

Timna Néill (*Corp. Gen.* 131-2) are obvious Irish parallels. Indeed, detailed biblical echoes in the former have been pointed out by Ó Corráin (1985, 54). The political dimension of genealogy will figure prominently in chapter ten and is sufficiently commonplace (Vansina, 1973, 153-4) to make independent convergence a reasonable explanation for some of the above agreements, although their cumulative evidence probably points to significant biblical influence. However that may be, it can be confidently asserted that the monastic compilers of extant early Irish genealogical material would have been fully aware of these resonances with the Bible.

Thanks to the pioneering work of Ó Corráin and others, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Bible, particularly the legal sections of the Pentateuch, exercised a major influence upon both the theoretical framework and the actual contents of even the earliest Irish law tracts, whether canon or secular, in Latin or the vernacular. These important insights will be discussed more fully in chapter four and do not, of course, preclude significant pre-Christian elements. That said, it is indisputable that Old Irish law was consciously linked with that of the Old Testament, even to the extent of asserting that pre-Christian Irish law was fundamentally Mosaic and had been learned from the horse's mouth, so to speak, by Fénus Farsaid's (see 4 below) pupil Cai Caínbrethach ('fair-judging'), who subsequently came to Ireland with the sons of Mil (Ó Corráin, 1987, 288-94).

Early Irish gnomic tracts such as the *Audacht Morainn* (Kelly, 1976) and *Tecosca Cormaic* have obvious affinities with Old Testament wisdom literature as represented by Proverbs, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus above all. A pointed style based upon a constant and varied interplay between parallelism and antithesis, formulaic repetition and variation, is noticeable in both literatures, but such features seem to be almost inevitable in an aphoristic genre and the Irish examples fall short of, say, Proverbs' frequent stylistic intricacy. Since, moreover, similarities in content are not unduly striking overall, a concern with early medieval Irish *mores* appears to have outweighed slavish imitation of the Bible in the constitution and development of an Irish genre that nonetheless contains obvious Christian elements (ch. 5, 12). Regardless of whether an originally pagan form has been assimilated to Christianity or biblical and patristic models have been rather freely adapted to Irish conditions, there can be little doubt that monastic *literati* drew pertinent parallels between their own gnomic literature and that of the Bible. It is, for instance, hardly a coincidence that *Tecosca Cormaic*, which is cast in a question and answer form probably derived from the monastic schoolroom (Charles-Edwards and Kelly, 1983, 25), represents the illustrious king of Tara and Ireland, Cormac mac Airt, giving sectionalised practical and moral instructions to his son just as the great king of Jerusalem and Israel, Solomon, is envisaged addressing various chapters (2, 3, 5, 6 etc.) of his Proverbs to his son. A particular branch of early Irish aphoristic literature is represented by substantial compilations of Triads and Heptads. Plausible biblical models can be found here and there in the wisdom literature, for instance the heptad in Proverbs 6:16-19 and the triads in Ecclesiasticus 25:1-2 (cf. Prov. 25:3 and 26:3 and the series of 'triads' expanded to tetrads in 30:18-31), but the genre certainly developed a momentum of its own in early Christian Ireland.

The prominence of kings in early Irish sagas is obviously first and foremost a native feature reflecting the central role of monarchy in pre-Norman Irish society and politics, but the fact remains that this and other ingredients were almost bound

to remind medieval writers steeped in the Bible of the gripping narrative in 1-4 Kings (in the Septuagint and Vulgate, but 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings in the Hebrew Bible, English Authorized Version etc.). For instance, the constant conflict in the so-called 'Ulster Cycle' between the Ulidian kingdom with its capital at Emain Machae and the other provinces of Ireland led by the monarchs of Cruachu in Connacht was eminently compatible with the recurrent hostilities between the kings of Judah and those of the tribally more diverse Israel after the division of the kingdom between Rehoboam and Jereboam in 1/3 Kings, 12.

3. Moreover, Irish monastic saga-writers were presumably as prone as their Norse counterparts (see ch. 1, 8) to adapt biblical and other Christian elements to their narratives. This possibility will be further explored below and in subsequent chapters, and a single example must suffice here. In literary descriptions of the *bruidneá* or hostels of certain idealized mythical representatives of the socially important early Irish class of *bringaid* or hospitallers emphasis is laid upon the dispensation of food to all visitors from cauldrons in which meat was boiled (McCone, 1984c, 2-7). Thus the first section of *Scéla Muicce Moic Da Tho* states of such an establishment: "the man who went along the road used to put the fork into the cauldron and, whatever he brought up from the first thrust, that is what he would eat. If, however, he did not bring up anything from the first visit, he would not get another". Since this theme of quite literal pot-luck is scarcely consonant with the Old Irish laws' meticulous detailing of the type and amounts of food due to guests in strict accordance with their status, it comes as little surprise that later versions of this motif should attempt to resolve the anomaly. Thus the Middle Irish *Scéla na Fir Flatha* (par. 10) gives king Cormac a magic cauldron of this type capable of awarding different cuts of meat to the thrusters according to the niceties of rank, and this modification presumably underlies the rule in the saga *Bruiden Da Choca* (par. 31) that "just one thrust of his fork used to be given to each person, and there only comes his proper food out of that". At all events there is a strong *prima facie* case for an external origin of what looks like the original version in *Scéla Muicce*, and 1 Sam./Kgs. 2:13-4 duly tells of the custom that "whoever had sacrificed a victim, the priest's servant used to come while the pieces of meat were being hoiled, and he used to have a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he used to put it into the cauldron or vessel or pot or kettle, and everything that the fork brought up the priest used to take for himself". The similarities here are such that the obvious explanation is a direct borrowing from the Bible with such minor adaptations as the new context demanded.

The function of this motif may be largely ornamental, but more could well be involved in view of the New Testament's evident penchant for references to the Old in order to shape essential typological messages. As Lampe puts it, "at almost every point the evangelists, often by means of subtle hints and allusions, convey their belief that what God had accomplished in Christ was analogous to his great acts recorded in the Scriptures" (1975, 157). Moreover, David Howlett has now demonstrated that at the very dawn of Irish letters St. Patrick made highly effective use of just such a technique of significant biblical allusion in his extant writings (1989). Accordingly, if the interpretation of *Scéla Muicce* as a moral satire offered below (see ch. 3, 11) is valid, the introductory scriptural allusion could well be a deliberate cue evoking the apposite biblical frame narrative concerning the gross misconduct of

Eli's sons and its dire consequences. Be that as it may, there are undoubted cases where the recognition of biblical allusions and their context is crucial to the overall significance of a narrative episode. It has long been realized that early Irish saga and hagiography, whether in Latin or the vernacular, have much in common, and Muirchú's seventh-century *Life of Patrick* in Latin is a good early example of what might be termed "saintly epic in the Irish mode" (McCone, 1984b, 33-8). Scriptural quotation and reference play a major and hitherto insufficiently appreciated role in Muirchú's narrative, and a brief discussion here should help to identify factors of potential relevance to topics dealt with in later chapters.

The great set piece in Muirchú I 16-21 (Bieler, 1979) bringing Patrick and his small band of followers into conflict with and ultimate triumph over the Irish establishment under the king of Tara, Lóegaire mac Néill, revolves round a great pagan feast explicitly likened (I 15, 2) to that given by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in chapter three of Daniel. Although there is nothing approaching slavish imitation, there are some evidently deliberate verbal echoes of the book of Daniel. For instance, the functionaries assembled (*congregati*: Muir. I 15, 2, Dan. 3:3) comprise kings (Muir. *reges*, Dan. *tyranni*), satraps, chiefs, nobles and princes (*satrapae, duces, optimates, principes*) in both, although the pagan monarch's "magistrates and judges" (*magistratus et iudices*) are significantly omitted by Muirchú lest this detract from his deliberate depiction of a representative of this class as an early convert to Christianity (see ch. 1, 11). Muirchú's three main categories of stubbornly pagan *des dáno* are termed *magi, incantatores* and *aruspices* in conformity with Daniel 5:11 (cf. 2:27 etc.), and his subjects' salutation to Lóegaire, *rex in aeternum vive* "king, live forever" (Muir. I 15, 5), is identical to that applied to oriental potentates in Daniel (3:9, 5:10, 6:6, 6:21). Nebuchadnezzar's great feast provides the setting for the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to worship the golden statue, the king's attempt to kill them in the fiery furnace and their miraculous escape with God's help. Later in the book a similar sequence of events occurs when Daniel's insistence upon worshipping God in defiance of king Darius' edict leads to his being cast into the lions' den, miraculous rescue from which brings about the king's conversion (Dan. 6). Patrick likewise defies the king's pagan rite by celebrating Easter (Muir. I 15, 3-6), escapes an attempt upon his life through miraculous divine intervention (18, 6-8) and finally converts the monarch (21). These biblical resonances help to endow Tara with an opulent imperial atmosphere highly congenial to Muirchú's political concerns (I 10, 1, cf. McCone, 1982, 137), while simultaneously highlighting the struggle against entrenched paganism and the ability of a faithful few to triumph against huge odds with God's support.

However, Lóegaire is also likened by Muirchú to a more insidious New Testament sovereign. After his druids' (*magi*) warnings about the threat posed by Patrick and the new religion *his ergo auditis turbatus est rex Loigaire valde ut olim Erodis et omnis civitas Temoria cum eo* "having heard these things, then, king Lóegaire was exceedingly disturbed, like Herod once, and all the city of Tara with him" (I 16, 1). This is an explicit echo of king Herod's reaction to the enquiries of the three *magi* in Matthew 2:3: *audiens autem Herodes rex turbatus est et omnis Hierosolyma cum illo*. Thus Tara is now equated allusively with Jerusalem, and the comparison with Herod introduces Lóegaire's deceitful side, feigning submission to Patrick while really intending to kill him. After Daniel had expounded his dream Nebuchadnezzar fell down and adored him (Dan. 2:46, *tunc rex Nabuchodonosor cecidit in faciem*

suam et Danihelum adoravit) but a similar action by Lóegaire after divine intervention to thwart his first effort to kill Patrick is mere pretence (Muir, I 18, 1-6: *et venit rex timore coactus et flexit genua coram sancto et finxit adorare quem nolebat*), just like Herod's expressed wish to adore Christ (Matth. 2:8: *ut et ego veniens adorem eum*). Like the holy family, Patrick and his followers are forthwith enabled by God to avoid the king's unwelcome attentions.

The wider implications of these analogies between Tara and Jerusalem, Lóegaire and Herod, Patrick and Christ (explicitly at Muir, I 19, 2) will be discussed in subsequent chapters along with further examples of Muirchú's pointed use of scriptural allusion. Meanwhile the foregoing should give some indication of Muirchú's varied narrative exploitation of Scripture. Direct quotations, whether attributed (e.g. I 17, 2) or not (e.g. I 19, 4 = Gen. 15:6 and Rom. 4:3), and explicit references such as those to Nebuchadnezzar and Herod are employed on occasion, but an appreciation of their biblical setting is liable to endow the narrative with a further complex of associations relevant to its effect and message. For present purposes particular interest attaches to Muirchú's suggestive recreation of the underlying structure and message of certain biblical narratives by means of rather different surface details. A further example of this is Patrick's final contest with Lóegaire's pagan druid, who was burned in the green half of a wooden house whereas Patrick's disciple remained safe in the dry half (I 20, 9-13). Despite considerable differences of detail and a lack of obvious verbal echoes, this episode reproduces the core underlying Elijah's celebrated confrontation in God's name with the prophets of Baal before the backsliding king Ahab (1/3 Kgs. 18:17f.): whereas Baal failed to light the dry wood under his prophets' offering, God ignited the wet wood under Elijah's and the enemy were duly destroyed. All in all, there can be little doubt that the Bible provided a major and often subtle stimulus to Muirchú's fertile imagination.

Similar possibilities should be reckoned with in other branches of early Irish literature, including vernacular saga, and the second part of *Tochmarc Étaíne* may be worth considering in this respect. This tells how Ailill Ánguba became infatuated with his elder brother Eochaid's wife Étaín, fell sick, was tended by Étaín and arranged to make love with her. Love-sickness of this type is a sufficiently common saga motif to provide a plausible explanation of this narrative in terms of native origins, but there are also striking parallels with 2 Sam./Kgs. 13, in which David's son Ammon feigned sickness for love of Tamar, sister of his elder half-brother Absalom, and raped her as she tended him. This episode could well have been adapted by a the monastic writer of *Tochmarc Étaíne* to his own narrative purposes, which required a slight alteration in relations between the principals and the frustration of Ailill's lust by Midir. Proof can hardly be supplied in such a case, but a creative interplay of native and biblical models does look like a distinct possibility.

Considerations such as the above, which could probably be applied to rather more genres than the major ones just treated, chime in well with citations (see ch. 1, 11) from the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchus Már* and *Míadsleхта* to the effect that Scripture and ecclesiastical Latin scholarship dominated the hybrid system of learning generated by the assimilation of poets, jurists and historians with presumed pre-Christian roots to a rising clerical and monastic cultural establishment. It is, of course, highly likely that originally pagan elements found their way into this amalgam, but certainly not as part of a deliberate policy to preserve manifestations of a paganism detested by the Church and her associates (see ch. 9,

8-14). Learned monastic interest in the pre-Christian past can be far more credibly ascribed to a desire to control and exploit its social and political potential with the help of perceived biblical parallels capable of being enhanced or even fabricated as occasion demanded. The corollary would, of course, be that the literate learned classes are unlikely to have treated pagan and oral raw material with anything like the tender respect so essential to the nativist conception of much early Irish literature.

4. A dualistic approach to that literature has encouraged a tendency to treat its Latin and Old or Middle Irish components in relative isolation from each other, but the truth is that virtually all early Irish literary genres were to a greater or lesser extent bilingual and that as a rule the predominance of Latin increases the further back one goes. Thus the earliest annalistic, genealogical and hagiographical material was compiled in Latin, the vernacular intruding increasingly as time went on. Inevitably, there were transitional phases in which Latin and Irish were freely intermingled, often in one and the same sentence, episode or entry. For instance, about a quarter of the roughly ninth-century Old Irish *Life of Brigit* is written in Latin, and there is no shortage of mixed passages in annals and genealogies. Similarly, one finds edificatory material in Latin, the vernacular or both, a particularly fine bilingual example being the seventh-century Cambrai Homily with alternating blocks of Latin and Old Irish (*Thes.* II 244-7). The glossing of a Latin text in Old Irish is by definition a bilingual undertaking, but the major eighth-century collections of Würzburg and Milan contain an abundance of Latin and mixed glosses too, and a similar linguistic mixture characterizes texts like the St. Gall charms against sickness, the mostly testamentary *Additamenta* in the Book of Armagh and the instructions in the Stowe Missal. A more detailed discussion of such phenomena with appropriate examples will be found elsewhere (McConc, 1989, 76-80). The deep interpenetration of secular and canon law in texts emanating from early medieval Ireland's monastic law schools has been alluded to earlier, and the admittedly fairly sparse examples of Latin citations in the former have been recently collected by Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen (1984, 430-8).

In the genres most closely associated with the *filid*, namely prose or prosimetrum sagas, various kinds of verse, linguistic and poetic treatises, the vernacular is overwhelmingly preponderant, as one might expect, but it is noticeable that snatches of Latin sometimes occur, particularly in various rubrics associated with the text. For example, verse or prose speech may be introduced by *dixit* 'said' or the like, the beginning or end of a text or episode may be marked by *incipit* or *fnit* respectively, and the scribe of the Book of Leinster *Táin* concluded his massive vernacular undertaking with a striking Latin coda expressing some reservations about its validity. Even treatises such as the *Ériu* 13 tract and *Mittelirische Verslehren*, which were clearly written either by or for poets or both, are not afraid to use Latin here and there. Thus various sections of the *Verslehren* are marked by *incipit* and *fnit*. Text II introduces "the twelve parts of poetry" in Latin in Laud 610 (*duodecim partes poeticae hae sunt*) but in Irish in Ballymote (.xii. *ernáil na filideachta arnso sis*) (Thurneysen, 1891, 31), and *Ériu* 13, 36.17-9, backs the view that "the three divisions of voice are size, firmness and softness" (*at é teora ranna gotha .i. med, sonairte, 7 maoithe*) by quoting Cicero as source in Latin: *ut dixit Cicero, figura vocis in tres partes dividitur, in magnitudinem, in firmitatem, et in mollitudinem.*

The Middle Irish etymological tract *Cóir Anmann* or 'The Fitness of Names' obviously owes much to the methodology of the late sixth- and early seventh-century Spanish bishop Isidore of Seville, and is quite prepared to base its inventive explanations on Latin, or even such bits of Greek as Isidore or the like had explained, in addition to Irish. For instance, the Munster dynastic name *Éoganacht* and its eponymous ancestor *Éogan* are given the following etymologies: "Éogan his name from procreation, i.e. *éogenesis*, i.e. good birth (*gein maith*) on account of its *éó*, i.e. *eu*, i.e. *bona* (cf. Isidore, *Etym.* VI ii 43). *Genesis* indeed is the *generatio* of Éogan (cf. *Etym.* VI ii 3). Éogan then is *bona generatio* in its analysis . . . From this comes *Éoganacht*, i.e. *bona ucht[io]*, i.e. a good action (*acht maith*) of his to free the men of Ireland from famine. *Éoganacht*, i.e. *Éogan-icht*, i.e. the mercy (*icht*) of Éogan on the men of Ireland, or *Éogan-necht*, i.e. the offspring (*necht*) of Éogan, i.e. *necht* offspring (*clann*), i.e. the seven Éoganachta are the offspring of Éogan" (par. 37). When confronted with the need for a rhyme with an otherwise intractable Latin saint's name, the obviously monastic poet who produced the Old Irish *Féire Oengusso* around 800 A.D. has recourse to Latin, as in the striking verse *togairm Fintain choraig/ post contemptum mundi/ hi féil chaín co llaindi/ Viruli, Iucundi* (l'eb. 21). Verses wholly or predominantly in Latin also occur in basically Old Irish hymns ascribed to Colmán, Ultán and Broccán (*Thes.* II 302, 303.5, 326.8-9, 349.13-4). These phenomena indicate not only monastically educated authors familiar with Latin but also readers and reciters expected to have similar backgrounds and attainments.

This intermingling of Latin and the vernacular to varying extents is, of course, precisely what one would expect to find in the literary products of a monastically oriented learned class. As argued towards the end of chapter one, the most esteemed members of this were Latin scholars, jurists, historians and poets apparently bound together by literacy and a core educational syllabus on to which their various specializations were grafted. This state of affairs would presumably have been almost ideal for promoting a free and creative interplay between native and ecclesiastical material, Latin and the vernacular. Some evidence has already been presented to suggest that intensive cross-fertilization of this kind lies at the heart of most extant medieval Irish literature, and this should accumulate as the book progresses. The present chapter will continue to concentrate upon certain aspects of narrative genre, style and technique that may have a bearing upon the central question.

