discourse of tolerance', in C. Stewart and R. Shaw (eds), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London, 1994), pp. 196–215.

60 See, for example, the summary by Gerald Wait, *Ritual and Religion in Iron Age Britain*, BAR British Series, 149 (Oxford, 1985), p. 17.

61 Aldhouse-Green, *Archaeology of Images*, p. 228.

62 M. Henig, '*Ita intellexit numine inductus tuo* – some personal interpretations of deity in Roman religion', in M. Henig and A. King (eds), *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Monograph 8 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 159–64 (x).

63 See H. Vesner, *M. Annaei Lucanni Commenta Bernensia* (Teubner, 1869), 32 under 1.445.

64 J. Webster, '*Interpretatio*: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods', *Britannia,* 26 (1995), 153–62 (154).

65 See for example Green, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 38–8.

66 Webster, '*Interpretatio*', pp. 157–61.

67 For an introductory overview see C. Stewart, 'Creolization: History, ethnography, theory', in C. Stewart (ed.), *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek, 2007), pp. 1–25.

68 J. Webster, 'Creolizing the Roman Provinces' *American Journal of Archaeology,* 105 (2001), 209–25, with J. Webster, 'Art as resistance and negotiation', in Scott and Webster (eds), *Provincial Art,* pp. 24–51.

69 On the Virgin of Guadalupe see W. Rowe and V. Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London, 1991), pp. 19–24 and S. Kellogg, '*Hegemony out of Conquest:* The First Two Centuries of Spanish Rule in Central Mexico', *Radical History Review*, 53 (1992), 27–46. Studies of Santeria include G. Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World* (Bloomington, 1993) and D. Darién (ed.), *Beyond Slavery: The Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America* (Lanham, 2007).

[70] Green, *Gods of the Celts*, p. 173.

[71] M. Green, 'God in Man's Image: Thoughts on the Genesis and Affiliations of some Romano–British cult Imagery', *Britannia*, 29 (1998), 17–30; Webster, 'Art as resistance'.

[72] P.-M. Duval, *Les dieux de la Gaul* (Paris, 1976), p. 50.

[73] For a comprehensive summary of examples of the divine marriage see Green, *Symbol and Image*, pp. 45–73.

[74] J. de Vries, *La religion des celtes* (Paris, 1948), could only point to twenty-six inscriptions naming Epona.

[75] R. Karl, 'Celtoscepticism: A convenient excuse for ignoring non-archaeological evidence?', in E. Sauer (ed.), *Archaeology and Ancient History: Breaking Down the Boundaries* (London, 2004), pp. 185–99.

[76] S. Yeates, *The Tribe of Witches: The Religion of the Dobunni and Hwicce* (Oxford, 2008) and *A Dreaming for the Witches: A Recreation of the Dobunni Primal Myth* (Oxford, 2009).

[77] For an insightful review of the former, see P. Wells, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 19, 2 (2009), 283–4.

[78] Yeates, *Dreaming for the Witches*, pp. 56–77.

[79] Ibid., p. 76: 'there was a process at work in which certain aspects of older religions survived; this process occurs due to *interpretatio*.'

[80] Ibid., p. 163.

[81] Yeates's reading of the Gloucestershire mother is dependent upon her bucket or barrel attribute – the 'sacred vessel' – which, he argues, later gave rise to the tribal name Hwicce. But barrels and pots are a common attribute of Romano-Celtic divide couples in Gaul too; see here Green, *Symbol and Image*, pp. 69–72.

[82] D. Waterman (ed. C. Lynn), *Excavations at Navan Fort 1961–71* (Belfast, 1997).

[83] Chris Lynn, *Navan Fort Archaeology and Myth* (Bray, 2003).

[84] Lynn, *Navan Fort*, p. 107.

[85] See J. J. Tierney 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *PRIA*, 60, (1960), 189–275 (215), on the possible debt of both this passage and Strabo, *Geography*, 4.4–5, to Posidonius.

[86] Lynn, *Navan Fort*, p. 120.

[87] See, for example, C. Newman, 'Reflections on the Making of a "Royal Site" in Early Ireland', *World Archaeology*, 30, 1 (1998), 127–41.

[88] Haverfield explicitly viewed the continuity of aspects of Celtic religious belief into the Roman period as the passive result of the 'latent persistence' of indigenous superstition, rather than as active opposition: F. Haverfield, *The Romanization of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1923), p. 22.

[89] The studies examined in the present contribution are: R. Karl, 'Iron Age Chariots and Medieval Texts: A Step too Far in "Breaking Down Boundaries"?', *e-Keltoi*, 5 (2003) (*http://www4.uwm.edu/celtic/ekeltoi/volumes/vol5/5_1/karl_5_1.html*); Karl, 'Celtoscepticism'; R. Karl, 'Master and Apprentice, Knight and Squire: Education in the Celtic Iron Age', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 24, 3 (2005), 255–71; Karl, 'Random Coincidences'.

[90] See J. Webster, 'Less Beloved: Roman Archaeology, Slavery and the Failure to Compare', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 15, 2 (2008), 102–49.

[91] Karl, 'Iron Age Chariots'.

[92] Karl, 'Random Coincidences'.

[93] Karl, 'Master and Apprentice', p. 257.

[94] This is the paradoxical position adopted in Karl, 'Random coincidences': see especially p. 76.

[95] Ibid., p. 70.

[96] Karl, 'Master and Apprentice', p. 257.

[97] Karl, 'Celtoscepticism', p. 187, posits a 'general dislike of non-archaeological evidence amongst Celtosceptics'.

[98] Historical archaeologists, like ethnographers and folklorists, study the *lifeways* of their subjects. The total lifeway of group of people, as John Vlach puts it, includes 'their verbal, material and spiritual forms of expression'; see John Vlach, *By the Work of their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Charlottesville, 1991), p. xv.

[99] This has long been recognised by archaeologists – see for example T. Champion, 'Written sources and the study of the European Iron Age', in T. C. Champion and J. V. S. Megaw (eds), *Settlement and Society: Aspects of Western European Prehistory in the First Millennium BC* (Leicester, 1985), pp. 9–22 – and lies at the heart of the 'post-colonial' turn in Roman Archaeology. For a case study on Roman writing on 'Celtic warrior society' see J. Webster, 'Ethnographic Barbarity: Imperialist Discourse and the Archaeology of "Celtic" Society', in Webster and Cooper, *Roman Imperialism*, pp. 111–23.

[100] Webster, 'Less Beloved', p. 113.

[101] Ian Armit, *Headhunting and the Body in Iron Age Europe* (Cambridge, 2012).

[102] Armit, *Headhunting*, pp. 29–32.

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Although it has long been acknowledged that the early Irish literary corpus preserves both pre-Christian and Christian elements, the challenges involved in the understanding of these different strata have not been subjected to critical examination. This volume draws attention to the importance of reconsidering the relationship between religion and mythology, as well as the concept of 'Celtic religion' itself. When scholars are attempting to construct the so-called 'Celtic' belief system, what counts as 'religion'? Or, when labelling something as 'religion' as opposed to 'mythology', what do these entities entail? This volume is the first interdisciplinary collection of articles which critically reevaluates the methodological challenges of the study of 'Celtic religion'; the authors are eminent scholars in the field of Celtic Studies representing the disciplines of theology, literary studies, history, law and archaeology, and the book is a significant contribution to the present scholarly debate concerning the pre-Christian elements in early medieval source materials.

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