

Cú Chulainn concludes by extolling the benefits of believing in Patrick and reveals that even his apparently glorious accoutrements have been supplied by the saint for the occasion. Finally, "the earth came over Lóegaire, heaven is promised to Cú Chulainn" (9539-40). *LU* alone adding that "Lóegaire then believed in Patrick" (9540).

The scheme of saint, helper-hero and king here essentially replicates that of saint (Patrick again), helper-poet (Dubthach) and king (Lóegaire again) in the legal sphere (ch. 4, 5). The pathetic dependence of the once invincible main hero of the Ulster tales upon St. Patrick in order to escape the torments of hell is unremittingly hammered home in this powerful narrative: his greatness is in the past, and only the cleric's power can recreate any semblance of it in the present or secure him a bearable future. Patrick thus proves to have virtually complete control over the hero's image and message, which invites the reader to consider Scáth's nasty transmarine kingdom as a rather pale allegorical reflection of hell, just as the blissful land overseas functions as an allegory of the Christian paradise in *Immram Brain and Echtrae Chanlaí* (ch. 3, 13). Cú Chulainn may have escaped from Scáth's clutches under his own steam, but the real hell is a different matter. The very embodiment of the pre-Christian heroic tradition, Cú Chulainn can only be saved by entering the service of the Church and submitting to clerical manipulation.

Carney provides convenient synopses of the various main accounts of the *fallsigud* or "revealing" of early Christian Ireland's foremost literary epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (1955, 166-79). The earliest attested of these (*LL* 32878-909, trans. Kinsella, 1970, 1-2) tells how Ireland's *filid* were gathered before the traditionally seventh-century poet Senchán Torpéist (cf. Thurneysen, 1921, 252, n.2) "to see if they remembered *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in its entirety, and they said that they only knew bits of it. Then Senchán asked his pupils which of them would go with his blessing to Latin lands to learn the *Táin* which the sage (*in súl*) had taken eastwards in exchange for the *cuibne*" (32880-3), an unmistakable reference to the scholarly bishop Isidore of Seville (+636), whose enormously influential *Etymologiae* were known in Ireland as the *cu(i)llmen(n)* or "summit" of knowledge (Ó Máille, 1921). Two pupils, one of them Senchán's own son Múrgen, duly set out. When they reach Fergus mac Roig's gravestone in Connacht, Múrgen is left to sit thereon alone and chant a lay to it as if it were Fergus himself. A great mist descends and keeps him from his followers for three days and nights, during which Fergus appears in all his glory "and then recites the whole *Táin* to him as it was done from beginning to end. However, others say it is to Senchán it was recited after a fast against the saints of Fergus's race, and it were no wonder if it should have been so. Then they all go to Senchán and recount their adventures to him and he was grateful to them (then" (32895-6).

Here we see the *filid* of Ireland obtaining direct access to past events in the middle ground of heroic epiphany between an inadequate oral tradition and the literate ecclesiastical learning that had supplanted it. The Church's indispensability as a catalyst of poetic revelation, also stressed in the "Caldron of poesy" (ch. 7, 6), is made still more explicit in the other versions, where various saints are invoked to help the poets communicate with Fergus, a further application of the Christian saint's perceived affinities with the pre-Christian hero and a good example of the well attested symbiosis between churchmen and *filid* in early Christian Ireland (ch. 1, 10-11). As Nagy puts it, "the role of calling forth the dead Fergus is played jointly



by the seeking poets and the saints of Ireland, who through their joined powers accomplish the extraordinary deed" (1983, 141-2). In effect, these texts candidly acknowledge that nothing like a complete *Táin* was available in the early seventh century, its basis in oral tradition being at best fragmentary, and that it owed its subsequent existence to the ecclesiastically mediated efforts of poets. In straightforward modern parlance, it was a literary creation smacking of monastic learning, as Thurneysen cogently argued long ago (1921, 96-7).

Being aware that full-scale literacy had first reached their island in the wake of Christianity, medieval Irish men of letters had to confront the problem of how the truth about their pre-Christian *senchus* could be known. Consequently the conversion of oral into written testimony was a matter of profound concern to them, as Nagy has shown with reference to what he dubs these "close encounters of the traditional kind": "like Patrick in the tales discussed above, the Irish *literati*, extending the bounds of the new Christian culture, were attempting to record the words of a wondrous being, the oral tradition, that had its own modes of generation and transmission" (ibid., 136).

However, it might be argued that by regularly cutting out intermediaries to recover an eyewitness account, the kind of *fiadnaisé* acceptable as evidence in court (Bíochy, *Críth Gablach*, 90-1), this genre actually shows itself to be mistrustful or even subversive of oral tradition, which by definition entails a *chain* of such testimonies (Vansina, 1973, 19). That the 'close encounter' scenario was not specifically intended to justify the recording of genuine oral traditions is indicated by its application to the transmission of *senchus* as a whole, including key 'synthetic' historical schemes whose high literary and ecclesiastical content is not in dispute (ch. 3, 1 and 6-9). *Do Suidgud Tollaich Temra* has already been discussed, and a further example of this type is *Scéil Tuáin meic Cairill* (LU 1207-1355), in which the ancient shape-changing Tuán, eager to hear God's word, encounters St. Finnian of Moville and tells him of Ireland's five post-diluvian invasions.