In this and other biblically oriented cultures any theory of a language's origins was bound to be based upon the Tower of Babel episode in Genesis 11. Isidore's doctrine in the opening sections of the ninth book of his *Etymologies* is that Hebrew was the original language of mankind, that this, Latin and Greek are the three sacred languages by virtue of being used on the cross and as such are superior to the remainder of the seventy two or three, including Irish (IX ii 103), recognised by him as the product of God's confusion of mankind at the tower. This account lies at the heart of the Old Irish canonical section of the poets' manual, *Auricept na nÉces*, but the status of Irish was greatly enhanced by a neat twist. This represented the eponymous ancestor of the *Féni* or Irish, Fénius Farsaid, as staying on after the dispersal at the tower, located in Egypt, and being asked by the seventy-two pupils of his school to extract a language for their use. The text goes on to claim with wonderful audacity that "what was best then of every language and what was wisest and

finest was cut out into Irish" (Ahlqvist, 1982, 97-8), which is thus represented as a virtual reconstitution of mankind's original pre-Babel idiom. Thus a doctrine inspired by Isidore and the Bible asserted a privileged position for Irish ahead even of Isidore's three sacred tongues, and obviously provided a charter for its written cultivation alongside one of these, Latin, in the monasteries. After all, if the Bible could be composed in two different languages, why should Irish monastic literature not be similarly bilingual?

5. In most early Indo-European literatures such as those of India, Greece and Rome there is almost always a clear divide between prose and verse texts, whereas certain types of early Irish narrative are quite prone to intersperse prose narrative and dialogue with verse put into the mouths of the characters themselves. There is no better illustration of the exotic preferences of modern nativism than the theory of Indian parallels and Indo-European origins which was advanced by Myles Dillon (1947, 9-11) on the basis of earlier work by Windisch and has remained largely unchallenged since. India's oldest bodies of verse and prose literature are respectively the often highly allusive poems of the Rigveda and the somewhat later prosaic ritual prescriptions of the Brāhmanas. The former sometimes take the form of dialogues and the latter occasionally rise to a simple prose tale explaining the origin of a ritual. It is hardly surprising that the Brāhmanas should on occasion cite authoritative Vedic verses, and a couple of instances where such verses from an allusive Rigvedic strophic dialogue are inserted into plain Brahmanic prose have been held to mirror an ancient narrative technique in which difficult verse alternated with explanatory prose. At first, we are told, only the verse was written down, the prose being recited orally, but later this too came to be added in one or two cases. Whether in prose or verse, allusive literature requires a knowledge of the necessary background for its effect, but this is a far cry from positing simultaneous explanation, so to speak. After all, what is the point of writing a long and metrically elaborate allusive poem only to have it interrupted by banal prose explanations after every single verse? Are we to suppose, for instance, that the recitation of the often mythically allusive odes of classical poets like Pindar or Horace, not to mention Classical Modern Irish bardic poetry, was disrupted by prose explanations whenever the going got difficult? Such procedures would presumably have been both aesthetically intolerable and insulting to the audience's intelligence.

Nevertheless, this extraordinary speculation about the origins of a most atypical mixture of prose and verse in a couple of brief Indian learned narratives from the first millennium B.C. has formed the basis of a comparison with certain types of Irish saga from the early Christian period, and this in turn has spawned a theory of mixed prose and verse sagas among the non-literate Indo-Europeans some three millenia or more B.C. The grounds for this far-reaching inference are flimsy, to say the least, and an explanation in terms of factors nearer home would be more convincing.

We may begin by noting that two of the most influential works of the early Middle Ages in Western Europe, the *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* of Martianus Capella and Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, are cast in so-called *prosimetrum* form with alternating verse and prose from the author's own pen. It was, of course, realised that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, was partly in prose and partly in verse, and Isidore's teaching was that various types of poetry originated with the Hebrews, were imitated by the Greeks and spread thence to the

Romans. For example, in *Etymologiae* I xxxix 11 he claims that Moses' great canticle in chapter 32 of Deuteronomy was the first epic poem and Job the first elegiac. Moreover, in VI ii 12 Isidore points out that Job is a verse dialogue with a narrative prose introduction and conclusion. The studding of plain prose narrative with poetic utterances put into the mouths of various characters is a prominent Old Testament trait, and the mannered parallelisms, antitheses and so on of Hebrew poetry are often still apparent in Latin translation, a number of such poetic utterances in the Vulgate's narrative being clearly recognised as canticles. Chapters 36-9 of Isaiah and the opening of St. Luke's Gospel are good examples of simple prose narrative generously interlarded with speech and dialogue, some of this prosaic enough but a major part unmistakably poetic in tone. This recurrent biblical pattern seems an eminently plausible starting point for the development of mixed prose and verse narratives by early Irish monks whose lives revolved round scriptural study and a daily sequence of divine offices in which prayers and lessons alternated with the singing of psalms, hymns and canticles.

Poetic speech in early Irish narrative is usually introduced by the *as/bairt* or *dixit* X formula or trivial variants thereof. In verse dialogue forms of *fris-gair* 'replies' may also appear, as in *ro:reccair Fergus* (*Táin*: 244), and combinations like *fris-gair in tres fer co n-epert* 'the third man replied and said' (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 326) are, of course, possible. A third major category comprises versions of the formula 'X (then) sang a/this (poem) (to Y) (and said)', e.g. *ro:chachain in tres fer laid dá* (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 303), *cachain Fergus in laid so síis* (*Táin*: 272) or *conid and ro:chan Fergus inso co n-ebairt* (*Táin*: 2392). As far as I can see, these types are very similar to the main biblical modes of introducing poetic utterance within prose narrative. Thus the canticle-ridden beginning of Luke's Gospel repeatedly uses the *dixit* or *ait* X formula or a trivial variant, the highly poetic dialogue in Job is usually punctuated by the formula *respondens autem X dixit*, and two great Old Testament canticles, the song of Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea and the song of Deborah, are introduced as follows at Exodus 15:15 and Judges 5:1 respectively: *tunc cecinit Moses et filii Israel carmen hoc Domino et dixerunt* and *cecinerunt Debhora et Barac filius Abinoem in die illo dicentes*. It is, of course, possible that these similarities are coincidental, given that poetic statements are being introduced throughout, but the resemblance is fairly striking and seems more likely to have arisen through imitation of familiar biblical models by the monastic authors of early Irish sagas. Whatever their origins, these phrasological parallels with the Bible would hardly have been lost on such writers, and are eminently compatible with the hypothesis that early Christian Irish prosimetric narrative was initially inspired by biblical and liturgical patterns before acquiring a momentum of its own.

6. The bulk of extant Old and Middle Irish verse is based on syllabic rhythms typically generated by sequences, often stanzas, of lines with a regular syllable count overall and a specific syllabic configuration for the final word, a particularly common type consisting of quatrains of heptasyllabic lines with a disyllabic cadence ($7^s 7^s 7^s 7^s$) or an arrangement whereby the end of the second line regularly has one or rarely two syllables more than that of the previous line ($7^s 7^{s+1} 7^s 7^{s+1}$). The main ornament of such poetry is rhyme between a given pair or pairs of final words, whether in contiguous lines (first with second, third with fourth) or alternate ones (second with fourth, sometimes also first with third). A rougher end-rhyme known

as consonance may supplement a full rhyme between the finals of two other lines, and there may be the further ornament of full rhymes involving internal words or of alliterations between contiguous stressed words. Early Irish rhyming syllabic metres have been described and illustrated by Gerard Murphy (1961b, 26-90), who argues cogently that the central features of rhyme and regular syllable count derive ultimately from early medieval Latin religious poetry (*ibid.* 8-25), a hypothesis recently corroborated by David Sproule's revolutionary identification of a transitional "concentration on rhyme in the final syllable" (1987, 198). This implies "a phase in Irish metrics when the attention of the poet, in creating rhyme, worked from the final syllable backwards, rather than from the stressed syllable forwards", a system easy enough to derive "from Latin rhyme, which 'was normally only in an unstressed last syllable'" (*ibid.*, 199).

In Old and Middle Irish literature this kind of poetry seems steadily to have supplanted a different type based upon stress rhythm with alliteration as the key ornament. The most regular and readily recognisable form consists of short lines or cola with two or sometimes three primary stresses and runs of binding alliteration between the last stressed word of one colon and the first stressed constituent of the next. A good example occurs in the striking episode of the saga *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* where king Conaire's son makes three attempts to dissuade three red horsemen from infringing his father's taboo by preceding him to Da Derga's hostel. The third horseman gives three doom-laden replies, the first of which conforms fully to this pattern (alliterations in boldface): *én a meic/ mór a scél/ scél ó bruidín/ béol long/ liaicher fern-gablach/ fian-galach ndogair, cned míscud/ mór bét/ bé-fínd fors(a):ndestetar/ deirg-indlid ár/ én a meic* "lo, o lad, great the tale, a tale from a hostel, an encounter of ships, a flashing of shields-and-spears, *fian*-valorous (and) woeful. Wound (and) curse [=/curse of wounds], great (the) misdeed, white-woman on whom have settled red-inlays of slaughter, lo, o lad" (par. 32, cf. *LU* 6790-2). Further examples are given by Murphy (1961b, 3-6).

As Carney has demonstrated with appropriate illustrations in a brilliant pioneering article on various types of accentual poetry and the transition to rhymed syllabic verse, the principle of stress count may be combined with syllable counting of the cadence or with rhyme and "as Irish poetry developed rhyme made continual inroads on the function of alliteration" (1971, 55). The trend towards assonance and rhyme is well illustrated by the two-stress poem on the Éoganacht ascribed to Lucreaid mochu Chiara (*Corp. Gen.* 199-202). This has binding alliteration but is also arranged in quatrains with rhyme or occasionally mere consonance between the finals of the second and fourth two-stress cola. It uses both biblical and related 'invasion' genealogies (see above), and a rough date is indicated by the fact that it comes no further down than the mid-seventh-century Munster dynast Cú-cen-máthair. Here, however, an example will be provided by the following rather crude jingle from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (par. 157, cf. *LU* 7950-1), which seems to be based upon seven two-stress cola paired to give three long and leave a final short line. The second line repeats the first with substitution of an alliterating synonym *fó* for *maith*. There is full rhyme between *Cécht* in the second and *écht* in the fourth line, a rough progressive assonance between *dig*, *ríg* and *-gní* in the three final cola, but virtually no binding alliteration.

Maith fer/ Mac Cécht "Good fellow Mac Cécht,
Fó fer/ Mac Cécht "Fine fellow Mac Cécht.

Do:beir dig/ con:oi rig He brings a drink that saves a king.

Do:gní écht He performs a feat."

It is to be noted that the introduction of rhyme tends to periodize the structure into larger articulated units.

Because of a comparative shortage of monosyllables and the accentuation of polysyllables on the antepenultimate or penultimate syllable later Latin accentual poetry tended strongly towards a di- or trisyllabic cadence. This is the obvious model for Irish stress metres with a preference for such cadences, a good example being the hymn to Patrick analysed by Murphy (1961b, 4; *Thes. II* 322; but see Breatnach, 1981, for an alternative analysis). This seems to be based on two- and three-stress units ending, with two probable exceptions (*mór gein* and *Dá len*), on a di- or trisyllable, and contains plenty of linking alliterations. One might compare the short alliterative poem in *Comport Con Culainn* (par. 7) with two- and three-stress lines of 6^s 6^s 7^{s+2} 7^s 8^s and 7^s syllables. Intensification of two prominent features of such comparatively free structures seems to have produced the well attested regularization of a three-stress line with trisyllabic cadence. A good heavily alliterative example is provided by *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* par. 93 (*LU* 7270-80, cf. the much longer but less regular poem of this type in par. 100, *LU* 7370-7428):

Trechenn tri Iothucht/ Fomórach (8^s)

nud- ndóib duine/ ndúinegein (7^s)

fora ndreich duaicni/ -dfulathar (8^s)

roda- ler lond/ -láthrastar. (7^s)

Lánchenn tri lorg/ línfiacloch (7^s)

ó urbél co úae/ rechteaire. (8^s)

Míad muintir cech/ véiglonnaig (8^s)

claidbilib tri shing/ selgatur (7^s)

ro:seli ar borg/ mhúiredach (7^s)

bruidne Da Derga/ turcho:mruc. (8^s)

"Triple head, three abdomens of the Fomorians, from whom neither human form (nor) human birth may be removed on their strange countenance which the raging sea has arranged for them. A full head of three full-toothed rows from front lip to ear (as) steward [i.e. carver of food?]. Fine the following of each (man) of a hundred exploits, with swords they shall hack [modal pret., or "swords shall hack" without emendation] through the host that has descended on the noisy stronghold in the gathering of Da Derga's hostel." The apparent insistence upon a first half-line at least as long as and preferably longer than the second, while avoiding words of three or more syllables, made for a line at least six or, usually, seven syllables long and unlikely to exceed eight or nine. From this it would have been but a small step to regularization of the heptasyllabic type (7^s) and a concomitant reduction in alliteration on occasion.

Calvert Watkins has suggested that such unrhymed heptasyllabic verse is too widespread in gnomic legal poetry to reflect ecclesiastical Latin influence and so is more likely to derive with considerable manipulation from an Indo-European syllabic type best preserved in Vedic Sanskrit (1963, 212-20). The mounting evidence referred to above for extensive ecclesiastical influence upon even the earliest Old Irish law tracts invalidates a major step in this argument, which is further vitiated by its failure to account for a substantial body of material with a regular stress pattern but an irregular syllable count. Indeed, most of the valuable examples given

by Watkins are quite heavily alliterative and can be just as plausibly analysed in terms of two or three stresses with trisyllabic cadence, the preponderance of the latter increasing still further if we accept Carney's (1971, 25) suggestion that initial proclitics sometimes do duty for a fully stressed word. As indicated above, the obvious overall explanation is that a native accentual and alliterative measure incorporated a syllabically regular cadence under the influence of accentual Latin hymnody and that this resulted in pressure towards isosyllabism alongside a two- or three-stress count, the former gradually displacing the latter as the basic rhythmical principle. Meanwhile the ornaments of assonance and rhyme were being developed from late Latin models and gradually restricting the role of alliteration. The convergence of these major innovations, both attested at least as early as the seventh century and apparently introduced by the Church as Murphy suggested, finally produced the rhyming syllabic metres dominant throughout Old, Middle and early Modern Irish literature.

As Murphy remarks, "in Irish syllabic verse, and also often in the older poetry, the last word or syllable of the *larcomarc* ('final stanza') echoes the first word or syllable of the first line of the poem. A poem in which this echo does not occur is said to lack a *dúrad* ('conclusion')" (1961b, 43). The three stressed or otherwise rhetorically structured poetic utterances of the three red horsemen cited above and below exemplify a still more extensive correspondence, the same line (*én a meic*) being repeated both at the beginning and the end of each passage, as can also happen sometimes in rhyming syllabic verse (e.g. *Scéla Cano* ll. 73-84). Alter refers to "the general fondness of ancient Hebrew writers in all genres for so-called envelope structures (in which the conclusion somehow echoes terms or whole phrases from the beginning)" (Alter and Kermode, 1987, 621), and this is a feature able to survive translation. A particularly obvious instance is provided by the identical first and last verses of Psalm 8, and the significance of this was well appreciated by an Old Irish glossator: "as it is with praise and admiration of the Lord that this psalm begins, it is likewise, moreover, that it is concluded, even as the poets (*filid*) do among us" (Ml. 26^o10, cf. Murphy, 1961b, 43-4). It thus seems more than likely that this important feature of much medieval Irish poetry from at least the eighth century onwards is rooted in a tendency of biblical poetry often still apparent in the Latin version.

This emphasis upon a likely broad evolutionary outline should not obscure the fact that the old continued to exist alongside and to interact with the new. Consequently early Irish verse is exceedingly varied despite the steadily expanding use of rhyming syllabic metres. Broadly speaking, stress count, syllable count or combinations of the two determine its various rhythms and these in turn may be ornamented by alliteration, assonance/rhyme or both. There is, of course, a tendency for stress patterns to correlate with alliteration and for syllabic structures to correlate with rhyme and consonance, but this is far from absolute.

7. The interruption of more or less plain prose narrative or exposition by metrical or otherwise stylised and ornamented passages usually represented as speech is common enough in vernacular sagas and legal tracts. Authoritative legal maxims of this kind are sometimes ascribed to a particular individual, as in the case of *arachain Cenn Fáelad díchetai do chórus ecuisa a n-us;imjber* "Cenn Fáelad recites an incantation on the proper arrangement of the Church when he said" after the prose

introduction of *Bretha Nemed* (*CIH* 2212.3-4), but are more usually introduced by a non-specific *ara:chain féinechus* "the law recites it" or the like. Authoritative Old Testament law is, of course, similarly enunciated by God or his prophet Moses from Exodus to Deuteronomy. More or less regular metrical structures, including rhyming syllabic poems in the sagas, account for a significant proportion of this heightened material but a great deal of it cannot be reduced to such definable accentual or syllabic patterns, at least in the present state of knowledge. As Breatnach judiciously puts it, "Old Irish texts appear in three forms: prose, rhyming syllabic verse and *rosca*. The simplest definition of *rosca* is that it is neither of the other two. Much work remains to be done on the various sub-categories of *rosca*, but at present we can distinguish three main types: the first consists of syllabically regular lines with a fixed cadence and alliteration, but without rhyme; the second of lines with regular number of stressed words per line and alliteration; while the third type shows no apparent regular syllabic or stress pattern, but is heavily alliterative. Furthermore, *rosca* is characterised by various linguistic features, usually referred to as 'Archaic Irish', which are not found in prose, but are found in Old Irish rhyming syllabic verse" (1984, 452-3).

The various possibilities can be illustrated from the famous episode of the three red horsemen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. As remarked above, the third of these utters three *laid* 'lays' of this kind, each beginning *én a meic, mór a scél* and duly marked .r. in the margin of *LU*. The first has already been analysed as a regular two-stress structure with binding alliteration broken only once. The second, however, seems not to go beyond a few random alliterating pairs: *én a meic, mór a scél, gerthiut gorthiut robruth rig eslabrue trí doilthiut fer forsaid for dúim, dúm nón-bair, én a meic* "lo, o lad, great the tale, there scars you, there scorches you the great ardour of a generous king through figments of wise men on retinue, a retinue of nine, lo, o lad" (par. 34, *LU* 6879-80). The first part of the third passage is hardly marked by alliteration and seems rather to depend on a modified chiasmic repetition (attribute [adj.] - head noun - verb, verb - head noun - attribute [gen.] + preposition phrase) plus a simple semantic contrast ('alive - dead'), but the conclusion is a perfectly regular two-stress poem with linking alliteration: *én a meic, mór a scél, seitha eich imarriadam, imriudam eochu Duind Teiscoraig a sídaib; ciáminn bí aminn mairb/ móra nirdi/ airdibí sáegail/ sásad fiach/ Yothad (m)hran/ bresal airlig/ airlachtad fáebuir/ fernafib/ tul-bochtaib/ tráthalb íar fuin, / én a meic* "lo, o lad, great the tale, tired the horses which we ride about on, we ride about on the horses of Dond Teiscoraich from the síd-mounds. Though we are alive, we are dead. Great (the) signs, cutting off of life, satisfying of ravens, sustenance of crows, strife of slaughter, sharpening (?) of cutting edge on shields with broken bosses in (the) hours after sunset" (par. 35, *LU* 6806-9). In this particular instance, then, the overall structure resembles a sandwich with a somewhat non-descript filling symmetrically framed by regular blocks.