It thus seems that, rather than placing much trust in an actual or idealized oral tradition's capacity to transmit their pre-Patrician traditions reliably, the clerical establishment adopted an obvious enough medieval solution to the problem of authentication by claiming for the Church and her learned appendages privileged access to the truth about the past through divine revelation. Classically liminal heroes like Cú Chulainn and Fergus could then be enlisted as suitable messengers along with other bridgers of gaps such as the patriarchal Fintan and Tuán or the angelic Trefuilngid, the Church's essential controlling role being personified by a saintly go-between or near equivalent. Through such interchanges between hero and saint on the boundary between the two, knowledge of the dead or dormant pagan past could be authoritatively channeled by the Church's allies and representatives into the Christian present. In practice, this doctrine was a charter for the monastically oriented literary reworking and invention of saga and other *senchus* as required, within the limits imposed by the need to avoid straining credibility by unduly great or sudden divergences from a received tradition increasingly bolstered by writing. Charters, of course, are usually intended for use.

## Druids and outlaws

1. The *fian* and some of its basic traits have already been alluded to here and there in the preceding chapters (ch. 1, 7; ch. 3, 4; ch. 5, 8; ch. 7, 3 and 8-9; ch. 8, 7). It is now the turn of these and various other groups associated with them on the fringes of early Irish society to be considered in greater detail.

In ancient Ireland the early life of a girl or, even more pronouncedly, a boy was divided into distinct phases. After being reared in the parental home during infancy (*maice*), a child of free birth was usually sent away to be fostered when still quite young (Kelly, 1988, 86), the normal age for this being seven years according to *Bretha Crólige* (par. 7; Binchy, 1938, 8-9). Fosterage for affection (*altramm seirce*) with friends or relatives for no fee may well continue an Indo-European practice, convincingly documented by Jan Bremmer (1976), of giving a young boy to the head of his mother's kin, typically her father or oldest brother, to be reared. A good literary example of this institution bordering on the avunculate, Cú Chulainn's precociously early departure for fosterage with his mother's brother Conchobar in the first of his *mac gnímrada* or "youthful deeds" in the *Táin* (ll. 399-456), has been discussed along with others by Ó Cathasaigh (1986b, esp. 152-5). However, the type of fosterage afforded most prominence in surviving legal material is a kind of early medieval Irish equivalent of the English 'public' school entailing the professional fosterage and training of a number of children for a fee and associated privileges determined strictly by parental rank (Kelly, *ibid.*, 87-8).

There is some disagreement between the texts as to whether fosterage was generally concluded at the age of fourteen or seventeen years, *Crith Gablach* opting for the former and *Bretha Crólige* for the latter (*ibid.*, 88-9). However, regardless of which of these is correct or of whether they reflect variations or changes in practice, the main concern of the present chapter is with the well born young male's position during the intermediate phase between the end of fosterage (*altrann*) and the attainment of manhood (*fertu*) along with the inheritance of landed property (*trehad*).

2. Concerning the lowest grade of freeman it recognises, *Crith Gablach* asks: "why is this man called a 'man of middle huts(?)' (*fer midboth*)? Because he has come from childhood, from the law of fosterage, and has not reached manhood



(*arindí do;ndichet a mmaici, a ddligiud altruma, ⁊ nad:roig fertaid*). Is a particular age assigned to the *fer midboth* who swears concerning penalties (*imma:thuig smachtu*)? An age of fourteen years is assigned. The reason he cannot maintain testimony is that he who has not already taken possession or inheritance (*naid:rogaib seib ná comarbus ria sin*) is not capable of testimony except regarding every trifle before seventeen years, unless a free adult (*fer féne*) maintain it with him" (par. 6).

Regarding the second *fer midboth* "who maintains testimony" (*con:oi insci*), it is asked: "is [a particular age] assigned [to him? It is assigned] from fourteen years to twenty, to beard-encirclement. Though it be that he acquire the estate of a cow-freeman (*bó-aire*) before he have an encircling beard, his oath does not avail except according to the oath of a *fer midboth*. Moreover, though he be without taking inheritance until old age, his oath still does not go beyond the *fer midboth*. His fief is five *séts* (i.e. two and a half milch-cows), his render a wether with its accessories. That is the render of an *óen-chiniud*, a man who does not occupy possessions or land for himself (*fer nad:trebu seib ná ferann dó fadeisin*) . . . No one is allowed to set up his house as long as he is a minor until he is capable of separate estate ownership (*sain-trebad*) and of taking possessions (*gabál seib*), (and this applies to) a *fer midboth* as long as he be an *óen-chiniud*, except his lord be counterbound . . ." (par. 9).

It is apparent from this account that graduation to full legal status as an adult within the settled landowning laity of the *tuath* depended upon the fulfilment of two conditions, namely the attainment of a minimum age of twenty symbolized by growth of a full beard and the acquisition of the appropriate property rating by inheritance. Hence the reluctance of an adult warrior like Nad Crantail to fight with the beardless Cú Chulainn in the *Táin* (ll. 1443-56) or the people of Tara's initial reaction to Conaire's youthful appearance naked and armed only with a sling to claim the kingship in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: "it seems to us that our bull-feast and our incantation of truth have been ruined since it is a beardless youth that was shown to us therein" (par. 15). In the absence of either one of these qualifications, progress from the relatively low status of *fer midboth* to the higher one of *bó-aire* or the like must wait. In the case of an under-age person with the necessary inheritance this would only be a matter of time, six years at most, but failure to inherit the requisite property might result in lasting *fer midboth* status.