After stating that "already in the older prose sagas, especially the longer ones, there are scattered pieces in poetic form or elevated language" Thurneysen described the unrhymed non-strophic type as follows: "(ii) bears the name *retoric* from the Latin adverb *retorice*. Such passages are marked in some manuscripts by an .r. written in the margin. It is presumably through a misunderstanding of this r. that later texts then sometimes call them *rosca* or *roscaid* 'maxims'. They consist mostly of very short sentences or phrases, often bound together by alliteration, in extremely

figurative language with unusual word order, rare words or forms of words and loose syntactic structure. Sometimes a certain parallelism of the constituents seems to be intended, so that they recall the Church sequences. As the name *retoric* indicates, it is the highly rhetorical language particularly valued in late Latin that served as a model for their composers" (1921, 54).

This hypothesis of major Latin influence did not prevent Thurneysen from indulging in further unprovable speculation about possible oral and native origins in ecstatic mantic utterance (*ibid.* 55). Encouraged by Bergin's impressive argument for the survival of archaic final verbs in such material (1938), the subsequent trend was to discount the possibility of ecclesiastical Latin influence and treat it as the debris of largely pagan oral poetry later grafted more or less mechanically onto written prose texts. Dissenting from this view, Carney pointed out that a fairly long composition of this kind at the end of the early saga *Aided Chonchobair* was not only thoroughly Christian but also a major and integral constituent of the extant tale. In consequence "nativist scholars would do well to reflect upon the fact that this Christian chronologist sat down and deliberately composed the difficult, obscure, and archaic-seeming rhetoric which Conchobar was supposed to have uttered when he heard of the Crucifixion. From this it would emerge that we can never assume that merely because rhetorics contain linguistic archaisms they are older in point of composition or 'writing down' than the text in which they are incorporated" (1955, 298).

Binchy countered this with the claim that "those of us who hold what Carney calls 'nativist' views and look on 'rhetorics' as being of native and pre-literate origin' do not regard the composition of them as abruptly ceasing with the adoption of Christianity. Indeed what must be the longest text of this kind, the *Bretha Nemed*, includes a lengthy interpolation on the status of the Church in Irish society. Obviously this was composed by a Christian jurist of the sixth or seventh century, but it must have been handed down by oral tradition for several generations before being committed to writing by a scribe who . . . can hardly have understood more than one word in three" (1972, 29). Thus "when fragments of this oral tradition were first committed to writing (perhaps as early as the sixth century), the *roscaid* had already been transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. Their language was from that period on congealed in ink, and we may assume that those who first wrote them down understood it reasonably well, unlike those who copied and recopied them much later" (*ibid.* 31). It therefore appears legitimate to ask: "does not all this apply, *mutatis mutandis* to the so-called 'rhetorics'? Like the legal *roscaid* they are suddenly interpolated in the middle of a straightforward Old Irish (or, as in later recensions of a saga, Middle Irish) text. That all or most of them were 'composed' at the same time as the rest of the text is in my view linguistically impossible; one might as well argue that the archaic passages quoted in the tracts of the *Senchas Mór*, often introduced by the words *amail aracain* (or *arindchain*) *fénechus* 'as the traditional law chants (it)', were the work of those who compiled the tracts of that celebrated law-book about the beginning of the eighth century" (*ibid.* 32).

Indeed one might, following Breatnach's recent demonstration that some *roscaid* in *Bretha Nemed* can be dated to the early eighth century, derives from a Latin original and is probably contemporary with a nearby passage virtually repeating its contents in plain Old Irish prose (1984). Moreover, the alliterative *roscaid* with prose

introduction entitled *Udacht Aithirne* or 'Testament of Aithirne' in the *Ériu* 13 tract on poets exhibits a "strongly trinitarian character" which "clearly shows it to be based upon the Athanasian creed" (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 420-30). The so-called 'pseudo-historical' prologue to the *Senchus Már*, which will figure prominently in chapter four, is built round a *roscaid* put into the mouth of the poet Dubhach maccu Lugair. This composition apparently consists of two- and three-stress cola with pretty regular binding alliteration, and displays various 'archaic' word-order patterns. However, it is integrally bound up and presumably contemporary with much of the surrounding prose, can hardly be earlier in date than about 700 A.D. by virtue of presupposing certain features of Muirchú's Life of Patrick, and is replete with biblical quotations and allusions (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 387-92; McCone, 1986c).

It can similarly be argued that the prophecies of the three red horsemen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* mesh fully with the imminent destruction to be unleashed by warlike *fián*-hands and with the view ascribing king Conaire's doom to revenge for his maternal grandsire Eochaid's devastation of the *síd*-mound of *Bri Léith* while attempting to recover his wife Étain alias *Bé-find* 'white-woman' (cf. *LU* 8010-9, 6741-4). This might seem unfair but is hardly unibiblical: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Leviticus 24:16, cf. Deut. 5:9). The Bible, of course, contains some famous apocalyptic equestrians with strikingly coloured mounts. Thus Zechariah "saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse (*vir ascendens super equum rufum*) . . . and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white (*equi rufi varii et albi*)" (1:8, cf. 6:2-4), but the second of the four horsemen of the apocalypse on their different coloured steeds in Revelation 6:4 seems particularly germane: "and there went out another horse that was red (*alius equus rufus*): and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another". Since this is precisely what the three reds (*tri deirg*) presage in this tale of the destruction of the appropriately named Da Derga's hostel, it seems unlikely that its monastic moulders were uninfluenced by the biblical symbolism. Indeed, the recalcitrant red horsemen are arguably a trio in prefiguration of Conaire's death at the hands of the three sons of Dúnd Désa otherwise known as "the three red hounds" (*tri rúad-choin*, cf. Knott, 1936, 72-4). Here too, then, *roscaid* or *retoiric* appears as part and parcel of an Old Irish prose narrative in an episode probably coloured by and perhaps even partially created from scriptural imagery.

Further evidence is thus steadily accumulating in support of Carney's insight, which in any case does not rule out the possibility that older material of this kind could on occasion be embedded in later prose texts. The present state of play is that *roscaid* or *retoiric* as such need be neither oral nor archaic, let alone pagan, and that the ball is firmly in the court of those seeking to claim at least a nucleus of ancient oral survivals in a genre known to us only in writing.

8. Prior to 1966 it was generally accepted that the term *rosca* or *roscaid* was restricted in the early period to poetically adorned legal maxims (cf. Binchy, 1972, 30-1) and that formally similar passages liable to be marked by *.r.* in the margin of saga manuscripts should be designated 'rhetorics' for the simple reason that on the few occasions when this *.r.* is expanded in the oldest saga manuscripts (e.g. *LU* 7438, *LL* 14385) *retoiric* is used, not *roscaid*. Mac Cana, however, then suggested that *.r.*

originated as an abbreviation of the native word despite the lack of early attestations, and accordingly made light of the testimony of *IU* and *LL*: "it is true that the word *retoric* is sometimes (though not very frequently) used of passages in 'rhetorical' language. It is also true that the scribe *M* of *IU* appears to equate *r.* with *retoric* . . . However, since there is no evidence of its use among native scholars before the eleventh century, one must seriously consider the possibility that the equation was made and the term *retoric* given currency by the *IU* scribe himself or by a recent monastic predecessor" (1966, 71). In view of the complete absence of extant saga manuscripts predating the beginning of the twelfth century this is a rather surprising *argumentum ex silentio*, but the article concludes with the frank admission regarding *retoric* that "the most serious objection to it is the unfounded implication of Latin origin for the *genre* which seems to be inseparable from it and which had so influenced Thurneysen and other scholars" (*ibid.*, 90). Since it is far from obvious that the assertion of unprovable pagan origins is any better founded, it seems preferable to use the only expansion of *r.* for which there is direct pre-Norman evidence and call these passages in sagas 'rhetorics'.

One should, moreover, not be too lightly dismissive of Thurneysen's considered opinion that this genre had, despite assumed pagan oral antecedents, undergone major Latin influence reflected in its name. Since there appear to be no convincing Latin models, the verse consisting of two- or three-stress cola linked by alliteration and reminiscent of old Germanic *Stabreim* poetry (cf. Murphy, 1961b, 6-7) has the best claim to be considered basically 'native'. It has already been suggested that this was the foundation upon which the catalyst of Latin models worked to trigger evolution towards syllable counting and rhyme, and it can be plausibly regarded as the main source of alliteration as a more general ornamental device. The Latin Bible seems not to have figured in the discussion so far but may help to account for some further stylistic tendencies of saga rhetoric and legal *roskad*, particularly the former.

The precise nature of Hebrew poetry is a notoriously vexed question and, in Alter's words, "at least one scholar, despairing of a coherent account of biblical verse, has contended that there was no distinct concept of formal versification in ancient Israel but merely a "continuum" of parallelistic rhetoric from prose to what we misleadingly call poetry" (Alter and Kermode, 1987, 612). Whatever its validity or otherwise in relation to the original text, this is the impression almost inevitably conveyed by Latin and other translations, and as such may have encouraged those less determinate types of *retoric* or *roskad* variously ranged in the interstices between standard prose and formal verse.

Alter notes that a common device in biblical poetry is "parallelism of meaning" ("that is, if the poet says "hearken" in the first verset, he is likely to say something like "listen" or "heed" in the second verset"), accompanied "sometimes by parallel syntactic patterns as well" or even by "double chiasm" (*ibid.* 612-3). Stylistic features like these fare well in Latin translation, e.g. *in tribulatione mea invocabo Dominum et ad Deum meum clamabo* "in my tribulation I shall invoke the Lord and to my God I shall call" (2 Sam./Kgs. 22:7), the chiasmic *fines inferi circumdederunt me, praevenerunt me laquei mortis* "the ropes of hell have encompassed me, there have preceded me the nooses of death" (*ibid.* 6) or the more repetitive *venerunt reges et pugnauerunt, pugnauerunt reges Chanaan in Thanach iuxta aquas Megiddo* "there came kings and fought, so fought the kings of Canaan in Tanach by the waters of Megiddo" (Jud. 5:19). So too do mannered antitheses

like *deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles* "he hath put down the lofty from their seat and hath raised up the lowly" (Luke 1:53).

Whether by coincidence, design or a combination of both, broadly psalmodic traits of this kind are not uncommon in Old Irish rhetorics despite frequent alliterative constraints, e.g. from the last two ostensibly 'pagan' *én a meic* poems cited earlier the chiasmic *scítha eich im;riudam, im;riadam eochu Duind Tetscoraig a sídaib* "tired the horses we ride, we ride the horses of Dond Tetscorach from the síd-mounds" (cf. Jud. 5:19 above), the antithetical *ciammin bí ammin mairb* "though we are alive, we are dead", the paired synonyms *gerthiut, gorthiut* "scars thee, scorches thee" (cf. *invocabo . . . clamabo* above), or the semantic and syntactic parallelism between *sásad fiach* "satisfying of ravens" and *fothad bran* "sustaining of crows". Also worth noting are plays upon words, e.g. the transformation of the conventional sartorial formula *dergindled óir* "red-inlay of gold" (e.g. *Scéla Cano* l. 32, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* l. 10) into the nearly homonymous but quite unexpected and correspondingly effective *dergindlid ár* "red-inlays of slaughter" disfiguring the contrasted *Bé-find* "White-woman" at the end of the first *én a meic* poem cited earlier. Fergus' rhetoric near the end of *Comperi Con Culainn* begins with a regular accentual measure of three- and two-stress cola bound by alliteration. There is much syntactic as well as some semantic (e.g. *amnas-gal-gaisced* "strong-valour-martial prowess" / *gníae* "martial champion" / *túaing* "sustaining" / *dín* "shelter") parallelism, but in the final pair of syntactically parallel three-stress units alliteration is apparently replaced by an antithesis very reminiscent of biblical patterns like the dyad above from the *Magnificat* in Luke's Gospel: *am tréin, am trebur, am techtaire; / náda(m) (f)húir ar feib ná ar indmus; / am amnas ar gail 7 gaisciud; / am gníae frim tháir; / am túaing mo daltai; / am dín cech dochraite; / do:gnú dochur cech tréin, / do:gnú sochur cech lobair* "I am strong, I am prudent, I am a courier (emend to *techtai* "proper"); I am not shameful as regards wealth and fortune; I am strong as regards valour and prowess; I am a champion against my shaming; I am capable of (sustaining) my foster-son; I am a shelter from every hardship; I bring about the disadvantage of every strong person, I bring about the advantage of every weak person".

Pending much-needed further research, dogmatic assertions about this type of Old Irish material are best avoided. In the meantime, the gradually emerging picture of considerable formal diversity, stylistic sophistication and creative application should at least discourage crude and unsupported assertions that it does not transcend the mindless preservation or mechanical imitation of oral fossils.

9. Paul Russell's recent study of Cormac's Glossary (1988) has shown among other things that etymological speculation in early Christian Ireland was fully in tune with continental norms as enunciated by an ecclesiastic like Isidore of Seville, and Rolf Baumgarten (1987) has demonstrated that the etymological explanations of the names of people and, above all, places common in early Irish narrative often function as major constituents in or even the creative mainspring of a tale or episode. Baumgarten further argues that modern 'neogrammarian' contempt for classical and medieval etymological method has led to unjustified neglect of this crucial intellectual instrument, which was, in Isidore's words, based upon the notion that knowledge of a word's etymology "often has a necessary function in its interpretation. For when you have seen whence a name has arisen, you understand its

meaning more readily. For the inspection of everything is clearer when the etymology is known" (*Etymologiae* I xxix 2).

Valid though these observations are, the teaching of Isidore hardly provided a direct model for the use of etymology as a narrative device or alternatively the use of narrative as an etymological device that is so abundant in early Irish literature. The Bible, on the other hand, would be a very plausible source, since Old Testament narrative pullulates with episodes explaining the name of a person or place. Moreover, Jerome was keenly aware of this aspect, so much so that, for instance, in the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib at Gen. 2:23 he prefers a semantically bizarre Latin equivalent to continuing the Greek Septuagint's failure to reflect the crucial derived status of Hebrew *'iššāh* 'woman' in relation to *'āḏ* 'man' in translation: "she shall be called 'woman (*uirago*)' because she was taken out of man (*de viro*)".

In line with this concern, etymologically significant placenames are usually, and personal names occasionally, rendered by a Latin translation that brings out the connection with the explanatory narrative clearly. A handful of typical examples must suffice here, e.g. "and they came to Marath and could not drink the waters of Mara because they were bitter (*nec poterant bibere aquas de Mara eo quod essent amarae*), wherefore he also imposed name fitting the place, calling it Mara, that is bitterness (*unde et congruum loco nomen inposuit vocans illud Mara id est amaritudinem*; Ex. 15:23)". When Gideon feared for his life after beholding an angel, "the Lord said unto him 'Peace with thee (*pax tecum*). Fear not, thou shalt not die'. Therefore Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord and called it 'the Lord's Peace (*Domini Pax*)', since down to the present day it was still in Ephra, which is of the family of Ezra" (Jud. 6:23-4). After Samson's famous slaughter of the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (*maxilla asini*) "he cast away the jawbone out of his hand and called the name of that place Ramath-lehi, which is translated 'elevation of the jawbone (*Elevatio Maxillae*)'" (Judges 15:17. cf. 2:15, 1 Sam./Kgs. 7:10-3 etc.). Of the young Solomon we are told that Nathan the prophet "called his name God's Beloved (*Amabilis Deo*) because the Lord loved him (*eo quod diligeret eum Dominus*)" (2 Sam./Kgs. 12:25). Thanks to a separate work by Jerome on the etymology of Hebrew names in the Bible, the *Liber de Nominibus Hebraeis*, the narrative significance of a name could be appreciated even where the Vulgate did not give a Latin equivalent, e.g. *Ismahel interpretatur Auditio Dei; sic enim scriptum est (Genes. 16:11): 'Et vocavit nomen eius Ismael, quia exaudivit eum Deus'* "Ishmael is translated 'God's Hearing'; for thus it is written: 'and she called his name Ishmael because God heard him'" (Isidore, *Etymologiae* VII vi-ix).

The author of the medieval Irish saga *Cath Maige Mucrama* (O'Daly, 1975) is an example of someone who makes considerable narrative use of etymologies of the names of people and places. Again two or three illustrations will serve here. "Ailill had intercourse with the maiden. While he was at this the woman sucked his ear (*ō*) so that she left neither flesh nor skin on it and so that it never grew on it from that time. So that Ailill Bare-ear (*Ó-lomm*) is his name since" (par. 3). Later on the name is slightly distorted to *Mag Mucrína* and etymologised as 'Plain of Pig-counting' with the help of an elaborate aetiological tale about the difficulty of counting (*óim*) some destructive magical pigs from Hell (*muc*) (par. 34 7). Moreover, although this is not explicitly stated, the striking episode about Lugaid and his followers being forced to eat mice (par. 26-30) seems to have been triggered by the similarity of the

hero's name to the Old Irish word for mouse, *loch*, acc. *lochaid*. It thus appears distinctly possible, to say the least, that the etymological machinery so prominent in early Irish narrative literature owes its initial impetus to the Bible.

10. In a recent introduction to early Irish saints' Lives the present writer made the following remarks about the style of the roughly mid-eighth-century so-called 'First' Life of Saint Brigit or *Vita I S. Beigidae*: "to me the overall effect is rather reminiscent of the terse, plain narrative typical of early Irish sagas, and I suspect that the First Life's author is, at least in part, attempting to capture this quality in Latin. Certainly the opening sentence of this work is deliberately close to a common opening formula in vernacular saga" (McCone, 1984b, 36). This last point was elaborated as follows in a footnote: "*fuit quidam vir nobilis, Luginensis genere, nomine Dubtachus* clearly echoes the very common opening formula 'there was a noble (vel. sim.) X over/among people Y, Z his name' of secular saga right down to the initial verb normal in Irish but a good deal less so in Latin. Typical enough saga examples are *but ri amra airegda for Éirinn, Eochaid Feidlech a ainm* 'there was a wondrous, noble king over Ireland, E.F. his name' (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, 1936) and *bol coire féile la Laigniu, Buchat a ainm (Esnadu Tige Buchat*, ed. Greene in *Fingal Róndán and Other Stories*, 1955), 'there was a cauldron of generosity among the Leinstermen, B. his name'." To these may be added *bol rig-briugu amrae la Laigniu, Mac Da Thó a ainm* 'there was a wonderful chief hospitaller among the Leinstermen, Mac Da Thó his name' (see McCone, 1984c, 4).

These views cannot be sustained because they ignore highly germane Latin scriptural data. Hebrew, like Irish, was a fundamentally verb-initial language, and this background allied with the flexible nature of Greek word order to produce plentiful initial verbs in both Septuagint and New Testament. Given the respect accorded to the sacred text and the reasonable flexibility of Latin word order, it is no surprise to find a strong inclination to place the verb at or near the head of its clause in the Vulgate, particularly those parts of the Old Testament translated by Jerome from the Hebrew. Formulae corresponding closely to the hagiographical one just cited may introduce episodes in both the Old and New Testaments, e.g. *fuit eo tempore vir quidam de monte Ephraim nomine Michas* "there was at that time a certain man of Mount Ephraim named Micah" (Jud. 17:1), *fuit vir quidam Levites habitans in latere montis Ephraim* "there was a certain Levite man living on the side of Mount Ephraim" (Jud. 19:1), *erat autem vir quidam de Saraa et de stirpe Dan nomine Manue* "there was, however, a certain man of Zorah of the stock of Dan named Manoah" (Jud. 13:2) and *fuit in diebus Herodis regis Iudaeae sacerdos quidam nomine Zaccharias de vice Abia* "there was in the days of Herod king of Judaea a certain priest named Zacharias of the course of Abia" (Luke 1:5). Accordingly there can be little doubt that the opening formula of the First Life of Brigit (cf. the similar *fuit vir vite venerabilis, Colmanus nomine, de nobile gente Hybernie, id est de Nepotibus Neill*; Plummer, 1910, I 258) was primarily derived from the Bible. Indeed, the simple Latin prose style of this Life as a whole is highly reminiscent of, and was presumably consciously modelled upon, normal Vulgate narrative in both the Old and New Testaments. According to Schökel, "the Hebrew phrase, because of the simplicity of syntactical articulation and the scarcity of adjectives and adverbs, is customarily short. Only a few oratorical texts resort to an elaborate

phrasing, with subordinate clauses (a good example is Deut. 8:7-18). Likewise, the best Hebrew narrative advances in a succession of brief phrases" (Alter and Kermode, 1987, 167). Similar qualities are still quite apparent in the narrative of the Vulgate translation, the terse and formulaic prose of which stands in marked contrast to the elegant and elaborate periods of Jerome's own prologues to the various books.

It has usually been assumed that the similar vernacular formula used to introduce sagas is of oral native provenance and may even be of Indo-European antiquity by virtue of comparability with the opening line of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata's Nala episode, *asad raja Nalo nāma Vrasenasuto bah* "there was a king named Nala, strong son of Vīrasena", and so on. However, there now appears to be some possibility of biblical influence. Regardless of whether conscious imitation of or mere coincidence with a scriptural pattern is involved, the parallel must have been apparent to monastic men of letters.

11. The same would presumably hold for the brisk and relatively unadorned style of much early Irish vernacular narrative with its tendency to repeat with only minor grammatical modifications a given phrase linked to a particular action or situation, e.g. *'Ced sliab inso thall?' of Cú Chulainn. 'Sliab Monduirnd' of int ara. 'Tiagam co rísam' of Cú Chulainn. Tiagam tarum co ríancatar. tar richtain doib int slébe . . .* "What mountain is that yonder?" said Cú Chulainn. 'Mount M.' said the charioteer. 'Let us go until we reach (it)' said Cú Chulainn. They go then until they reached (it). After the reaching by them of the mountain . . ." (*Táin* II, 691-5). Similar repetitions are common in the Old Testament, e.g. "Samson therefore went down into Timnath and, seeing there a woman of the daughters of Philistia (*descendit igitur Samson in Timnatha, vidensque ibi mulierem de filiabus Philistin*), he went up and told his father and mother, saying 'I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines (*vidi mulierem in Timnatha de filiabus Philistinorum*) whom I ask that you get for me as wife'" (Jud. 14:1-2). General features of this sort are, of course, widespread in plain narrative genres, whether oral or literate, and are, for instance, abundant in early Indian Brāhmanic prose or the Homeric poems of ancient Greece. There is thus no particular reason to assume deliberate imitation of the Bible rather than more or less coincidental similarity in this area. Nonetheless, the fact remains that these rather extensive stylistic parallels with Latin scriptural narrative were at least liable to be appreciated by medieval Irish monastic authors.

In Thurneysen's opinion saga narrative was originally in prose only, although even in the older extant versions this might be interspersed with poetic passages of the rhetorical or rhyming syllabic type discussed earlier (1921, 53-9). The language of this prose is "full of Latin loanwords, which had spread from the monasteries and often already undergone significant changes in meaning . . . Thus the older narrators of about the eighth century speak the christianised language of their time: a tradition first begins here with the writing down of the sagas. The style of the prose sagas altered greatly over the centuries. The oldest consist of short, unconnected, note-like sentences. And since some derive from the manuscript of *Druim Snechta* . . ., which in part actually does contain mere notices of sagas, one could suppose that the oral narrators had always been fuller. However, other texts that do not spring from this manuscript show precisely the same style, e.g. "Cú Roí's Death"

... or "Liadain and Curithir". The finished sagas too, such as "The Cattle-raid of Cooley", ... hardly diverge. It seems, then, that tales really were so narrated in the earlier period. Pauses in these swiftly progressing, cracking narratives are created on the one hand by the conversations, which are often rendered very completely, and on the other by the descriptions, over which there is an inclination to linger. Gradually the language becomes more connected, e.g. in *Fled Bricrenn* ... There is also a tendency, as already mentioned, to adorn the descriptions rhetorically. This rhetorical style spreads in the eleventh century to narrative passages, cf. the more recent episodes in the "Cattle-raid of Cooley" ... and the later redactor of this saga at the beginning of the twelfth century has extended this style over the whole lengthy narrative as well as the saga *Mesca Ulad*" (1921, 59-60).

Thurneysen is doubtless justified in viewing this pleonastic narrative style prone to alliterative pairings of epithets and so on as a relatively late outgrowth of certain elaborate types of description in the sagas, and much else in this characteristically shrewd analysis is similarly convincing. However, the attempt to differentiate chronologically between the less and more continuous narrative modes does seem to have combined with Thurneysen's severely qualified connection of the former with abridgement to encourage Murphy's misapprehensions (ch. 1, 3), about "the poorly-narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature" (1961, 8). Pursuant to his hypothesis that *Imram Brain* is "compounded of fresh composition and traditional oral narrative" Mac Cana is at once more discriminating and more ambitious in comparing two passages from the beginning and end of this text: "the contrast is obvious: in the first a remarkably mature prose which links sentences and varies their length and syntax so as to create an easy, rhythmical style; in the second the blunt, unvaried prose which is found in *Compert Con Culainn* and spasmodically throughout the early literature. Now this may be nothing more than an instance of the diversity of styles which is comprehended within the succinct prose of Old Irish saga. On the other hand, it is equally possible that the first passage is stylistically free because it is a freshly composed introduction to the following verse while the second is stylistically bound because it is a précis of an episode from traditional *echtra* literature" (1972, 114). Few would quarrel with Mac Cana's stylistic sketch of the passages in question and others like them or be surprised by his aesthetic reservations about the blunt, laconic style. However, of the two explanations offered for this contrast the former is surely more attractive than the latter, subsequently made to support questionable inferences about the composition of *Imram Brain*.

It can hardly be denied that early Irish saga narrative, like that of the Old Testament, is generally uncluttered and fast moving. In practice, this movement can be achieved either in a staccato or a legato manner, so to speak, or for that matter by virtually endless combinations of the two. *Compert Con Culainn* with its preponderance of short, sharp sentences does indeed verge markedly towards the staccato end of the scale, but still does not eschew snatches of connected prose, static description and *retraic*. Other tales like the first recension of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* or *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* display all manner of fluctuation between or within different sections. It seems clear that there was nothing approaching a significant chronological or generic divide in this supple stylistic continuum. In this context individual preference for comparative homogeneity or degrees of greater variety in the basic narrative medium may well have been paramount.

In addition to the interplay of these staccato and legato effects, the basic progression of the plot was liable to be articulated by alternations between narrative and dialogue. Although at least some dialogue is normally present, its proportion to direct narrative varies greatly from text to text, authorial inclination presumably again playing a significant role alongside exigencies of plot. Whether smooth, abrupt or somewhere in between, both narrative and dialogue tend to be quite plain when primarily intended to advance the plot, but both are susceptible of considerable elaboration in order to slow down or even halt the action at crucial points. In straight narrative this is usually accomplished by detailed catalogues of people or by minute and often pleonastic prose descriptions of persons, places, objects or occasions ornamented in varying degrees by parallelism and alliteration, but in dialogue the rhetorics and rhyming syllabic verse discussed earlier are the standard devices.

Biblical parallels for poetically adorned speech and dialogue have already been considered, and it remains to note that static descriptions also play a prominent part on occasion in Old Testament narrative. Notable instances include the relatively brief accounts concerning Noah's ark and the entry into it (Gen. 6:14-6 and 7:13-6), the long descriptions of the construction of the sanctuary and ark of the covenant (Exod. 36-9), of the building of Solomon's temple and palace (1/3 Kgs. 6-7) and of the sumptuous setting of the king's feast at the beginning of Esther, the catalogue enumerating the Israelites by tribe (Num. 1:19-46), the list of David's mighty men, which contains some narrative embellishment (2 Sam./Kgs. 23:8-39), and that of Solomon's princes (1/3 Kgs. 4:2-19) followed by a description of the prosperity of that proverbially wise and just monarch's kingdom and household (20-8).

Such descriptive devices are, of course, quite widespread in different narrative traditions, being prominent in the Homeric epics for example. Consequently their frequent occurrence in early Irish saga hardly needs to be ascribed to imitation of biblical models, although some influence from that quarter can by no means be ruled out.

Catalogues of varying extent and adornment are quite common in early Irish saga, some particularly striking instances involving the descriptive enumeration of warriors by question and answer prior to a great battle. Good examples include the mere inventory of the muster of the Ulstermen in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*: 3454-97, the slightly more descriptive list of the practitioners of reaving (*dišberg*) in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* pars. 41-3, the elaborate and alliterative question and answer account of *Tochtin na mbuiden* or 'the march of the companies' at *Táin*: 3544-3870, and the extraordinary description of the inmates of the hostel in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* pars. 75-140, which is of the same type, but with the additional feature of a considerable amount of *retoiic*, and actually takes up about half of the story. The physical beauty, fine clothes and other accoutrements of men and women either individually or in groups are often dwelt upon (e.g. *Scéla Cano* 27-37). Once again *Togail Bruidne da Derga* provides a striking example in the extremely elaborate description of Étaín as encountered by her husband-to-be king Eochaid at the beginning of the tale. This includes a long sequence of similes applied to her features from the hair on her head down to her feet that is quite reminiscent of the less extended description of the king's beloved in the reverse direction at the beginning of the seventh chapter of the Song of Songs. Descriptions of fine buildings (e.g. *Táin Bó Fraich*, par. 7), festive occasions (e.g. *Serglige Con Culainn*, par. 1), the

prosperous reigns and realms of just kings (e.g. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, par. 17, and *Mesca Ulad* ll. 130-5) and so on also occur.

It can thus be seen that the early Irish saga writer had a considerable array of narrative or descriptive devices and styles at his disposal. These could enter into countless combinations calculated to produce many different immediate and overall effects. Thus in the relatively short *Compert Con Culainn* the plot unfolds with appealing swiftness and directness by means of rather pithy prose and dialogue with the odd brief description or rhetoric thrown in, while *Scéla Múice Meic Da Thó* progresses purposefully but less rapidly by lacing its straightforward narrative with brief descriptions, a sizeable rhymed syllabic poem and a dramatic sequence of verbal confrontations culminating in the encounter between Cet and Conall, which is heightened by two short rhetorics. Other authors, particularly of longer narratives, often tend towards more variation of style and tempo. For example, in the first third of *Táin Bó Fraich* the plot is repeatedly interrupted and overshadowed by a string of elaborate prose descriptions presumably intended to build up tension in anticipation of the meeting between the hero and the woman he seeks (par. 13), whereafter the narrative proceeds more quickly but still with considerable descriptive embellishment. *Scéla Cano* makes liberal use of descriptive passages in its direct narrative and of rhymed syllabic verse in its extensive dialogues, while *Immram Brain* consists essentially of two large balancing gems of lyrical and prophetic syllabic poetry in a slim prose setting. Finally, the extraordinary proliferation of elaborate prose descriptions and rhetorics in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* help to make it arguably the most majestic and monumental of all extant early Irish sagas.

These few examples from a vast corpus should give some idea of the enormous technical and stylistic variety and sophistication of early Irish narrative literature. This rich tapestry urgently needs studying as an integrated phenomenon in its own right rather than as a more or less haphazard patchwork to be rudely unstitched in the search for 'original' constituents. Furthermore, those prone to stress the paramount role of oral tradition in the moulding of this material are challenged to find a comparable narrative complex in a demonstrably genuine oral milieu as opposed to a presumed one surviving only in writing. Unless or until this challenge is met, it must be accepted that Latin literary models, especially the Bible, are likely to have played a significant role in the evolution of early medieval Irish vernacular narrative style and method as we know them from monastic pens. In view of the ultimate dependence of writing upon speech, native oral modes presumably also played a role that we can now hardly assess. In the perspicacious words of James Carney concerning the overall situation, "early Irish saga literature shows in its vocabulary that it was given its present form well within the Christian period. Without any doubt this literature was based in part upon an oral tradition going back to the remote pre-Christian past. But the traditional element is often a mere nucleus because the Christian authors, in presenting the pre-Christian past, drew not only on native material but upon their total literary experience. This experience included a direct knowledge of a certain range of Latin literature . . . a knowledge of the scriptures, of apocryphal works, and the Fathers of the Church" (1955, 321).

12. In the field of Old Norse literature Carol J. Clover refers to "the dramatic reaction, in the mid-1960s, against the methodological and ideological conservatism of saga scholarship. The collaborative volume *Norran fortællerkunst* . . . distin-

guished itself from earlier literary histories in three important ways: (1) in its deemphasis of what are conventionally viewed as the "main" genres (family and kings' sagas) and its corresponding emphasis of such neglected genres as saints' lives and learned history writing; (2) in its effort to obliterate the traditional sharp distinction between "native" and "foreign" or "learned" literature; and (3) in its general assumption that the medieval Icelanders were considerably more conversant with, and indebted to, contemporary European culture, or sectors of it, than traditional scholarship has been inclined to allow . . . If the earlier generation of scholars thought of "influence" as involving occasional bits of foreign matter or ideology inserted into an essentially native form, the new Europeanists are more inclined to see them as elements integrated in a whole that itself owes European debts: an intellectual debt to medieval theology and a formal debt to medieval historiography. In the meantime, the list of suspected foreign debts, large and small, continues to grow" (1985, 251). These characteristics are eminently applicable to the current debate about medieval Irish literature, and it says much for the backward-looking isolationism of the post-war nativist school that both Carney's insights and major new developments in a cognate discipline, not to mention the evidence of the native sources themselves, should have been resisted or ignored for so long.

'Pagan' myth and Christian 'history'

1. Until quite recently there has been a somewhat strange tendency in medieval Irish studies to restrict terms such as 'myth', 'mythical', 'mythology' or 'mythological' to the pagan past or assumed pagan survivals in the literary record of the early Christian period. Those prone to view early Irish tradition in dualistic terms could then conveniently contrast this component with what Mac Neill has appropriately dubbed 'synthetic history', namely the elaborate framework of genealogy, chronology and narrative devised by monastic men of letters and their associates from ecclesiastical and other sources. Subsequently, however, O'Rahilly's term 'pseudo-history' has generally been preferred with mischievous consequences, implying as it does an opposition both to 'real' traditions or myths on the one hand and to reliable history on the other. As a result these impressive medieval endeavours have, for the most part, come to be denied any real significance and dismissed as a mere distorting layer of clerical invention to be peeled away to get a better idea of the pagan foundations deemed to matter. Hence the commonly applied dichotomy in Irish studies between mythology and pseudohistory, the former being seen as essentially pagan and genuine, the latter as basically Christian and somehow bogus. Like chalk and cheese they appear not to mix well, and textual omelettes suspected of containing pseudohistorical or other literary impurities are for unscrambling in search of unadulterated pagan flavours rather than for straightforward consumption.

A notable application of this procedure is O'Rahilly's uncontrolled intuition against all the evidence of the text itself that 'the story of Buchet and Ethne was in an earlier form a partial version of what was perhaps the most popular of all myths among European peoples, the myth of the Rival Wooers. Originally Buchet (alias Cathaer Már) had as consort the goddess Ethne, who in time wearied of him and fell in love with the Hero (here Cormac), who made the difficult journey to the Otherworld to win her. Sometimes, in order to gain sympathy for the change of affections of the faithless wife (as she appears to be), we are told that she was being ill-treated or persecuted by her cruel husband, as when Branwen in the *Mabinogi* is said to have been degraded to the position of kitchen-wench in the court of Matholwch. We have a trace of this in *Énada Tige Buchet*, in which Ethne is reduced to performing the most menial tasks before Cormac carries her off; but

Ethne's lowly state is represented not as an indignity inflicted upon her by her husband but simply as resulting from Buchet's unmerited impoverishment. Moreover, Ethne is no longer Buchet's wife, but only his devoted foster-daughter. (There is mention of Buchet's wife, but significantly she gets no name.) Of the original enmity between Buchet and Cormac little or nothing remains, for they are no longer rivals. With the passage of time myths as a rule become more and more rationalized and humanized, and those relationships which would offend the conscience of humanity tend to be modified or suppressed; but such processes have seldom been carried out so thoroughly as in *Esnada Tige Buchet*" (1952, 19). In similar but vaguer vein Mac Cana has recently referred to "literatures born of mythologies" and to Fothad Canainne as "a figure still trailing behind him the remnants of a complex mythology" (1987, 75 and 78), and elsewhere states of the tale *Cath Maige Tuired* that "its mythological importance is obvious, its meaning rather less so" (1983, 58).