Binchy's textually untenable attempt to distinguish between a junior and a senior *fer midboth* aged 14-17 and 17-20 years respectively has been effectively criticised by McLeod (1982b), who proposes a single age group of 14-20 further subdivided on the basis of non-inheritance versus inheritance. However, this view is based upon a misinterpretation of the passage about the junior *fer midboth*, which clearly states that his definitive failure to maintain testimony did not extend beyond the seventeenth year. The solution would seem to be that both age and inheritance were involved: up to the age of seventeen failure to inherit entailed the lower *fer midboth* status, the upper grade being available from his fourteenth year to one who had inherited property but only from his seventeenth to one who had not. Moreover, the twentieth year only marked transition from the upper *fer midboth* to a higher status for the inheritor of sufficient property, the landless *óen-chiniud* being condemned to remain at the former level until such time as he inherited, if ever.

Apart from a brief convergence in status from the ages of seventeen to twenty, the distinction between the inheritor of independent landed property or *trebad* and



the non-inheriting *óen-chiniud* is crucial throughout, differentiating the upper from the lower *fer midboth* in the fourteen-to-seventeen age group and the full legal status of *bó-aire* etc. from the merely partial competence of the upper *fer midboth* after the age of twenty.

Who, then, was this *óen-chiniud* or "sole kin" caught in limbo, as it were, between the end of fosterage and the more or less postponed inheritance of the independent property necessary to secure full legal status as a member of landed society? Thurneysen's rather desperate suggestion that he was "the last of an impoverished kindred (*fine*)" hardly squared either with mention in the sources of "his 'kin' . . . and his relatives . . . who can impugn his contract, if it exceeds what is normal" or with his obvious lack of inheritance since "in accordance with the Irish law of inheritance whereby the collateral kin of one who dies childless inherit, such a 'last descendent' ought to be particularly rich in land" (1923, 347). On the other hand, someone legally cut off from his kin until such time as he should inherit would fit the bill nicely. One is reminded of the similar term *é-clann*, meaning literally "without family", applied to warriors in medieval Irish sources (see *DIL*), and the classically propertiless status of the *fian*-warrior emerges clearly from *Tecosca Cormaic's* dictum *fénnid cách co trebad* "every one is a *fian*-member until (he acquires) landed property" (par. 31, 10).

The *óen-chiniud's* likely association with the warlike *fian* is confirmed by *Táin Bó Flidais*, in which the Ulster exiles' *óen-chinidí* are cast in the role of naked berserks who intervene at the crucial stage of a siege to snatch victory for them and their Connacht allies from the jaws of defeat: *la sodain at-regat anchinnidí Ulad ⁊ siat lomnocht ⁊ do:berat fohairt trén tolchar co feirg ⁊ londnus érmair co rrucsat an n-índorus inna cind co mhóí for medon ind lis ⁊ tlagait Conachta léo immalle* "thereupon the Ulster *óen-chiniuds* arose stark naked and launched a strong, vigorous attack with wrath and enormous fury so that they brought the lintel down upon them (the enemy) until it was on the middle of the courtyard, and the Connachtmen joined them" (*LU* 1606-8).

3. It appears, then, that the early Irish *fian* catered for propertiless males of free birth who had left fosterage but had not yet inherited the property needed to settle down as full landowning members of the *tdath* liable to military service only on proclamation of a *slógad* or "hosting" (ch. 5, 8; Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 106). Moreover, the laws associate the latter status with a formal marriage in which both spouses should ideally be of the same social class and to which both or either should contribute the requisite property (see Kelly, 1988, 70-3). Since such matrimony obviously presupposed either the inheritance of property in one's own right, typically on the death of one's father, or marriage to an heiress cousin endowed by the strictly circumscribed "Zelophahad" rule (ch. 4, 8), members of the *fian* can hardly have been married in the normal course of things.

Given the comparative paucity of *flannaigecht* or Fenian lore in the pre-Norman record (see Meyer, 1910b), our fullest literary accounts of the *fian's* ideals and way of life come from rather later sources, above all that massive twelfth- or thirteenth-century composition *Acallam na Senórach*. The basic traits of *flannaigecht* in this broader perspective have been admirably brought out by Nagy's recent revolutionary study of *The wisdom of the outlaw* (1985), and seem to be reasonably congruent with such information as earlier texts give about the *fian* as a social



institution in early Christian Ireland, the focal point of the present chapter.

Whatever the propensities of later texts like the *Acallam* to differentiate a somewhat romanticized *féindid* or *fian*-member from the disreputable *díberg(sach)* or brigand, these terms seem to have been more or less interchangeable in the earlier sources (McCone, 1986d, 1-7). Thus when in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* Conaire's fosterbrothers, the three sons of the *féindid* Donn Désa (par. 9), complain about their inability to practise the profession (*dán*) of their father and grandfather, this is described as *gat 7 brat 7 gain daine 7 díberg* "theft and plunder and slaughter of people and *díberg*" (par. 18). Subsequently "they took up brigandage (*díberg*) with the sons of the lords/kings of the men of Ireland about them (*co maccaib flaithi fer nÉrenn impu*)" (par. 20), a passage that corroborates the *Acallam*'s repeated designation of *fian*-members as *maic rí* "kings' sons" with regard to the preponderantly youthful and aristocratic make-up of such bands. Moreover, the unprovoked pursuit of Maine Milscothach's swineherd by Donn Désa's sons and their fellow *díbergs* (par. 20) is reminiscent of the temporarily resurrected son of Mac Cais's complaint to Patrick in Tirechán's memoir: "I was the swineherd of Lugair king of Irrúath. The *fian* of the son of Mac Con slew me (*iugulavit me fian maicc Maicc Con*) in the reign of Cairbre Nia Fer" (40 (7); Bieler, 1979, 154-5).

These *díberga* or (bands of) brigands and the British counterparts with whom they eventually combine are also termed *fianna* on occasion in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (e.g. par. 145), a particularly striking instance being furnished by the description of their landing in Ireland with murderous intent: "the brigands (*díbergaig*) leap onto Trácht Fuirbthin and bring a stone for each man with them to make a carn. For the *fian*-bands (*fiána*) distinguished at the outset between raiding and decision in battle (*eter orgain 7 maidm n-imáiric*). It is a column that they used to plant when it was decision in battle, but a carn that they used to set up when it was raiding. It was a carn, then, that they set up that time, since it was raiding, and a long way from the house at that lest they be overheard or seen from the house. They made the carn for two reasons, firstly because a carn was customary for brigandage/a brigand (*ba béis carn la díbeirg*) and secondly so that they might discover their losses at the hostel. Every one who should come safe from it would take his stone from the carn so that the stones of the people who had been killed there would be left" (J.I. 7028-37; cf. par. 67).

The brief genealogical tale of Creidne and her three sons, eponymous ancestors of the three main branches of the Conaille of Louth, neatly illustrates the association of *fiannas* or life in the *fian* with both raiding and lack of proper inheritance: "it is a daughter who bore them to her father, i.e. Creidne the female *fian*-leader (*ban-féinnid*) was their mother, she being the daughter of Conall Costamail. Conall belonged to Conchobar's province, and was ashamed that his daughter should bear him sons. They were put from him then into the edge of the territory. For Conall was forced to separate these sons from him on account of his queen, whose name was Aife, since the conflict between Aife and Creidne was great. Thereafter Creidne entered upon *fiannas* to plunder her father (*do fogail a hathar*) and her stepmother on account of her sons (being put) outside their ancestral kindred. She had three nines on *fiannas*, wore her hair plaited behind, and used to attack (by) sea and land alike. It is for this she was called Creidne the *fian*-leader (*C. ba féinnid*). Seven years she spent in exile (i.e. between Ireland and Britain) until she made peace with her father", adequate lands being promised to her sons (*Corp. Gen.*, 154).



As Richard Sharpe has demonstrated (1979, 80-7), *díberg* is represented in the hagiographical record as a ritualized form of brigandage involving the wearing of special marks (*stigmata* or *signa*) on the head in token of a vow to kill someone, a particularly illuminating instance being Muirchú's description of the ferocious Ulsterman Maccuil moecu Greccae "residing in a mountainous, rough and high place in Druimm moecu Echach, where he daily exercised his lordship by taking up most wicked signs of cruelty (*signa nequissima crudelitatis*, significantly glossed *díberca* in the early ninth-century Book of Armagh text) and killing passing visitors with cruel criminality" (I 23(3); Bieler, 1979, 102-3). The size of these bands ranges widely in the sources from small groups of three or five through Creidne's twenty seven above to troops several hundred strong in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (par.s 41-4), Sharpe referring to "the frequent mention of men in multiples of three, most commonly nine" (ibid., 84). The opening of *Táin Bó Fraích* may indicate a tendency for such groups to be made up of rough cuevals: "fifty kings' sons (*coíca mac rig*) was the number of his household, all of the same age (*comais*) and equality with him both in appearance and apparel".

As might be expected of unattached young men past the age of puberty, the *fian*-members' characteristically unmarried state was no bar to sexual relations with women, however transitory. There is no shortage of such episodes in later Fenian literature (see Nagy, 1985, 52 etc.), and *díberg* seems to have been a byword for sexual promiscuity in the earlier period too. In an extraordinary narrative from the Book of Leinster St. Moling punctures his own member with an awl to avoid temptation when a neighbour's wife bares her crotch (*gabul*) to him, and then shows himself as firm a believer as W.S. Gilbert's Mikado in letting the punishment fit the crime: "'very well, woman,' said he 'may bad people distort your crotch (*ra:riastrat droch-dóine do gabul*) until they have their fill of you'. 'That shall not be true' she said. 'There is not a man in Ireland who would try it on with me, thanks to my dogs'. It is afterwards, then, that brigands (*díbergaig*) came to her so that twelve of them mounted her" (LL 36707-10; Hall, 1930).