In view of such attitudes the shortage of serious attempts to appreciate synthetic history as an integrated and meaningful ideological construct in its own right is hardly surprising, even though various versions of it influence or inform a great deal of extant medieval Irish material. The main barriers have been firstly the use of 'mythology' as a kind of smokescreen to obscure or evade the issue of the meaning of texts as actually transmitted and secondly a preoccupation with questions of origin and classification irrelevant to their compilers. However, Mark Stowcroft's recent remarks about the relatively late extant recensions of the full and ever-expanding manual of synthetic Irish history known as *Leabhar Gabhála* suggest a way forward out of this pseudo-modernist morass: "this fusion of fact and fiction, of native and Latin (pagan and Christian) tradition furnishes the Irish *literati* with their own mythology - a history and re-enactment of the order of things - and with a historical framework for the sagas, the annals and the chronicles" (1987, 81), to which might be added hagiography, genealogy, topography, gnomic literature and law.

2. A brief synopsis of relevant ancient, medieval and modern attitudes to and theories about myth seems desirable at this point to help elucidate the relationship between myth, allegory and history in a medieval Christian Irish context. It will be argued that the extant record presents us with a dynamic and thoroughly syncretistic early Irish history-cum-mythology geared to a contemporary symbiosis between the intermingled aristocracies of Church and State (cf. McCone, 1984h, 56-9).

Jean-Pierre Vernant begins a lucid discussion of successive theories of mythology by showing how the rise of philosophical reasoning in ancient Greece caused the meanings of the originally more or less synonymous *mythos* and *logos* 'utterance, account' to diverge as the latter became increasingly associated with fact and logical reasoning, thus tending to shift the former's meaning towards the other end of the spectrum. Thus "the concept of myth that we have inherited from the Greeks belongs, by reason of its origins and history, to a tradition of thought peculiar to Western civilization in which myth is defined in terms of what is not myth, being opposed first to reality (myth is fiction) and, secondly, to what is rational (myth is absurd)" (1980, 186). These notions are, of course, still central to the word's meaning in normal English usage, and this no doubt explains a certain western reluctance to call biblical and other Judaeo-Christian narratives 'mythical', thus giving the term automatic pagan connotations. However, this squeamishness is unnecessary,

since the evolving study of mythology has increasingly sought to invest 'myth' and its derivatives with an objectivity appropriate to scientific terms precisely by eschewing gratuitous assumptions about the incredibility, irrationality or immorality of such material.

A mythological corpus may, of course, retain all or much of its authority and appeal despite social and intellectual progress away from the modes of thought and the values embodied by it, but this divergence is likely to give rise to discomfort and embarrassment about elements now felt to be absurd, unedifying or both. Allegory is the classic response to such perceptions and basically provides a strategy for transposing or translating myths into more rational or morally acceptable terms by the application of quite arbitrary symbolic values to their constituents. The allegorical approach was applied by later Greek philosophers and critics to the Homeric poems and other mythical narratives, and also found limited favour with pre-Christian rabbinic exegetes of the Old Testament. These traditions converged in the philosophising Old Testament exegesis of Philo Judaicus (1st. cent. A.D.), who in turn influenced the Christian fathers Clement of Alexandria (2nd. cent.) and Origen (3rd. cent.). According to G.W.H. Lampe "it is true that rabbinic allegory tends to be less fully developed and elaborate (indeed, fanciful) than that of the Alexandrian Jewish tradition represented by Philo; but the difference lies in content rather than in method. Paul's application of the Deuteronomic prohibition against muzzling the ox to the Church's duty to maintain its ministers is a good example of the rabbinic use of allegory. Philo, on the other hand, is concerned, like some of the Hellenistic interpreters of Homer, to read a system of philosophy into the Scriptures and in so doing to eliminate apparent obscurities and morally offensive passages. His idea that Abraham's wanderings signify the progress of the soul towards contemplation, and that the wives of the patriarchs stand for moral virtues, has no parallel in Palestinian Judaism" (1975, 160).

Esteem for the allegorical method spread from Alexandrian to western biblical exegesis. Indeed, such major and prolific sixth- and seventh-century writers as Pope Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville were enthusiastic allegorists as well as being enormously influential in early medieval Irish learned circles. As a method of accommodating the Old Testament to Christian purposes allegory coexisted and was often combined with historical typology, a procedure rooted "in the conviction that the divine purposes of history are revealed in a pattern of promise and fulfilment, and that this means that the Old Testament can in principle be applied at every point to Christ and the Church" (ibid., 162). Allegory has rightly been considered methodologically unsound by modern students of myth and literature, who reject its ultimately arbitrary interpretations and in any case tend to be concerned with the broadly contemporary meaning of texts rather than with how subsequent generations chose to harmonize them with their own ideas and circumstances. Nevertheless, the fact remains that typology and, above all, allegory were of cardinal intellectual importance throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, including Ireland: "the resources of philology were slight, being limited almost exclusively to traditional collections of *onomastica sacra*, consulted for the etymology of proper names. The important place occupied by allegory, however, in every branch of thought provided the exegesis of this period with its dominant orientation" (Leclercq in Lampe (ed.), 1975, 183-4). Following Baumgarten (1987), it has already been argued (ch. 2, 9) that understandable modern disapproval of medieval etymo-

logical method should not be allowed to prevent proper appreciation of its major role in early Irish exposition and composition. It would be similarly unwise to dismiss out of hand the possible relevance of allegorical and typological factors, both quite liable to be linked with etymologies, to a written Irish narrative literature that was being produced in monasteries at a time when allegory, typology and etymology were very much in vogue. A test case will be considered later, but first a number of more modern treatments of myth merit attention.

3. The so-called 'solar' mythology developed by Max Müller and other romantics in the later nineteenth century sought by etymological and other means to rediscover the original 'natural' meanings of myths held to have been subsequently obscured by the perversion of language. Thus 'restored', myths were, in effect, reduced to various figurative ways of talking about the weather and natural phenomena. Although this absurd theory was soon wittily debunked by scholars like Andrew Lang (cf. Thompson, 1946, 371-5), O'Rahilly's *Early Irish History and Mythology* testifies to its continuing influence as late as the 1940s in Celtic studies at least.

Scholars such as Lang himself and J.G. Frazer, author of the monumental *Golden Bough*, adopted an evolutionary approach to myths, which were primarily valued as survivals of a savage stage of human intellectual development governed by emotion and association rather than reasoned analysis or as evidence for incipient progress away from that primitive condition. It was in this vein that Murphy could regard Irish saga as "something unique in European tradition, a rich mass of tales depicting a West-European barbaric civilization as yet uninfluenced by the mighty sister-civilization of Graeco-Roman lands. Likewise, the lover of literature, having exhausted the possibilities of the maturer literatures of other countries, finds in Irish storytelling something to delight him from the youth of the world, before the heart had been trained to bow before the head or the imagination to be troubled by logic and reality" (1961, 5). Such assumptions clearly preclude analysis aimed at revealing deliberately articulated and often complex constellations of meaning in mythological narratives.

The historian-philological approach developed in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries owed much to Lachmannian principles of stemmatic textual criticism and accordingly concentrated upon establishing a myth's chronological and taxonomic provenance in the hope of identifying the historical events or circumstances responsible for shaping it. As its title suggests, *Early Irish History and Mythology* was heavily influenced by this method, which O'Rahilly astoundingly sought to combine with concepts derived from 'solar' mythology. Accordingly the first half or so of this book squanders the author's matchless knowledge of the medieval sources upon a futile attempt to manufacture pre-Christian Irish history, especially that pertaining to alleged invasions, from the manifestly tendentious claims of the much later literary record, while the second half suddenly and without explanation renounces this line to insist with equal fervour that various major figures in the material originated as cosmic deities devoid of historicity. The end result of this intuitive eclecticism is an erudite but alarmingly capricious and idiosyncratic treatment that continues to cast a steadily fading shadow over sections of early Irish studies.

Whether naturalist, evolutionist or historicist, each of these three basic approaches to myth shares a primary concern with speculation about unattested

earlier stages or even origins rather than with interpretation of the material as actually transmitted.

They are also indiscriminately reductionist, seeking to strip everything down to certain aprioristic essentials. A similar objection applies to various psychological explanations of myth in terms of universal symbols, whether linked to basic Freudian impulses or to the Jungian archetypes and other transcendental notions so influential in and through the comparative religious and mythological studies of scholars like Kerényi and the more empirical Eliade. The invocation of questionable general hypotheses about the human psyche to account for myth seems to promise little more than an explanation of *obscurum per obscurius*, and its results have proved too vague and repetitious to be analytically useful. Various theories along these lines have been conveniently summarized and criticised by G.S. Kirk (1974, 63-82), and their impact upon Irish studies has been no more than tangential, although Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1977) and others have made occasional and mostly non-committal references to certain of Eliade's generalizations where appropriate.

The Austrian anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's interment on the Trobriand Islands during the First World War led to an epoch-making study of a so-called 'primitive' society in all its integrated aspects, including mythology. Thus was born the so-called 'functionalist' approach to myth particularly influential in British anthropology and associated with names such as Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown. This school saw the primary role of myth as, in Vernant's words, "to reinforce the social cohesion or functional unity of a group by presenting and justifying the traditional order of its institutions and modes of conduct in a codified form that is agreeable to listen to and easy to remember and transmit from one generation to the next" (1980, 221). In this way myths, rituals, customs and institutions are integrated with and corroborate each other in a given socio-cultural matrix, the primary function of myth being to provide explanations of and authority for things being the way they are.

4. This view appears quite valid as far as it goes, but certain inadequacies have been pointed out by the founders and adherents of various types of structuralist analysis. Common to these is the claim (1) that the formal properties of mythical discourse are amenable to analysis in terms of notions like binary opposition and the neutralization or 'mediation' (cf. Ó Cathasaigh, 1977, 45-6) of contrasts developed in structural linguistics and (2) that myth need not be merely a static sociological model of and charter for reality as perceived by a given group but can also be a dynamic intellectual instrument for viewing and discussing various aspects of this from positive or negative standpoints.

Structuralists tend to regard the message of a given narrative, whether mythical, literary or both, as being encoded in what may be a many-levelled interplay of functions and symbols, the values of which are to be deciphered by the classic stratagem of establishing a grid of oppositions and working from the known to the unknown. The quest for pertinent data may, of course, extend beyond the text itself to the investigation of further texts, artefacts, institutions, beliefs and so on from the relevant socio-cultural environment.

Georges Dumézil's particular application of early structuralist principles to comparative Indo-European mythology has exercised considerable influence upon Celtic studies, and has been briefly touched upon in chapter one. Dillon expressed his

approval as early as 1947 (19-20), and the Rees brothers' book *Celtic Heritage* (1961) constitutes an influential but unduly enthusiastic attempt at a full-scale application. The injection of Dumézilian insights into medieval Irish studies has had the beneficial effect of focusing attention upon the myths or tales as meaningful narratives expounding various aspects of a pervasive ideology. On the debit side, however, the fact that the tripartite ideology in question was primarily seen as an Indo-European inheritance or survival meant that early Irish texts were still tending to be laid on an imported bed of Procrustes relating to their assumed past rather than their present. All too often scholars have been content to label a motif 'Indo-European' as if that were an explanation in itself and obviated the need for further discussion of its actual textual function.

In a classic presentation of the so-called 'formalist' approach to folk narrative Vladimir Propp (1958) has sought to base his analysis of certain Russian folktales upon a limited number of generally applicable *functions*. The basic means of isolating these is illustrated by the following four examples:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero.
The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Suceuko a horse.
The horse carries Suceuko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat.
The boat takes Ivan to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Ivan a ring.

Young men from the ring carry Ivan away to another kingdom.

As one can readily see, "both constants and variables are present in the preceding instances. The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we may draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale according to the functions of its dramatis personae . . . Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action . . . Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale" (*ibid.*, 19-21). Some constituents in these sequences (e.g. tsar/old man/sorcerer/princess, eagle/horse/boat/young men from ring) may be interchanged without affecting the basic pattern observable throughout. As such they are isofunctional variables capable of being subsumed under a common heading or function (e.g. giver, transporter) and, in Ó Cathasaigh's words, "are related *paradigmatically*, that is, they are in a potential relation of *substitution*" (1977, 14). On the other hand, the various elements juxtaposed in a given narrative (e.g. tsar-gives-eagle-to hero, eagle-carries-hero-to another kingdom in 1) "are related *syntagmatically*, that is, their relationship is one of *opposition* and absolutely precludes substitution: it is actualized as a linear sequence of events in time and space" (*ibid.*). Once the relevant functions have been tagged with appropriate symbols, it becomes possible to follow Propp and represent narratives by formulae made up of these.

As in the brief examples given, the functions are organised into larger units called *moves*: "morphologically, a tale . . . may be termed any development proceeding from villainy . . . or a lack . . . through intermediary functions . . . to a *dénouement*. Terminal functions are at times a reward . . ., a gain or in general the liqui-

(b) moves to determine successor, (c) wrong candidate, (d) help from supernatural parent, (e) people of Tara's hostility, (f) passing of test, (g) acceptance by people of Tara (cf. McCone, 1980, 142-5).

In *Togall Buidne Da Derga* the death of king Eiriscél (= a) is followed by the mantic ritual of a *taibfeis* or 'bull-feast' to divine the appearance of the future king (= b). The young Conaire's supernatural father tells him to present himself naked with a sling at Tara in conformity with the vision at the bull-feast (= d), but when he arrives the people of Tara express doubts about the validity of a vision showing one so manifestly under age (= c/e). However, Conaire responds to this challenge with an apposite assertion of his moral qualification for and hereditary right (as carthy son of Eiriscél) to the kingship (= f) and is duly acknowledged by the people (= g). *De Síl Chonairi Máir* follows the death of Eiriscél (= a) with a meeting between the Leinstermen and the Cenél Cuinn to appoint a successor by ordeal involving mounting a chariot drawn by unbroken horses, fitting a royal mantle therein and driving through the narrow gap between two stones to earn a screech of approval from the Fál or "stone penis (*ferp chuche*)" against his axle (= h). When Eiriscél's slayer Lugaid Riabnorg fails these tests (= c), Conaire's supernatural mother Mes Búachalla advises him to go to Tara and assemble a host to assist him (= d). The people of Tara flee before them (= e), but Conaire passes the tests (= f) and the people of Tara duly submit to him as his father's successor (= g).

The fundamental similarities between these narratives are clearly important, but some significance presumably also attaches to the differences. It is no mere coincidence that the genealogically oriented *De Síl Chonairi Máir* emphasizes martial and (ritualized) sexual prowess as its hero's qualification for kingship whereas *Togall Buidne Da Derga* emphasizes the more pacific attributes of generosity, wisdom and inheritance in line with its author's adverse attitude to the gratuitous violence of the *finn* (see ch. 9, 3 and 8). Likewise the surface differences are at least as important as the underlying similarities for determining the respective meanings of the For Loga episode and the story about Cú Chulainn's slaughter of the smith's hound (see 5 and 12 below).

In a review of Propp's work the most influential of modern structuralists in the field of myth, Claude Lévi-Strauss, pays tribute to its anticipation of such structuralist axioms as "the notion of an 'initial situation'"; the comparison of a mythological matrix with the rules of musical composition; the necessity of a reading that is at once "horizontal" and "vertical"; the constant use of the notion of a group of substitutions, and of transformations, in order to resolve the apparent antinomy between the constancy of the form and the variability of the content; the effort - at least sketched by Propp - to reduce the apparent specificity of functions to pairs of oppositions" (1978, 126-7). However, the problem lies in Propp's concentration upon form to the theoretical exclusion of content. As Lévi-Strauss puts it, "unless the content is surreptitiously reintegrated into the form, the latter is condemned to remain at such a level of abstraction that it neither signifies anything any longer nor has any heuristic meaning. *Formalism destroys its object*. With Propp, it results in the discovery that there exists in reality but one tale. Henceforth, the problem of explanation is only displaced. We know what *the tale* is, but as experience puts before us not an archetypal tale but a great number of concrete tales, we do not know how to classify them anymore. Before formalism, we were certainly

unaware of what these tales had in common. Since formalism, we have been deprived of any means of understanding how they differ" (ibid., 132-3).

In *The story of Asdiwal*, originally published in French in 1958 like the above review, Lévi-Strauss goes beyond functionalism by making the basic point that "the myth is certainly related to given facts, but not as a *representation* of them. The relationship is of a dialectic kind, and the institutions described in the myths can be the very opposite of the real institutions. This will always be the case when the myth is trying to express a negative truth" (1978, 172). His comprehensive analysis of the *Asdiwal* tale causes Lévi-Strauss "to draw a distinction between two aspects of the construction of a myth: the sequences and the schemata. The sequences form the apparent content of the myth, the chronological order in which things happen: the meeting of the two women, the intervention of the supernatural protector, the birth of *Asdiwal*, his childhood, his visit to heaven, his successive marriages, his hunting and fishing expeditions, his quarrels with his brothers-in-law, and so forth. But these sequences are organised on planes at different levels of abstraction in accordance with schemata, which exist simultaneously, superimposed one upon the other: just as a melody composed for several voices is held within bounds by two-dimensional constraints: first by its own melodic line, which is horizontal, and second by the contrapuntal schemata, which are vertical" (ibid., 161). The following sets are identified in this case: a geographic schema comprising journeys on a primary east-west and secondary north-south axis, a cosmological schema involving nether regions, earth, air, sky etc., a schema integrating both in terms of the contrasts high/low, land/water, mountain-hunting/sea-hunting, peak/valley, and finally a techno-economic schema reflecting "the economic cycle and the seasonal migrations of the native fishermen" (ibid., 164). These all combine in a global integration arrived at by contrasting "the initial state of affairs and the final, which together summarize its operational function" (loc. cit.). In this way, "having separated out the codes, we have analyzed the structure of the message. It now remains to decipher the meaning" (ibid., 165), a quest which leads to the consideration of some cognate material.

Lévi-Strauss's classic argument (e.g. 1972) that so-called 'savage' or 'primitive' thought, far from being irrational, is highly sophisticated and structured in the paradigmatic choice of content as well as in syntagmatic form, but along analogical rather than strictly logical lines, leads Vernant to conclude: "once rescued from the sphere of affective confusion and the spontaneity of fantasy . . . , the mythical symbol can be defined in terms of, on the one hand, the social conditions that affect it and, on the other, the rules of linguistics. Myth is no vague expression of individual feelings or popular emotions. It is an institutionalised system of symbols, a codified verbal behaviour which, like language, conveys various modes of classifying facts - by coordinating, grouping and opposing them, various ways of recognising both resemblances and differences, in short ways of organising experience. Thought takes shape by expressing itself symbolically in and through myth as it does in and through language" (1980, 222).

5. Since classic anthropological studies of myth by Lévi-Strauss and others have been based upon material gathered from various truly oral cultures, the question inevitably arises as to how far such methods are appropriate to the study of literary narratives. In the Irish context this issue has been largely evaded until late either by

the famous fiction that early Irish sagas are fundamentally oral compositions or by preference for the textual orientation of Dumézil's approach.