However, there was more to the Fenian way of life than the sexual licence, robbery and violence particularly associated with *díberg*. Although the more harmless role of nomadic hunters in the wild so prominent in the often somewhat romanticized later accounts tends to be neglected in the older sources, its major contribution to the *fian*'s livelihood in the early period can hardly be doubted. Thus a curious Old Irish charm preserved in the ninth-century *Codex Sancti Pauli* testifies to this side of their activities as well as to the role of inheritance in determining the choice between a settled farming and a vagrant hunting career in *tuath* and *fian* respectively: "I wish for the wood (wooden board?) of notice (?) and of silver raven (chief?) between fire and wall, I wish for the three thin boars. May a fairy attend my encounter with cereal and dairy produce (*ith γ milcht*) of whatever I move it for. If I be granted good luck here may it be cereal and dairy produce that I see (*ma rom:thoicther-sa inso rop ith γ milcht ad:cear*). If I be not granted good luck let it be wolves (lit. "wild dogs") and deer and traversing of mountains and young warriors of the *fian* that I see (*mani-m:rothcaither ropat choin aítai γ ois γ imthecht slébe γ oaic féne ad:cear*)" (Thes. II, 293).

Obviously these words relate to a situation due to seal the speaker's fate as a landad proprietor, if lucky, or a wolf-like wanderer of the mountains with the *fian* in search of game, if not. What might this 'make or break' scenario be? The



standard early Irish practice of dividing a patrimony equally among the surviving sons with legitimate entitlement, allowing for the extra share or *cumal senarbai* due to the eldest (ch. 4, 8), must on occasion have resulted in portions no longer sufficient to maintain two or more such heirs in their father's status. Indeed, *Críth Gablach* envisages just such a situation when it asks the following question about the rather low ranking *aithech ara:threba a deich* or "commoner who cultivates his ten": "what deprives this man of status as a cow-freeman (*bóairechas*)? For perhaps there are four or five men who are heirs of a cow-freeman (*báe hi comarbus bóairech*) so that (being) a cow-freeman is not possible for each of them" (ll. 145-8). That such ruinous divisions might be avoided by competition between the heirs is suggested by Tírechán's account (32 (1-5)) of two brothers preparing to fight an obviously traditional pagan duel to the death to resolve just such a problem (see McCone, 1984b, 57-8). A less extreme alternative is indicated by *Gúbretha Caratnaid*, in which the judge *Caratnae* recounts a series of judgements that would be false under normal circumstances but then proceeds to justify these on account of the exceptional situation applying to the case in question. Consequently, when he announces "I have given precedence to an heir without lot-casting (*trucus tuis do chomarbu cen chranncor*)" (CTH 2193.22), it follows that the casting of lots was the normal procedure for resolving disputes about an inheritance that was not to be divided. One may surmise that other forms of gambling might be adopted on occasion as a means of settlement, and the playing of *fidchell* for stakes or forfeits is a prominent constituent of sagas such as *Tochmarc Étaíne* (III, par. 3f.) and *Echtra Airt* (par. 15f.)

The charm's curious opening reference to *fid* "wood" and *argat-bran* "silver raven" in a patently indoors setting "between fire and wall (*etir tenid ⁊ fraig*)" begins to make sense on the assumption that a board game such as *bran-dub* "raven-black" or *fid-chell* "wood-sense" is involved. In his valuable discussion of the relatively few passages in medieval Irish literature giving some indication as to how these frequently mentioned games were played, Eoin MacWhite refers to Fleanor Knott's (1926, 198-9) collection of references to *brannumb* and its "choked board (*brec-clár*)": "she shows that there is a special piece in the game called the *branán*. The word *branán* is a common poetic epithet for a chief and the piece is probably a "king-piece" of some sort" (1948, 29). Since this word is an obvious diminutive of *bran* "raven (/chief?)" and the practice of playing *fidchell* with pieces made of precious substances such as gold or silver is well attested in the literature (e.g. *Táin Bó Fraích*, par. 8), it seems likely enough that *fid* and *argat-bran* in the charm refer to the board and key piece respectively in this game.

The following verse from a poem in *Acallam na Senórach* led MacWhite to the cogent conclusion that a game akin to the Lappish *tablut* was involved: "my famed *branchub* is in the mountain above Leitir Broin; five men of white silver without voice and eight of red-gold" (ibid., 30). Since the composition of the smaller side is demonstrated by a reference in a bardic poem to the *branán* with his four pieces on each square around him (Knott, 1926, 198), the basic situation and proportions appear to be exactly as in *tablut*, in which the central square is occupied by the "king of the Swedes" surrounded by his eight men, while the opposing force of sixteen differently coloured "Muscovites" is located in four groups at the edge. A turn consists of moving a single piece in the manner of the rook in chess, the "Swedish" objective being to get the king to the edge of the board, that of the "Muscovites"



being to surround him on all four non-diagonal sides. The Ballinderry board excavated by MacWhite has forty-nine squares (7x7) and may well have been used for a game like brandub with its thirteen pieces, whereas tablut with its twenty-five men has a correspondingly larger (9x9) board with eighty-one squares (MacWhite, *ibid.*, 33-5).

In tablut an ordinary piece is taken when two opponent pieces are placed on either side of it horizontally or vertically. As MacWhite points out (*ibid.*, 26), this was the standard capture move in *fidchell* on the evidence of a passage in the tale of Mac Dá Cherdá and Cummaine Fota: "Good," said Gúaire, "let us play *fidchell*." "How are the men slain?" said Cummaine". "Not difficult, a black pair of mine around a single white man of yours on the same line (*dias dub dam-sa in óin fer find dhúisea farsin óin-it*) striving for advance yonder" (O'Keefe, 1911, 32). Could "the three thin boars" in the Old Irish charm be a term for a similar move in *brandub* involving two pieces about to destroy a third aligned between them? Although doubts about exactly how these games, particularly *fidchell*, were played prevent further elucidation, the foregoing does establish a presumption that the charm relates to a 'winner take all' game of *brandub* between two heirs in order to determine which of them should receive an inheritance and which should remain perpetiless. It is, so to speak, an early Irish "luck be a lady tonight".

It has already been seen that a major role in the *fian* is attributed to kings' sons, and the first Salamanca Life of St. Lugaíd alias Moluac gives a nice vignette of a king's son called Fáclán "little wolf" with his brigand hand who subsequently becomes king and later still a monk of St. Moluac's (par. 10; Heist, 1965, 133). From this it would follow that many an early Irish king had a youth in the *fian* behind him, and it is doubtless against this background that the reminiscences in *Tecosca Cormaic* about juvenile hunting and fighting in groups of various sizes are to be understood: "O grandson of Conn, O Cormac", said Cairbre, "what were your deeds when you were a lad (*gilla*)?" "Not difficult", said Cormac. "I used to kill a pig, I used to follow a track when I was alone. I used to march against a band of five (*cuire cósicir*) when I was one of five. I was ready for slaughter (*oirgnech*) when I was one of ten. I was ready for raiding (*indredach*) when I was one of twenty. I was ready for battle (*cathach*) when I was one of a hundred. Those were my deeds" (par. 8).

It may be added that nature's bounty and the fruits of raiding do not seem always to have sufficed for the *fian*, winter presumably being a time of particular hardship when they were most liable to batten upon the settled community. References in early legal and other sources to feasts given for them will be discussed later (8 below), note merely being taken here of Cú Chulainn's claim in *Tochmarc Emire* to have inherited from his fosterfather Blai the hospitaller the ability to feed the men of Ulster with their king for a week, during which "I support their men of art and their brigands (*fo:suidiur a ndánu ⁊ a ndberga*)" (par. 22; van Hamel, 1933, 29).

4. Remarks from a previous article on this topic (McCone, 1986d, 13-5) will serve here to pull these various strands together and place them in a broader context indicated by the anthropological studies of Heinrich Schurtz (1902), Adriaan Prins (1953) and Frank Henderson Stewart (1977) as well as the work of van Gennep discussed earlier (ch. 8, 4).

"It thus appears that for many males of free birth in early Ireland the termination



of fosterage around fourteen years of age was followed by a stage in the *fian*, an independent organization of predominantly landless, unmarried, unsettled and young men given to hunting, warfare, and sexual licence in the wilds outside the *túath*, upon which it made claims, by agreement or force as the case might be, to sustenance and hospitality and for which it might perform certain elementary police or military services where relations were not strained by hostility. Upon the acquisition of the requisite property, usually by inheritance upon the death of the father or other next of kin, but not before the age of twenty one would normally pass from the *fian* to full membership of the *túath* of married property-owners.

"This system displays classic features of what anthropologists term 'age grading', the division of a man's life into distinct phases of activity demarcated by key transitions such as puberty and marriage, and 'age sets' of more or less approximate coevals bound together by a common rite of initiation, the 'Männerbund' or society of young male warriors being a particularly prominent association of this type.

"East Africa has proved particularly rich in systems of this kind, ranging from the comparatively simple to the enormously complex, and the Masai there have structures whose broad outlines are quite reminiscent of what has just been posited for early Ireland. Thus 'between circumcision and their formal initiation as junior warriors, boys wander in bands all over the Masai country. After initiation they sleep in special bachelor huts with the unmarried girls. Only when they become senior warriors are they permitted to marry' (Murdoch, 1959, 338). Furthermore, these segregated, unmarried and promiscuous junior warriors lead a wild life of warfare and raiding until they have acquired sufficient cattle to set up house and purchase a bride, whereupon they shave their long hair, become senior warriors, and settle down to tending their herds, raising a family, and fighting as a rule only when necessary to defend the territory. Children of wealthy parents are liable to leave the junior warrior grade earlier than average to look after the family property, while those of poor parents may have to remain junior warriors for longer than average until they can get the necessary bride-price together . . . It may be added that the use of secret warrior societies to impose order and a rough-and-ready justice is well attested in the somewhat different West African and North American Indian systems.

"It should be apparent that the junior warriors in this system have much in common with the early Irish *fian*-members, and the senior warriors with active members of the *túath* . . ., and the segregation of sexually mature but unmarried males from the rest of society, as in the case of the Irish *fian* or Masai junior warriors, was a not uncommon method of minimizing the potentially disruptive effects of their wildness upon settled society as a whole".

Furthermore, instructive though such parallels are, we do not have to look beyond medieval France's knights errant for a broadly similar phenomenon closer to home. Georges Duby's description of which (1977, ch. VII) brings out the social and economic factors involved extremely well. Duby's account has been summarized as follows: "certain well-born men termed *juvenis* individually or *juvenitus* collectively in the relevant sources emerge as a particular social group committed to a life of wandering in search of sexual and martial adventure and advantage between two settled phases, namely childhood in the parental home or place of education and married life as a father and master of one's own house. Moreover, 'the pressures which forced twelfth-century knights after they were dubbed into a life of errancy



must therefore be attributed to customs regulating the distribution of inheritances and family wealth' (Duby, *ibid.*, 118). Continued management of his estates by a father after sons had come of age was a significant factor, and the period spent as a vagrant 'youth' varied considerably according to circumstances. Duby's concluding remark to the effect that 'such was the aristocratic youth of France in the twelfth century, a mob of young men let loose, in search of glory, profit and female prey, by the great noble houses in order to relieve the pressure on their expanding power' could be applied with virtually equal force to the Irish *fianna*" (McCone, *ibid.*, 15).