A similar problem regarding the literary nature of the sources for most extant Greek mythology has been more squarely faced. According to Vernant "we should note in this respect that Lévi-Strauss works on a body of oral stories that affords a very large number of variants. The nature of the material itself calls for a systematic comparison between the various stories to distinguish the formal features which reappear from one myth to another, whether the relationships involved are those of homology, inversion or permutation . . . The problem is quite different in the case of a great written work with a strong and elaborate structure . . . Here it is not a question of selecting as most important those elements that can also be found, in a more or less altered form, in other versions. Instead, the scholar must attempt an exhaustive analysis of the myth in all the detail of its textual form" (1980, 235). Moreover, "the myths from oral cultures have been collected by anthropologists without any historical perspective, in bulk, usually in fragmented and dispersed order, just as they have come to hand. The only way to deal with this seems to be as Lévi-Strauss does . . . In written literature, alongside data similar to and on the same level as oral myth, we also find grand general systematised constructions the sum total of whose different parts integrates into one unified message" (ibid. 238-9).

The relevance of these considerations to early Irish narrative is apparent from a number of recent studies. For instance, Ó Cathasaigh (1981 and 1983) has argued persuasively that two relatively long narratives previously dismissed by critics as aesthetically unappealing ragbags of ill coordinated episodes do, in fact, display a deliberate structure and thematic unity geared to the recurrent exploration of a central ideological concept from different angles. Thus *Cath Maige Mucrama* is seen as an interconnected series of tableaux depicting the widening effects of *lammrad* or 'denuding' so crucial to early Irish notions of sovereignty (see ch. 5, 2), while episode after episode of *Scéla Cano* exemplifies that most Christian of virtues *ainne* or 'patience', which was likewise regarded as a desirable attribute of kings. The at first sight rambling and incoherent linear structures of these tales take on a significantly tighter aspect once this interplay of theme and variations is recognized, and one is reminded of the great Greek tragedian Euripides' play the *Troades*, the dramatic effect and moral message of which are conveyed by a sequence of loosely connected scenes depicting the cumulative horrors of war.

On the other hand, one can also find briefer independent narratives related to each other by 'homology, inversion or permutation'. A definitive brief study of this type is Lévi-Strauss' 'Four Winnebago myths' (1978, 198-210), in which three of the myths in question were identified as variants by permutation to produce somewhat different applications of a basic positive paradigm whereas the fourth presented a negative paradigm by inversion of key features found in the rest.

A similar argument has recently been made regarding *Aided Con na Corda* (*Táin* II, 540-607), the end of *Scéla Muice Meic Da Thó* and *Aided Cheltchair Meic Uithechair* (McCone, 1984c). Each of these narratives involves the slaying of a ferocious hound taken to embody the martial spirit. In the first the precociously warlike child Séntanae kills the hound of Culann the smith in fair combat and earns his adult identity as *Cú Chulainn* or 'hound of Culann', the warrior hero *par excellence*, by temporarily replacing the dead hound as protector of Culann's

property until a whelp from its litter should be old enough to release him for still greater deeds of derring-do. In the second the mere charioteer Fer Loga slays Mac Da Thó's dog Ailbe from an advantageous position and goes on to get the better of the Ulster king Conchobar by attacking him from behind. Conchobar is forced to save his life by agreeing to let Fer Loga spend a year at his court being treated as a real warrior, the women of Ulster being obliged to regale him with a nightly refrain of 'Fer Loga is my darling'. Thereafter Fer Loga returns to Connacht to resume his proper profession. The Cú Chulainn story clearly involves the permanent and beneficial fusion of the hound's attributes with those of its slayer to produce the perfect warrior, but in the Fer Loga episode a series of permutations serves to impair the effects of killing the dog, rendering them transitory and largely bogus. Nevertheless, in both cases the slaughter has basically positive results for its perpetrator. In *Aided Cheltchair* by contrast the Ulster hero Celtchar's own hitherto faithful hound, the Dáelchú, runs amok and starts attacking his own people and their property with the result that Celtchar is forced to kill it but himself dies in the process. Here the effects of the slaughter on its perpetrator are manifestly negative and the basic pattern is inverted to represent the disastrous split of a previously twinned pair.

In this way different aspects of martial behaviour and the warrior's psyche are exemplified. Since *Aided Cheltchair* explicitly states that the three hounds in these tales were from the same supernatural litter and significant parallels can be adduced from Germanic, Indian and, above all, Greek literature (McCone, 1984c, 23-7, and 1987, 124-5), it seems probable that an appreciable part of this material has pagan, oral and even Indo-European roots. However, that is a far cry from alleging the mindless preservation of such traditions virtually intact in a literary milieu, and it will be suggested below that the Fer Loga episode is particularly suspect of having been a literary creation or at least adaptation in the clerical interest. These and many other surviving narratives bear abundant testimony to the ability of early Christian Ireland's monastically oriented men of letters to generate truly 'mythical' discourse in a functionalist or structuralist sense by the purposeful manipulation and supplementation of inherited material and conventions. If, however, the authors' outlook was not pagan, it is difficult to see how the myths they produced can be so described in terms of contemporary function.

According to Thurneysen, "after the old sagas were written down, these written texts constituted virtually the only foundation for the later remodellings and new creations. Certainly the sagas fixed in writing were also recited orally in the country by narrators and thereby probably altered in many ways. However, the later compilers and authors hardly ever relied upon this oral transmission, but based their work on the written texts still largely available to us, even if they sometimes incorporate other motifs from folktales. This can often be directly observed, since whole prose passages or expressions are taken over. The later development of saga is thus a markedly literary one, just as its language, too, often presents a remarkable mixture of old-fashioned and contemporary forms" (1921, 73). However, over-reaction against this arguably over-positivist approach has often resulted in the survival of various early Irish narratives in different versions being put down to the role of 'oral multiforms' or the like (see Slotkin, 1979; Nagy, 1983, 136).

Although these may presumably have been a factor in some cases, the value of such a hypothesis is questionable, since the evanescence of the alleged oral originals

renders it virtually uncontrollable, and any general theory along these lines must in any case be dismissed as untenable. For instance, oral multiformity can hardly account for the manifestly literary reworking of the first recension of the Táin, which itself from time to time explicitly notes diverse written versions (*slachtae*) in "other books" (Thurneysen, 1921, 101), to produce the version surviving in the Book of Leinster (*ibid.*, 113-5) or for the demonstrably literate compilatory activity responsible for the extant *LU* version of *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dillon, 1941 and 1953, xi-xii). More to the point, different political biases or the like can often account for narrative variants as deliberate literary products without recourse to the fluidity of oral tradition, as has been shown by Ó Corráin (1986, 147-52) with reference to *Genemain Chormaic* and *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*, but this aspect will be considered further in chapter ten. In short, the existence of such written variants does not constitute good evidence for the fundamental orality of the sources upon which they drew.

Finally, Thurneysen's above inference from the language of saga texts would square well with recent arguments that even in the eighth century Old Irish "may have been an artificially fostered learned and literary standard in competition with more mundane registers of speech which were rather more evolved in the direction of an early Modern Irish grammatical type", while Middle Irish is best seen "as a written hybrid between the time-honoured but increasingly outmoded Old Irish literary standard . . . and contemporary upper-register speech with a grammar ever closer to that of early Modern Irish" (McCone, 1987b, 181-2; cf. 1985, 101-3).

6. The boundary between history and myth is notoriously unstable: actual events may, with or without appreciable distortion, acquire a profound ideological significance redolent of myth, while fabrications, whether mythical or otherwise in origin, can come to be accepted as literal history. A detailed chronological frame of reference is usually regarded as symptomatic of a fundamentally historicising cast of mind. Since, however, even 'primitive' mythological systems can comprise sequences based upon logical (e.g. creation myths) or generational (e.g. deeds of fathers and sons) priority, this criterion is far from absolute. The basic point, surely, is that, once the focus is shifted from usually unanswerable and correspondingly unprofitable questions about origins to the issue of contemporary function, arguments of the 'myth or history?' type become largely irrelevant.

Much medieval Irish narrative purports and was presumably felt to be historical insofar as it involves characters or events fitted into an elaborate genealogical and chronological network reaching far back into the pre-Christian period. However, this hardly affects the essentially mythical function of much of this material. To all intents and purposes early Christian Ireland's mythology has been largely historicised and her history extensively mythologised, thus robbing the dichotomy of real significance. The resultant *senchas* is a web encompassing the bare topological, genealogical and chronological record, various types of prose or verse narrative, and law. In a paper entitled 'Senchas: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition' Byrne puts the nub of the matter thus: "however we may try to keep these four strands of myth, legend, pseudo-history and fiction separate in our own minds, they tend to be inextricably ravelled in the texts as we have them. Monastic influence, with its bent for historicism, has been at work on most extant versions of our myths and legends. The authors of the sagas were Christian and composed

consciously as literary artists. We cannot therefore excise obviously Christian references as mere 'monkish interpolations' in the hope of recovering a genuine sample of Celtic paganism" (1974, 149).

The question is whether this 'inextricable ravelling' is, so to speak, an accident of textual evolution through various conceivable stages between pagan orality and monastic literacy or rather reflects a more or less consistent ideology already fashioned by the creative fusion of various native and ecclesiastical elements. Such an ideology would presumably belong first and foremost to those responsible for the extant literature - a monastically oriented learned caste of Christian *des dána* born of the rapid assimilation of certain native professions to the clerical establishment (ch. 1, 10-11). Like clerics themselves, members of this variously nuanced learned class were, of course, firmly tied by birth, patronage or both to the lay aristocracy (ch. 10, 5), and this convergence of social and political interests is inevitably reflected in the literature.

7. Consequently, whatever native or traditional elements may have gone into its anatomy, early Irish mythology must first and foremost be described as a contemporary attribute of the aristocratic, syncretistic but predominantly Christian culture and associated ideology of those who produced the surviving written texts. From this perspective it immediately emerges that early Christian Irish mytho-history has a thoroughly biblical dynamic quite evident in origin tales of the Irish race, language and law that go back at least as far as the seventh and eighth centuries. Only the first of these categories will be considered here, since the linguistic aetiology has already been touched upon (ch. 2, 4) and the early Irish legal tradition will be the main concern of chapter four.

As intimated earlier (ch. 2, 2), there is good evidence that the Irish genealogical record had been linked to that of the Bible through an elaborate series of intervening generations by at least the second half of the seventh century. Thus two early alliterative poems (*Corp. Gen.* 1-7, cf. Ó Corráin, 1985, 56-7) trace the genealogy of famous prehistoric Leinster dynasts back to Adam via Riphath son of Gomer son of Japheth son of Noah (115b54-5, 116b23-4 and 46, cf. *Gen.* 10:1-3), while a closely related poem (*Corp. Gen.* 199-202) adopts a similar approach to the pedigree of the Munster king Cú-cen-máthair, during whose mid-seventh-century reign it was presumably composed. The last two works follow Japheth's name with a list of peoples descended from him, and according to Isidore of Seville (*Etym.* IX ii 37) these "inhabit the middle part of Asia to the North of Mount Taurus and all Europe as far as the British Ocean" (cf. Ó Corráin, 1985, 63-7).

An adjunct to, or outgrowth of, this genealogical framework was the scheme of invasions of Ireland that was to burgeon into the tangle of later recensions of the so-called *Lebor Gabála* or 'Book of Invasion(s)', which "grew up in response to a medieval problem - the vast blank separating Irish tradition from accepted world history - a problem is solved in a medieval way, allowing Christian universalism to multiply its patterns across an Irish stage. For the early Middle Ages, the Bible served as the primary source for ancient world history, the chronicles of Eusebius and Orosius as its principal compendia, harmonizations and continuations, and Isidore's *Etymologiae* as a general encyclopaedia. These works inspired not only the historiographical context and framework for *LG* but to a remarkable extent the content itself, which adapts even pagan theology and contemporary politics to biblical myths of origin, migration, and population" (Scowcroft, 1988, 63).

Moreover, early versions of this scheme go back at least as far as the eighth century on the evidence of *Sanas Cormaic* and Nennius. The former compilation of etymological material by Cormac mac Cuilleáin (+ 908) contains the laconic statement "read the Invasions of Ireland if you wish to know more fully" (*lege Gabála Éirenn si uis plenius scire*, cf. Ó Corráin, *ibid.*, 67), while versions of the early ninth-century British Latin work bearing Nennius' name briefly describe three invasions by Partholón, Nemed and the three sons of Mil (par. 13). The wanderings of these ancestors of the Gael and their forbears from Egypt to Ireland via Spain are then summarized on the authority of the "most learned of the Irish (*peritissimi Scotorum*)" as follows: "when the sons of Israel came through the Red Sea the Egyptians came and pursued and were drowned, as is read in the Law. There was a noble man from Scythia with a great family among the Egyptians and he was expelled from his kingdom and was there when the Egyptians were drowned, and he did not proceed to pursue the people of God. Those, however, who had survived formed a plan to expel him lest he beleaguer and occupy their kingdom, since their brave men had been drowned in the Red Sea, [he was the son-in-law of Pharaoh, that is the husband of Scorta, daughter of Pharaoh, from which Scotia is said to have been called] and he was expelled. But he wandered for forty two years through Africa, and they came to the altars of the Philistines and through the Salt Lake, and they came among Rusicuda and the mountains of Azaria, and they came through the river Malva and they crossed through Mauritania to the columns of Hercules, and they navigated the Tyrrhenian Sea and reached Spain. And there they lived for many years and increased and multiplied exceedingly. And afterwards they came to Ireland one thousand and two years after the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea . . ." (par. 15). It thus appears that an Irish tradition along these lines was well established by the early ninth century.

The pre-Milesian occupations of Ireland in this account, synchronized from Partholón on "with the foundation of the great world-kingdoms of the Third Age: the Assyrian, the Median, the Persian, and the Alexandrian Greek" (Scowcroft, 1988, 29), are reminiscent of the recurrent themes of famine and journeying between Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt in the period of the Old Testament patriarchs, but the story of the exodus from Egypt and subsequent protracted wanderings to Ireland via Spain represents a particularly clear attempt to create suggestive parallels between Irish history and that of God's chosen people in the Bible. Further exploitations of this deliberate link in the field of law will be considered in the next chapter, and it has been plausibly suggested that the choice of Spain as a springboard was dictated by the doctrine of *Insulore* and Orosius that Ireland (*Hibernia*) lay opposite to and was visible from Spain (*Hiberia*, cf. Baumgarten, 1984, 189-203).

The old canonical section of *Auricept na nÉces* describes Fénus Farsaid (clearly an eponym of the variety of Irish termed *Béluac Feni*) in Egypt as the inventor of the Irish language (*Gódele*) and his pupil Góedel son of Aingen son of Glúmfínd son of Lámfínd son of Agnoman as its eponymous first user (Ahlqvist, 1982, 47; ch. 2, 4). Allowing for an extra generation between Glúmfínd and Lámfínd represented by Feithiar/Éitheoir (an alternative name for Góedel's father according to *Auricept* 1.12) and for trivial fluctuation in the form of a couple of names, this is the genealogy of Glas or Góedel Glas in the Munster (115b47-9) and the first Leinster (148b47-9) poem mentioned above. This regrettably laconic verse thus makes it possible to trace Góedel's role as eponymous ancestor of the Irish (*Góedil*) and

the names of key ancestors linking him to biblical genealogies right back into the seventh century.

By the time of the historical poem *Can a nBunadas na nGáedel* ascribed to the monastic *filii* Máel Mura of Othain (+ 887) this older scheme of Góedel's immediate ancestors had been supplanted by a more effective one giving him a father Néil, son of the Scythian emigré to Egypt Fénius Farsaid, and a mother Scotta, daughter of Pharaoh. This had the advantage of supplying Góedel with a connection to Pharaoh's daughter even more impressive than that of Moses himself and of endowing three key terms relating to the Irish with eponymous ancestors. In the words of the poem, "the Féni are so called from Fénius, fame without reserve, the Gael were so-called from Góedel Glas, the Scots from Scotta" (*J.L.* 16025-6). Although the passage from Nennius above is sadly lacking in names, the Scythian origins of its hero suggest familiarity with this version in the early ninth century, and this would be corroborated by the apparent reference to Néil in the bracketed passage from an alternative manuscript source, if this could be shown to have been part of the original text. Be that as it may, the sequence (Góedel) Glas son of Néil son of Fénius son of Ghínfind etc. is already found in the second alliterative Leinster poem above (116b15-8), which may be as old as the seventh but in any case is hardly later than the eighth century. The bracketed section from Nennius may reflect a tradition that Néil or 'cloud' led the ancestors of the Gael from Egypt, the obvious trigger for this invention being Exodus 13:21-2: "and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way (*Dominus autem praecedebat eos ad ostendendam viam per diem in columna nubis*) . . . The pillar of cloud never failed by day (*numquam defuit columna nubis per diem*)".

The complex question of later developments in the extant recensions of the *Lebor Gabála* is best left to specialists, but there can be no doubt about the repeated use of the Bible and other ecclesiastical material in the formation and elaboration of this fundamental historical doctrine from the seventh century onwards. One point worth noting in this respect is the genealogical recurrence of the name Éber. This, for instance, is the name of the invading son of Míl supposed to have possessed the southern half of Ireland (see below), while the second Leinster poem with the line Góedel < Néil < Fénius gives the name of Góedel's son as Éber (later Éber Scott) instead of the Fahail/Fáchar of the other two poems with the apparently older scheme. The appeal of Éber presumably resided in the fact that it was a reasonable eponym for Ireland's Latin name *Hibernia* (e.g. *Corp. Gen.* 186: *Éber a quo dicitur Hibernia ut alii putant*) in addition to being identical with the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Hebrews (e.g. *Isidore, Etym.* IX ii 5: *Heber nepos Arphaxat a quo Hebraei, cf. Gen. 10:21f.*).

Short of anticipating Mormon heterodoxy by actually claiming descent from a lost tribe of God's chosen people, early Christian Ireland's men of letters went as far as they could to equate their early history with that of biblical Israel by creating deliberate analogues or even, on occasion, contacts between the two. A good example of just how close they were capable of sailing to the wind in this respect is provided by Muirchú's late seventh-century account of the bargain struck by God's angel Victor with Patrick just before the latter's death: "the fourth petition, that all the Irish on the day of judgement be judged by you - thus it is said to the apostles 'and you shall sit and judge the twelve tribes of Israel' - so that you may judge those to whom you have been an apostle" (II, 4(3) in Bieler, 1979). Further examples of

such reasoning will be given below and in subsequent chapters, but one obvious implication was that God had selected Ireland as a promised land for her Gaelic conquerors as represented by the sons of Míl and their followers.