5. Although reliable information on this point for the early period is rather scanty, the *fian* clearly had its own hierarchy, some of its more senior members apparently being charged with the enforcement of law and order both within and without the *túath*.

Thus some old legal glosses in the H.3.18 manuscript allude rather cryptically and tendentiously to a special type of lord-client relationship within the *fian*'s membership by mentioning "a wild fief (*fiad-rath*), i.e. a fief that is bestowed in a wood (*rath ernir i fíad*). An exile or raider or *fian*-member (*loingsech nó foghuid nó féinn-iúth*) bestows it. That is a wild fief, for it is not in the divisions of lordship (*fullachtaib flatha*), for it is not to manifest lordship in a wood or mountain; it is not customary to take a lord's third (*trían flatha*) into a mountain; likewise, then, a fief that is bestowed in a wood to an exile or raider (*do loingsech nó foglaid*)" (CIH 919.29-32).

The passage concerning the *aire échta* or "lord of slaughter", who is given a relatively high status equal to that of the lowest of the noble grades, is arguably the most obscure in *Críth Gablach*, which explains that he is so called "because he is the lord of a band of five (*aire cóicir*) that is left to perform slaughter in allied territory (*i cairddiu*) until the end of a month to avenge the dishonour of a kingdom (*do diguil enechruccai túaithe*) against whom recent homicide is committed. If they have not accomplished it by the end of a month they enter upon an agreement that their protections will not adhere to him (them?) any longer. Though the same band of five have slaughtered men from the allied territory, the *aire échta* can undertake (*as.com-ven*, lit. "can pay") on their behalf that neither land nor bronze cauldron is forfeit for it but only vessels to the value of a cow. He then brings them out to the end of the allied territory for their reception according to the extent of his protection and his friends. His retinue and maintenance are due as for an *aire déso*" (par. 25).

Dissenting from the view of Mac Neill and others that "the *a.é.* is the leader of a small band of 'avengers' who are left within the *túath* of the slayer and given a period of one month to take vengeance on the guilty parties" (*Críth Gablach*, 72), Binchy preferred to see him "as a member of the *túath* of the slayer. His duty is to harbour and protect the 'five men' who have been sent from the other *túath* to prosecute the blood-feud against the guilty party" (*ibid.*, 71). This notion of a public functionary charged with harbouring a 'hit squad' bent on murdering one or more of his fellow citizens is not only bizarre, to say the least, but is also flatly contradicted by the reference in a gloss on *Cethirslicht Athgabála* to "a man beyond the territory (*fer tar crích*), namely the *aire échta*" (CIH 395.29) as well as by a gloss on par. 51 of *Bretha Crólige* mentioning "the removal of outrages on kingdoms and



rares by the *aire échta* (*dingbáil greas tíath 7 cenél don airig échta*)" (ed. Binchy, 1938, 40-1). It thus appears virtually certain that the *aire échta* and his band of five were charged with crossing the border to avenge the murder of members of their own *tíath* by a person or persons from another *tíath*. The apparent restriction of this process to a *tíath* bound to their own by treaty (*cairdels*) is easy enough to explain, since the rules in question afford the band some protection in the foreign territory in return for a strict time limit on their activities. By then the dispute would have been resolved either by their failure to dispatch the wrongdoers within a month or by payment of rather low compensation for anyone duly killed. In short, these provisions were designed to prevent cross-border blood feuds from getting out of hand and could only have applied to *tíatha* between which a treaty existed. The operations of an *aire échta* and his followers in a foreign *tíath* with which no treaty existed can only have been legally unenforceable and correspondingly unregulated.

The glossing of the main text's *díbergach* as "the *aire échta*" in *Bretha Crólige* (par. 51) is summarily dismissed by Binchy: "it is strange that the *díbergach*, 'reaver', should be accorded a definite status: did he originally represent a member of a *flán* 'war band' (cf. Thurneysen, *Heidensage*, p. 78)? At all events the glossator no longer knew what to make of him and, in an attempt to fit him into his scheme of things, ludicrously identifies him with the *aire échta*, a kind of public enforcer of penalties against alien offenders" (1938, 71-2). However, the notion that the *aire échta* and his band of five turned loose on a killing mission constituted a *flán*, far from being absurd, is fully substantiated by the gloss on *im chert each fénneda* "concerning the right of every *flán*-member (-leader)" in *Cethirslicht Athgabála* partially cited above: "i.e. every treasure that is due to (the *flán*-member (*fénnid*), since he is like a man beyond the territory, i.e. the *aire échta*" (CIH 395.24 and 29). In the *aire échta*, then, we have the adult leader of a small *flán* whose relatively high rank depends upon the performance of certain rudimentary external policing duties.