8. A good example of the standard scheme of five post-diluvian invasions is provided by the Tale of Tuán mac Cairill (*J.U.* II, 1207-1355). According to Byrne "the study of Irish prehistory fascinated the medieval Irish, and over the centuries they elaborated a detailed history of the successive invasions of Partholón, Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the sons of Míl . . . preserved in the *Lebor Gabála* or 'Book of Invasions', which was being constantly brought out in new and revised editions until the end of the twelfth century . . . In the earliest version (already current in the eighth century) only the Connachta, together with their Uí Néill off-shoot, and the Eóganachra of Munster are descended from the two sons of Míl; the other peoples of Ireland are sharply distinguished from them and implicitly relegated to an inferior status. This reflects the widely held theory that the country was divided into two spheres of influence: Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga - the overlordships of Tara and Cashel respectively. Soon, however, other dynasties of local importance were provided by the synthetic historians with a line of descent from other sons of Míl, whose family underwent an alarming, if posthumous, increase. Even the more prominent of the Cruithin and Érainn were brought into the Milesian scheme, until only a few insignificant tributary tribes were still reckoned as 'Fir Bolg'" (1973, 9). Thus the narrative and genealogical dichotomy between the Fir Bolg and the sons of Míl expressed the crucial socio-political divide between the *aithech-thuatha* or subject peoples and the *sóer-chlanna* or free lineages.

Comparative evidence and some aspects of their literary representation suggest that a significant nucleus of the Tuatha Dé Danann consists of thinly disguised pagan Irish deities (cf. Rees & Rees, 1961, 28-53; de Vries, 1961, 50-5, 77-8, 82, 100-2, 148-55), but in the developed scheme of invasions they stand between the Fir Bolg and the sons of Míl. The Tuatha Dé's defeat of the Fir Bolg was ultimately responsible for the latter's servile condition in relation to their later Milesian masters. As told at the beginning of *Mesca Ulad* in *II*, defeat of the Tuatha Dé by the sons of Míl was followed by a vertical partition of Ireland, so to speak: "when the sons of Míl of Spain reached Ireland, their sagacity circumvented the Tuatha Dé Danann so that Ireland was left according to the division of Amairgen Glúnmár son of Míl, since he was a chief poet (*rígfili*) and chief judge (*rígbreithem*). Consequently he divided Ireland in two and gave the half that was downwards to the Tuath Dé Danann and the other half to the sons of Míl Espáine, to his own kindred. The Tuath Dé Danann went into hills and *síd*-abodes so that the *síds* below ground submitted to them". The next stage was a horizontal division between northern and southern halves: "the island of Ireland was divided between the two chief sons of Míl, namely Éremón and Éber, into two parts. Éber, moreover, received the southern part of Ireland, whereas Éremón received the northern part with the kingship" (*Corp. Gen.* 123, cf. *Laud Genealogics*, ed. Meyer, 1912, 291).

These displacements bring about the following series of binary social and spatial oppositions: UNFREE PEOPLES/FREE LINEAGES expressed by *Fir Bolg*/*Tuatha Dé*, SUBTERRANEAN (and immortal)/TERRESTRIAL (and mortal) realized as *Tuatha Dé*/*Meic Miled* (who thus supplant the former as masters of

the *Fir Bolg*), and NORTHERN HALF (Leth Cuinn)/SOUTHERN HALF (Leth Moga) embodied by *Éremón/Éber*.

Whatever pre-Christian constituents may have gone into its makeup, the roughly ninth-century saga *Cath Maige Tuired* is firmly and explicitly anchored in a synthetic historical framework that is most apparent in the opening sections about the magical powers, four talismans and invasion of the *Túatha Dé Danann*. Consequently the tendency of some scholars to treat this narrative as almost pure pagan myth seems a trifle surprising. It tells how the *Túatha Dé* reached Ireland and defeated the *Fir Bolg* in the first battle of *Mag Tuired* but were subsequently oppressed by the Fomorians living beyond their borders until they finally routed the enemy in the second battle of that name under the leadership of (their young king) Lug. Since *túath Dé* 'God's people' normally refers to Israel in Old and Middle Irish (see *DIL*, under *túath(b)*), the virtually regular use of *Túath(a) Dé* without the addition of *Danann* in this text (Gray, 1982, 117) looks like a deliberate ploy to associate these conquerors of Ireland with those of the biblical promised land. This will have been easy enough in a composition that makes no reference to the subsequent Milesian invasion, and the supernatural powers and immortality of the *Túatha Dé Danann* in any case rendered their status somewhat ambiguous. John Carey has identified a favourable doctrine that they were an antediluvian race unaffected by the Fall or the Flood and consequently immortal (1987, 76-9), while a hostile alternative view of them as demons is also attested (e.g. *Serglige Con Culainn* ll. 844-9). In the more euhemeristic context of invasion theory there may conceivably have been some perception or promotion of affinities with the similarly named Israelite tribe of Dan (*tribus Dan*), which was forced into the mountains (Jud. 1:34) but later took possession of four talismans and migrated to the edge of the territory to indulge in rather dubious religious practices in Judges 18.

In essence, however, their medial position allows them to be likened to Israel in relation to *Fir Bolg* and Fomorians but to Canaan in relation to the Milesians (cf. Scowcroft, 1988, 38-9). In this respect it is worth noting that the Canaanites are first depicted as superhuman giants to the Israelites at Numbers 13, 31-3. Moreover, after going into the hills the *Túatha Dé Danann* "left five of their number over against each province increasing battles, conflicts, strife and combat among the sons of Mil" (*Mesca Ulad* ll. 9-12) rather as God informs the Israelites that the Canaanite remnants in their midst "shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you" (Jud. 2:3). At this level the *síd*-mounds and hills of the *Túatha Dé Danann* may have been seen as analogous to the heathen high places in the midst of Israel that are repeatedly referred to in the books of Kings (e.g. 2/4 Kgs. 17, 9-11).

Be that as it may, the *Fir Bolg* play a role more fully consistent with that of the partly massacred and partly subjugated Canaanites of the Old Testament, and this may help to explain their name. After claiming, probably correctly, that this term had replaced an older *Buily* attested in Nennius (par. 14), O'Rahilly adverts to the virtual unanimity of medieval Irish sources regarding its etymology: "in the various accounts of the invasion of the *Fir Bolg* more than one childish explanation is offered of their name, which is assumed to mean literally 'men of hags'" (1946, 46). In the Bible the first group of Canaanites to save their skins in the face of divinely ordained genocide were the Hivites of Gibeon by the ruse of pretending to have come from far beyond the boundaries of the promised land: "they did their work

wily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks (*saccos veteres*) upon their asses, and wine bottles, rent and bound up (*utres vinarios scissos atque consutos*)" (Josh. 9:4). Having promised to spare the Gibeonites, the Israelites could not go back on their word after discovering their deceit, but Joshua pronounced "now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God" (9:23). Whatever its 'real' antecedents and etymology, the term *Fir Bolg* was undoubtedly understood by *literati* as 'men of bags/wineskins' (note *bolg* glossing Latin *uter* at ML 132⁷) and may well have been generated from this striking Old Testament episode as a means of endowing it with appropriately servile Canaanite connotations.

Once in possession of the promised land with its vassal pockets, God's people were engaged in more or less constant warfare with neighbouring peoples, especially the Philistines. During these protracted hostilities periods of subjugation alternated with periods of deliverance until king David finally subdued the Philistines. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the Fomorians in *Cath Maige Tuired* are neighbours who oppress and invade the *Túarh Dé* until the latter are finally delivered by their king Lug, whose affinities with the biblical David will be considered in chapter six. Moreover, the Fomorians share with the Philistines a descent from Ham rather than Japheth (e.g. *LU* II. 120-7, cf. 1 Chron. 1:12).

9. It thus appears that the broad outlines of pre-Christian Irish history were fashioned with the help of key features culled from the great biblical narrative up to the end of Kings. As with the Bible and Christian chronology, the coming of the new faith marked the great divide. Thus "Éremón, however, was the first of the Irish (*primus de Scotis*) to reign over all Ireland . . . and of his seed fifty seven kings ruled Ireland before Patrick preached the passion and catholic faith and rule of Christ to the Irish, and after Patrick fifty kings of his issue ruled Ireland" (*Corp. Gen.*, 123, cf. beginning of *Laud Genealogies*). In accordance with this principle of periodization, the Irish king list just cited divides the monarchs into two groups with the rubrics *haec sunt nomina incredentium/qui non crediderunt regum* "these are the names of the unbelieving/of the kings who did not believe" and *haec sunt credentium regum nomina* "these are the names of the believing kings" respectively, the latter beginning with *Lóegaire* son of *Niall*. Thus Irish history was divided into two great epochs before and after (conversion to) the faith, *ria cretim* and *far cretim* or the like respectively (e.g. *LU* 4035; *CIH* 527.14-7), Patrick's mission marking the turning point.

This was conventionally dated to 432 A.D.: "in the year of the Lord 432 Patrick came to Ireland in the ninth year of the reign of Theodosius the Less, in the first year of the episcopate of Sixtus the forty-second bishop of the Roman Church. So Bede and Marcellinus and Isidore compute in their chronicles" (*AU* 432). The main conversion of the Irish to the Christian faith was then supposed to have taken place in the following year: *conversio Scotorum in fidem christianam* (*AI* 433). The fact that both the date of the mission and the standard account of the conversion are highly tendentious and correspondingly unlikely to be correct (McCone, 1984b, 33-4 and 47-9) is beside the point here. What matters is that these were the dates devised and accepted by medieval Irish *literati* as the linchpin of a periodization of Irish history appended to a Christian scheme of the world's six main epochs (*sex aetates*

mundi in Isidore *Etym.* V xxxix marked by Creation, Flood, Abraham, David's reign, Captivity, Christ's birth) according to which the pre-Patrician sections of the annals were divided.

Various figures and events supposed to belong to the pre-Christian period in Ireland could now be given precise dates and interwoven with those ascribed to major people and happenings on the classical and biblical world stage set by the chronicles of Eusebius and others (cf. van Hamel, 1928). This process is duly apparent in varying proportions in extant Irish annalistic compilations such as *AI*, *AT* and *AT*, and this concern with a proper chronological framework for the narrative and genealogical components of *senchus* as a whole is at least as old as the seventh century. For instance, Tirechán is at pains to date Lóegaire's reign and that of Cairbre Nia Fer as precisely as possible in relation to Patrick's activities and death, itself dated 433 years after Christ's passion (1(7), 2, 40(7) in Bieler, 1979). Discrepancies were almost bound to arise as separate schemes of this sort were developed and gradually harmonised with each other. However, the basic point is that any given person, event or narrative of note could be, and usually was, given an appropriate date, as when the author of *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* carefully gives 300 B.C. as the date of the hostilities between Ulster and the rest of Ireland upon which his story is based (par. 5; *trí chéit bliadan riu ngein Christ ro:bal in cocad errorro*). As far as relative and absolute chronology was concerned, the early Irish 'tradition' known to us from the written record was thoroughly historical in conception and presentation.

It has already been pointed out (ch. 2, 3) that Patrick's biographer Muirchú deliberately infused his account of the conflict between king Lóegaire of Tara and the saint with echoes of king Herod of Jerusalem's perfidy towards the baby Jesus, and it will be argued in the next chapter that these resonances with the Gospel story were markedly enhanced in the early eighth century. In this way Patrick's mission to Ireland could be presented as a partial reenactment of Christ's mission to Israel and the world, the corollary being that Patrick's arrival in Ireland with the new faith divided two distinct epochs of her history just as Christ's arrival on the scene divided the Old Testament from the New in biblical and global terms.

In effect, then, Ireland's *literati* periodised their island's *senchus* as a microcosm of current Christian world history, but the extent to which they modelled their assumed ancestors' status and actions on those of God's chosen people in the Old Testament is quite striking in its audacity. It has been seen that the Goedelic exodus from Egypt and subsequent wanderings were deliberately correlated with those of the Israelites, while the struggles of the Túatha Dé Danann with the Fir Bolg and Fomorians in *Cath Maige Tuired* broadly resembled those of the Israelites with the inhabitants of Canaan and the neighbouring Philistines. The following chapter should show that these parallels and contacts were pushed even further in the field of law.

10. In the Bible God's dealings with men after the Flood fall into three main stages. First comes the period of the patriarchs, in which God singles out individuals for a privileged relationship, notably the trio of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with their families or alternatively the trio of Enoch, Noah and Abraham emphasised in the eighth-century Irish *Bibelwerk* as recipients of divinely inspired natural law (McNamara, 1987, 94; see ch. 4, 4). After the exodus from Egypt this is followed by

the covenant with the whole people of Israel, who are thereby bound to observe the Law enunciated through Moses in return for special divine blessings and protection. Finally, there is Christ's new covenant fulfilling the old one and extending it to the gentiles.

Early medieval Ireland's monastic men of learning could hardly make the unbiblical claim that their gentile race had enjoyed a covenant with God before the coming of Christianity, although we shall see below and in chapter four that they eventually developed ambitious doctrines that came perilously close to this position. Consequently Patrick's establishment of the faith among them amounted to a telescoping of the old and new covenants together, and the biblical model would suggest that their pre-Patrician Irish history be seen as an era of Irish 'patriarchs' or individuals blessed with faith and a partial revelation of divine truth even before the apostle Patrick brought the full dispensation on Christ's behalf. In effect, this is an Irish microcosm of the bipartite scheme of the world's redemption presented in the celebrated opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews: *multifariam et multis modis olim Deus loquens patribus in prophetis novissime diebus istis locutus est nobis in Filio* "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son".

What looks like the earliest version of this notion is neatly summarised at the beginning of the *LU* tract *Senchas na Relec*: "a great king of great judgement who was over Ireland, namely Cormac son of Art son of Conn of the Hundred Battles. It was well, then, that Ireland was in his time because judgement of law (*breth recht(g)ale*) was dispensed through Ireland by him, so that the killing of a man in Ireland was not dared in the period of little jubilee, i.e. of seven years (cf. Lev. 25:2-7). For Cormac had faith in the one God according to law. For he had said that he would not worship stones or trees but would worship the one who had made them and was lord behind every creature (*rogo chomsid ar cúl na ul dilla*), namely the one mighty Lord God who had fashioned creation, it is in him he would believe. Consequently he is the third person in Ireland who believed before the coming of Patrick. I.e. Conchobar son of Ness to whom Altus recounted Christ's passion, Morann son of Cairbe Cat-head the second man, Cormac the third, and thus it is likely that other people followed in their footsteps regarding that faith" (*LU* ll. 4041-52, cf. 4057-68 and *Genemain Chormaic* ll. 114-24). Cormac's prescience is based upon Saint Paul's doctrine (Rom. 1:17-25) that from the beginning it was open to anyone to perceive God through his creation but that this opportunity was missed by most of mankind, "who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator (*et coluerunt et servierunt creaturae potius quem creatori*)" (*ibid.*, 25), sentiments clearly echoed by Cormac's argument (note *dhú* glossing Lat. *creatura* at *MI*, 25*1 etc.).

Given that some four hundred years were supposed to have elapsed between the emergence of Christianity in Mediterranean parts and Ireland's conversion by Patrick, a further possibility presented itself: pre-Patrician Irishmen could become acquainted with the new faith either by going abroad or by contact with a foreign visitor to Ireland. Both of these approaches are combined in the Latin lives of the supposedly pre-Patrician saint Ailbe of Emly (cf. McCone, 1984b, 49-52). More to the point here, one of the trin named in *Senchas na Relec* makes a trip abroad to gain wisdom from the apostle to the gentiles: "then there was another collar of Morann, i.e. Morann of great judgement went to Paul the apostle and brought an

epistle from him and it used to be around his neck. When, then, Morann came to his fort on returning from Paul he met one of his bondmaids at the entrance of the fort. When, then, she saw the epistle round his neck she questioned him. "What collar is that, (*cíd sin sein*), Morann?" said she. "Indeed," said Caimin the fool "it shall be Morann's collar (*sin Moraínn*) from today till Doomsday". When, therefore, Morann used to give judgement, he used to put the epistle round his neck and he would not utter falsehood then" (*Scéil na Fir Flatha*, par. 16).

The stories of Cormac and Morann are primarily concerned with how righteous judgements in accordance with Scripture could be precociously delivered in Ireland before Saint Patrick's coming (Ó Corrain, 1987, 285-8), an issue that will be more fully discussed in the next chapter. However, this aspect plays no role in what is probably the oldest and best known tale in this group, namely *Aided Chonchobair*. The earliest and fullest version A of this death-tale falls into two halves. The first of these revolves round the practice of head-hunting (ch. 2, 1) and tells how the calcified brain of the Leinsterman Mes Gegra, slain by the Ulster hero Conall Cernach, becomes a fatal weapon in the hands of the Connachtman Cet mac Mágach, who casts it at the Ulster king Conchobar and brings him down with two thirds of it lodging in his skull (pars. 1-6). Since this section concludes with the words "his grave is there in the place where he fell and a pillar-stone against his head and a pillar-stone against his feet", Carney may well be right in seeing this as the "traditional nucleus" of the tale about Conchobar's end (1955, 296). However, as Carney stresses, "in the story as we have it he is revived in a most unconvincing fashion in order to play a part in what is essentially a Christian story" and "while we may see in the early portion of the tale a genuine traditional story it cannot be shown that there was an early written form of the tale lacking the Christian element" (*ibid.*, 296-7).

In the second part of the story Conchobar is brought home and told by his physician that he will die if the ball is removed but can be healed if the blemish is left in place. The Ulstermen vote for the latter option and Conchobar is patched up but warned against the fatal consequences of getting excited. He remained in this inactive state for seven years until the great earthquake at the time of Christ's crucifixion (Math. 27:51), the cause of which was explained to him by his druid. This news stirred Conchobar to an outburst of difficult *retoiic* deploring these events and he duly died. The end of the LL version refers to an alternative account, more fully recounted in version C, whereby the visiting Roman consul Altus brought Conchobar tidings of the crucifixion with the result that "he then arose and made the onslaught so that the brain of Mes Gegra jumped out of his head. Hence it is that the Irish say that Conchobar is the first pagan who went to heaven in Ireland, because the blood that sprang from his head was a baptism for him" (C, par. 5). In an important forthcoming study Johan Corthals has produced the first complete translation and interpretation of the rhetoric in version A and agrees with Carney that it forms an integral part of the surviving story. Corthals cautiously suggests that this alliterative poem is unlikely on linguistic grounds to have been composed after the early eighth century and shows that it is a theologically sophisticated product firmly based upon the Gospel accounts of Christ's passion well as upon a patristic doctrine of baptism by blood.

Already in the second half of the seventh century we find Tírechán displaying an interest in the posthumous baptism of a royal swineherd who had died well before

the Patrician mission (40 (7-8) in Bieler, 1979), but *Aided Chonchobair* is more than a tale about its hero's precocious baptism by blood. By hallowing the Ulster heroes' leader in the service of Christ it provides a charter for the monastic cultivation of the genre as a whole and shows how appropriate facets of the pre-Christian ethos can find typological fulfilment in the new faith.

11. According to the Middle Irish *Scéil na Fír Flatha* Cormac mac Airt was interested in more than quasi-Mosaic law (cf. ch. 4, 7): "moreover, a most wondrous deed was performed by Cormac then, namely the compiling of Cormac's Psalter (*Saltair Chormaic*), i.e. there were gathered the old men and historians (*sin 7 senchaidí*) of Ireland around Fintan mac Bóchra and Fíthal the poet (*filí*) so that the histories and the genealogies and the reigns of her kings and rulers and their battles and their contests and their antiquities down from the beginning of the world until then were written, so that that is the Psalter of Tara (*Saltair Temrach*), which is the root and foundation and source for the historians of Ireland from then until the present day" (par. 57). The antediluvian near-immortal Fintan functions elsewhere as repository of Ireland's traditions since the creation. For instance, according to the account of various marvels on the night of Conn Cétchathach's birth in *Airne Fíngéin* "the truth of Ireland and her chronology (*coimgne*) and her prophecy and her history (*senchus*) and her due rights have been hidden until tonight. For he (Fintan) is the only (righteous) man that the flood has left behind. It is tonight that the spirit of the prophet Samuel (*spirit Samuél fátha*) has been sent from the Lord in the form of a tender youth to strike a blow into his mouth from a sunbeam so that it may be through the middle of his back, so that there are seven chains or seven eloquences on his tongue thereafter. So that it is tonight that *senchus* and *coimgne* have been made known" (ll. 77-86).

Fintan plays a central role in the roughly tenth- or eleventh-century narrative *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra* 'On the settling of the manor of Tara', which has been subjected by Rees and Rees (1961, 114f.) to a rather fanciful Dumézilian interpretation inspired by alleged Indian parallels. However, even a cursory reading of this thoroughgoing synthetic historical text, which pullulates with explicit Christian and biblical references, reveals it as a particularly elaborate and ambitious attempt to integrate Irish *senchus* with Christian world history through the agency of Fintan.

The Irish establishment gathered for the feast of Tara demands a delimitation of Tara's demesne from the Uí Néill king King Diarmait mac Cerbaill, who seeks the counsel of the clerics Flann Febla and Fiachra mac Colmain (see Ó Riain, 1985, 11, pars. 64-5). These recommend the monastic scholar Cenn Fáelad (ch. 1, 10), who in turn suggests recourse to the five seniors of each province, including Tuán mac Cairill from Ulster (cf. 8 above). Finally, these recommend Noah's grandson Fintan, who proceeds to reveal Ireland's *senchus* to the assembled host. First a more or less standard account of the various invasions from the antediluvian Cessair and post-diluvian Partholón down to the sons of Míl is given in verse (par. 9). This is followed by a poetic account of major judgements in Ireland framed by biblical phases initiated by Moses, David and Christ (par. 12; see ch.4, 4). Then comes Fintan's central narrative about an ancient Irish assembly at which the gigantic Trefuingid Tre-eochair 'Three-sufferer Three-key' with his trinitarian name appears with stone tablets and a branch (from the tree of life in paradise according to *Airne Fíngéin* ll. 52-9) to tell of Christ's crucifixion (par. 14-5). In response to his

questions the king of Ireland tells of the Guel's exodus from Egypt, which is explicitly linked with the Hebrews' departure, and of their subsequent wanderings to Ireland via Spain (par. 16-8).

Trefuilngid remains with the assembled men of Ireland for the biblical span of forty days and forty nights. "'Show us', he said 'what are the foundations of chronology (*aigi coimgni*) of the men of Ireland in the king's house of Tara with you'. 'Indeed, there have not', they said 'been wise historians (*senchaidi*) among us to whom we ventured the foundations of chronology until you came'. 'You shall have that from me', he said 'and I shall establish for you an arrangement of history (*sreith senchusa*) and foundations of the chronology of the hearth of Tara itself with the four quarters of Ireland around it'" (par. 20). This knowledge Trefuilngid reveals to seven sages from each quarter, entrusting its exposition before the men of Ireland to the oldest of these, Fintan, who then reveals the arrangement of four provinces around a centre and tells how an ancient tree in each of these fifths was seeded by a berry from Trefuilngid's branch. Fintan urges that Trefuilngid's dispensation be continued, "for he was an angel of God or he was God himself (*ar ba haingel Dé héside nó fa Dia féisin*" (par. 31).

Finally, Fintan sets up a five-ridged stone at the meeting of the fifths in Uisnech (supposed site of a regular *mór-dál* or 'great assembly' according to *Scéil na Fír Mhatha*, par. 55), "and he assigned a ridge of it to every fifth in Ireland, for thus Tara and Uisnech are in Ireland as its two kidneys are wont to be in a heast" (par. 32). In view of the connection between Fintan and Samuel in *Airne Fíngein* mentioned above this activity may well be a deliberate echo of 1 Sam./Kgs. 7:12: "then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer (Vulg. *Lapis Adiutorii* 'stone of assistance'), saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". Mizpeh, of course, was where the assembled Israelites acclaimed Saul as king (ibid. 10:17f.) after he had been anointed by the prophet (10:1). Arguably still more suggestive is the great covenantal stone set up by Joshua at Shechem just before his death: "and he said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto you; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto you lest perchance ye wish hereafter to deny and lie unto your Lord God" (Josh. 24:27).

Fintan then feels his end drawing nigh and utters autobiographical verses. "So Fintan ended his life and his age in this wise and attained repentance and took communion and the sacrament from the hand of bishop Ere son of Ochomon son of Fidach, and the spirit of Patrick and Brigit came so that they were present at his passing. It is uncertain, however, where he has been buried, but people think it is in his physical body that he was taken to some secret divine place, as Elijah and Enoch were taken to paradise, so that they are awaiting the resurrection of that aged patriarch (*sruthseandóir*), i.e. Fintan son of Bóchra son of Eichier son of Ríal son of Annid son of Ham son of Noah son of Lamech. *Finit. Amen.*" (par. 36).

Thus this carefully constructed frame narrative comes full circle. It begins with a Christian Irish establishment confronted by a problem and seeking a solution in the past through the agency of clerics, who secure access to the island's oldest surviving patriarch, the very embodiment of pre-Patrician *senchus*. At the text's centre the promulgation of that *senchus* by 'God's angel or God himself' Trefuilngid is revealed. In turn, the antediluvian Fintan's contact with Ireland's Christian generation brings him to final redemption. Thus the realms of Ireland's pre- and post-

Patrician *senchus*, Irish and biblical world history; the Old and the New Testament meet, interact and finally merge. The basic message is, surely, that Irish *senchus* is rooted in God's word, vouchsafed to the pre-Patrician Irish as to the pre-covenant patriarchs of Israel, and is, moreover, firmly under the Church's control.

We now have an obvious answer to the riddle of how early Christian Ireland's monastically oriented *literati*, working within a historical framework modelled upon the Bible, could conscientiously regard their pre-Christian past as an object worthy of earnest attention. In effect, narratives purporting to cover people and events prior to Patrick's mission and establishment of the true faith could be treated as a kind of 'Old Testament' of the Irish race, a socially, morally and aetiologically instructive God-given record perfected but by no means invalidated by the new dispensation of Christianity. Since the Old Testament itself abounds with apparently unedifying details held to have a sacred purpose (cf. ch. 2, 1), there was no need to be unduly squeamish about the contents of analogous Irish narratives. After all, the Bible itself bears abundant testimony to the possibility of conveying a moral negatively by depicting the evil consequences of bad behaviour as well as by more straightforward positive means.

12. Virtually all of its critics past and present are agreed about the narrative brilliance of *Scéla Muice Meic Da Thó* and what Nora Chadwick terms its "laconic humour and a spirit of ripe burlesque" (1968, 81), but thereafter interpretations diverge markedly. For Thurneysen "it gives a vivid picture of the warlike spirit of the time" (1935, 1), whereas for Chadwick it is rather "a well-preserved heroic tradition, seen through the prismatic lens of a later age" (ibid., 91). More recently Cornelius Buttner has argued for its coherent structure and concern with socio-political themes such as the "successful defence of honor, and a consequent enhancement of the prestige of Leinster" (1982, 68) as well as with the moral dimension implied by its status as "a classic lesson in the likelihood that excess will lead to futility" (ibid., 65). On the other hand, Jeffrey Gantz (1981, 179-80) and Donnchadh Ó Corráin regard it as, in the latter's words, "a sophisticated parody of the heroic genre as represented by *Táin Bó Cúailgne*" (1985, 86).

For all its decidedly grim humour and moments of bathos, this taut and purposeful narrative is far from frivolous and can hardly be dismissed as a mere burlesque with no aim beyond parody for entertainment's sake. Rather the humour and bathos help to convey a message that is no less serious for being subversive of the untrammelled heroic ethos. I would suggest that what we have here is a deadly earnest, if at times amusing, moral satire in the classical tradition of the ever popular Horace or Juvenal but inevitably geared by its monastic author to Christian principles.

The action begins with the greedy and inconsiderate requests of those powerful rivals Connacht and Ulster for Mac Da Thó's great hound. At a loss for a solution, Mac Da Thó lapses into *sochú* or sloth until his wife advises him to offer the dog to each side without the other's knowledge. One does not, of course, need to go beyond chapter three of Genesis to appreciate the disastrous consequences of following female counsel, and the folly of trusting women is duly emphasised in early Irish literature, a classic instance being the great misogynist liany in section 16 of *Tecosca Cormaic*. The subsequent extensive losses of honour, life and property in our tale all stem ultimately from Mac Da Thó's craven abdication of proper male responsibility to follow his wife's Machiavellian advice.

Mac Da Thó duly makes the deceitful promise to both sides and bids them come proudly on a stated day to partake of his bounty. However, as usual in this story, expectations are cruelly frustrated and the enemy companies take their seats in an atmosphere of sullen hatred. Even the majestic pig on which they are to feast is not really the oversized *cochon au lait* that it seems: "three score milch-cows feeding it for seven years. However, it was on poison that it was being fed so that the slaughter of the men of Ireland might be carried out through it" (par. 5). There follows Bricriu's malicious proposal that the privilege of carving be awarded by contests that take the form of boasting. After various major Ulster heroes have been disgraced by Cet mac Mágach in this, Cet himself is in turn devastatingly worsted by Conall Cernach. Conall's division of the pig begins with an act of gross gluttony and culminates in deliberate niggardliness towards the men of Connacht, whose envious and angry response swiftly leads to a savage conflict with heavy losses on both sides. Ailill and Medb's charioteer, Fer Loga, succeeds in slaying Mac Da Thó's hound and then surprises the king of the victorious Ulstermen, Conchobar, into a degrading agreement to have the women of his province admire this opportunist upstart as a warrior of note.

The striking bathos of this concluding episode has never been satisfactorily explained. Its deliberate structural similarity to the tale of Cú Chulainn's slaughter of the Culann the smith's savage hound has already been pointed out, as has the contrast between Cú Chulainn's resultant permanent attainment of ideal warrior status and the temporary or bogus benefits reaped by the mere charioteer Fer Loga from a similar action (see 5 above). It is as if a chauffeur were to spend a modest pool win on a brief taste of the high life before returning to his previous employment. However, its very bathos can be seen as precisely the point of this conclusion, which subverts the love of fighting as an end in itself by representing battle as a bagatelle in which, with luck, even the lowly horn might distinguish themselves at their betters' expense, a scenario hardly calculated to appeal to an aristocratic audience.

All in all, the author of this splendidly entertaining saga presents us with a memorable gallery of morally reprehensible characters and actions. As the plot unfolds, major heroes, up to and including the king of Ulster himself, are humiliated one by one, and there is widespread death and destruction extending to the ultimate cause of the conflict, Mac Da Thó's hound, which is thus lost to owner and would-be owner alike. The thoroughly unchristian behaviour depicted in *Scéla Muice Meic Da Tó* thus proves totally futile and counter-productive for all concerned. In effect, this story is a glorious moral essay on the consequences, dire, absurd or both as the case might be, of human vanity (cf. Buttimer, 1982, 65). As the Book of Proverbs puts it, "pride goeth before destruction and an haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18). *Scéla Muice* illustrates a veritable catalogue of serious sins, all of them duly catastrophic, and among other things indirectly issues a salutary reminder that "these six things doth the Lord hate: yea seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among his brethren" (Prov. 6:16-9).

The Fer Loga episode hardly manifests the deliberate allusions to the story of Cú Chulainn and the hound that we might expect in a primarily literary parody. Rather

its monastic author has displayed the ability, noted earlier with regard to Muirchú and biblical narrative, to apprehend the structural core or essence of his model and recreate it with rather different surface details and such permutations as suited his purpose. This is a classic stratagem for generating myths, and the essentially mythological cast of thought underlying much early Irish narrative is in any case clear from its accessibility to structuralist approaches developed with reference to other mythical traditions. The historicising chronological framework in which the early Irish literary corpus is anchored no more detracts from this fundamental quality than it does in the case of the Bible, which is likewise proving to contain plenty of material amenable to structuralist interpretations as myth (cf. Leach and Aycock, 1983). Indeed, basic similarities between native and biblical mythopoetic concepts and techniques seem to have endowed medieval Irish *literati* with a remarkable instinctive grasp of the purport of biblical narrative, genealogy etc. that the modern rationalist can only hope to match with mechanical structuralist aids. The upshot was a profound creative interplay between their native and ecclesiastical inheritance to produce the thoroughly integrated hybrid medium in which all extant early Irish literature, history and mythology seems to be rooted. Although endowed with its own rationale and momentum, this matrix continued to be able to adapt and absorb elements from the Bible or elsewhere as occasion demanded.

13. On the other hand, Irish monastic scholars were also heirs to a late classical and early medieval ecclesiastical tradition that was uncomfortable with certain aspects of the Old Testament in particular and correspondingly prone to seek more rational or edifying interpretations by means of allegory and historical typology, the central role of which in medieval thought has been emphasised above (see 2). Certain allegoristic modes of interpretation, for instance taking a woman to represent the Church (see below), were so standard that any monastic writer might reasonably expect readers to make the commoner symbolic equations of this type, at least when appropriately cued. Given that mythical modes of thought and composition were apparently still being vigorously practised by early Christian Ireland's monastic men of letters, the intriguing possibility presents itself that allegorical values could be 'remythologised', so to speak, as constituents of new narratives.

No early Irish narrative genres have been more discussed than those of the *echtrae* or 'outing' and the *immram* or 'voyage'. While acknowledging some interaction, nativists tend to view the former as fundamentally pagan or traditional and the latter as essentially ecclesiastical (e.g. Mac Cana, 1980, 77). This attempt to apply a classificatory straitjacket has inevitably led to a sterile debate as to whether the early *Immram Bran*, being allegedly less Christian (at least when rid of certain inconvenient 'interpolations') than other extant voyage tales, should not rather be considered an *echtrae* (so David Dumville, 1976). However, Séamus Mac Mathúna has recently supplied the *reductio ad absurdum* by referring to "the vexed question of the genre to which *Bran* actually belongs. Is it an *echtrae* or is it an *immram*? Is it an *echtrae* with *immram* elements or is it an *immram* with *echtrae* elements?" (1985, 275). The irrelevance of the alleged dichotomy between native and ecclesiastical genres to this futile taxonomic exercise is well illustrated by what is generally regarded as the oldest extant *echtrae*, *Echtrae Chonlai*.

In this short tale a woman comes to summon Conn Cétchathach's son Conlae from the world of death to the land of the living, where there is no death, sin or

transgression but an abundance of feasting and peace under a fine king. Although she appears only to Conlac, the whole gathering can hear her, but Conn gets his druid to cast a spell rendering her invisible and inaudible. However, as she disappears she throws an apple to Conlac, who refuses all food or drink save the apple, which nevertheless stays whole. Conlac is filled with desire for the woman but, on her return, Conn again summons the druid. This time the woman foretells the coming of a righteous man with many followers who will destroy druidry before the Devil. Although in two minds about leaving his own life and people, Conlac finally jumps into the boat with her and disappears.

Carney has argued persuasively that *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai* are thoroughly Christian allegories (1955, 280-95 and 1969, 162-5 respectively), but Mac Cana maintains "that, notwithstanding the palpable Christian motivation of the authors of *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai*, their image of the Otherworld is essentially a traditional one in which the Christian notion of heavenly chastity has as yet no function" (1976, 114) and adheres to the wild claim that nine priestesses located by first-century A.D. geographer Pomponius Mela on an island off the Armorican coast "are an early literary reflex of the inhabitants of the otherworld Land of Women, and in particular of the thrice nine women who welcome the voyagers in *Immram Brain*" (ibid., 112). Moreover, the attitude of the two tales' monastic redactors to paganism was supposedly governed by "a benign ecumenism that is unclouded by propaganda or polemic" (ibid., 95), tending merely "to make a distinction between benign paganism and malignant paganism and to regard druidism as the embodiment of the latter" (ibid., 96). In identifying the woman's function, Mac Cana applies the usual nativist tag of pagan sovereignty goddess (ibid., 110-4), and states of *Echtrae Chonlai* that "the whole *raison d'être* of the tale is the clash of passion and pietas in the person of Conlac and the clash of ideologies and moralities represented by the druid on the one hand and the fairy woman on the other" (ibid., 98).

As Scowcroft has pertinently remarked of late, "students of early Irish tradition have too often pursued a kind of literary archaeology, excavating (sometimes creating) documentary ruins out of which to reconstruct pagan antiquity. Ignoring or dismissing the churches built of that same ancient stone, they may fail to see that their reconstructions rest on cruciform foundations" (1988, 1). In the present instance, not only is 'benign ecumenism' towards any variety of paganism a highly improbable governing motive for a monastic redactor, as already pointed out (ch. 1, 4), but the allegedly pagan goddess in *Echtrae Chonlai* represents the land of the living as a sinless paradise in an obviously Christian sense and makes an unmistakable prophecy about the coming of Patrick and Christianity. Indeed, Carney (1969, 162-5) has made the brilliant suggestion that the everlasting apple given by the woman to Conlac is the converse of the fruit given by Eve to Adam, namely an apple from the tree of life mentioned in Genesis 3:22-4, an interpretation supported by the vignette of Conlac and his woman in the rather later *Echtra Thaidy mheic Chein* (O'Grady, 1892, 350). We may further compare Trefuilngid's branch with three fruits, which is explicitly stated by *Ainne Fingéin* to come from the tree in paradise (see 11 above). Presumably the three fruits symbolise the Holy Trinity, and a similar origin and significance may be surmised for the branch with three apples given to Cormac by his visitor from a land without death, decay or sin in *Scéil na Fír Flatha* (pars. 25-7). As Carney rightly points out, the central conflict in