A similar picture emerges in the case of the *fer-gniae* or "champion", whose martial qualifications are described as follows in *Cráth Gablach*: "who is right and proper for making a king's food? A *fer-gniae* of three blows. What are they? A man who can strike a blow on his matched adversary so that it transfixes the man through his shield. A man who takes a man in live capture and holds him in battle. A man who smites an ox with a single blow that does not leave (anything) over. A man who runs through a prisoner without compunction (?). A man who runs through a warrior (*éctann*) in front of the host so that he falls from a single blow" (par. 43). The reasonable suspicion that such a man might be associated with the *flán* is confirmed by his place at feasts in the king's house: "on the other side, in the *flán*-champion's seat (*i fochlu féinnid* - see McCone, 1986d, 7, n. 25) a *fer-gniae* to guard the door" (ibid., par. 46). Finally, a legal miscellany in H.3.18 asks "what is a *fer-gniae*? A man with whom there are proper manly deeds (*fer-gníma*), as he enumerates in *Berrad Airechta*. He exacts her bride-price for a woman after every one has failed. What makes him a *fer-gniae* is that seven combats have been arranged from a combat between two up to a combat between seven and he captures a man through his prowess (*tar a gaisced*) from every one of those combats until he has the seven man-takings. It is thence he is called *fer-gniae*" (CIH 973.13-7). It appears, then, that this relatively senior type of *fénnid* also has rudimentary policing duties, this time within the *tíath*, where he may help to keep order in the king's house and enforce the payment of a woman's bride-price where other means have failed (see Thurneysen, 1928, 58).



6. After the sons of Donn Desa had taken up *dǫberg* with the sons of Ireland's nobility in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, "they had thrice fifty men under instruction when they were wolfing (*oc fáelad*) in the territory of the Connachtmen" (par. 20). The werewolf implications of the term *fáelad* emerge clearly from the following passage about Laignech Fáelad in *Cóir Anmann*: "he was a man who used to go wolfing (*fri fáelad*), i.e. into wolf-shapes (*i conrechaib*), i.e. into shapes of wolves (*a rechtaib na mac tíre*) he used to go and his offspring used to go after him, and they used to kill the herds after the fashion of wolves (*fo bás na mac tíre*), so that it is for that he used to be called Laignech Fáelad, for he was the first of them who went into a wolf-shape (*i conrecht*)" (par. 215).

This and other attestations suggest that, although the word *cú* usually refers to a hound, it was also a generic for hound and wolf indifferently, although the latter could be explicitly differentiated by adding the epithet *allaid* "wild", prefixing *fáel* "wolf" to give *fáel-chú* or using a term like *mac tíre*. As pointed out elsewhere (McCone, 1986d, 16), the prominence of *Cú* and *Fáel* in early Irish personal names is presumably rooted in the werewolf attributes of the *fian*, while the vagrant person termed *fulla* and described as having had the *dlú fulla* or "hair of vagrancy" put on him in some texts seems to belong in this context. The association between young warriors of the *fian* and wolves in the charm from the *Codex Sancti Galli* has already been alluded to in 3 above, and in the episode of St. Moling and the neighbour's wife discussed in the same section there is a clearly deliberate irony in the fact that it is wolf-like brigands or *dǫberguig*, human *coim*, who frustrate the wanton woman's confident expectation of protection by her own hounds (*lan chona*) and rape her in a gang or pack.

The band of wolf-like young warriors is a sufficiently circumstantial and widely attested phenomenon among the Celts' sister peoples to put the institution's Indo-European provenance beyond reasonable doubt. The details having been given elsewhere (McCone, 1987), it will suffice to present the broad outlines of the argument here.

The Old Irish martial name or epithet *luch-thonn* "wolf-skin" (McCone, 1985b, 175-6) has parallels in the Old Norse term *ulf-hedinn* "wolf-skin" used of the *berserkr* or "bare-shirt" warrior, who like the Irish *den-chinnud* (2 above) and Gaulish equivalents described by Polybius (II 28-30) tended to fight naked or virtually so (McCone, 1987, 106). Lily Weiser has put matters thus in a detailed discussion of the relevant Nordic material: "the early Norse berserks are mighty fighters . . . They also wore coats of wolfskin instead of armour and were consequently also called *ulfhednar* ('Wolfskins') . . . Furthermore they are capable of states of frenzy in which they then become superhumanly strong and invulnerable. They are usually represented as unmarried, dangerous warriors, and appear mostly in groups of two, five or, very frequently, twelve. They are usually in a king's service . . . and constitute his crack troops . . . However, they also appear as robbers and criminals on their own behalf . . . Finally, however, there are berserks who follow this way of life only in their youth, and later become good citizens . . . Berserks are presented in the tradition as pagans . . . The Viking expedition usually lasts three years, after which the young man marries and becomes more or less settled. It is clear that the Viking and the old berserk way of life have a great deal in common" (1927, 44-5).

Less precisely similar werewolf expressions are also attested in Latin, Sanskrit, Greek, Russian and Armenian (McCone, 1987, 118). Use of the word for "wolf",



more often than not a reflex of the IE form, as a personal name or a designation for outlaws is found in early Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Indic, Iranian and Hittite sources (ibid., 118-20). In addition to the early Irish evidence and an obvious representation of a young male company of spear- and shield-bearing 'wolves' on the Gundestrup cauldron of presumed Celtic workmanship (ibid., 112-4), notable further support for an Indo-European 'Männerbund' of youthful werewolves is provided by Rudra and the Maruts in Old Indic myth (ibid. 120-21), ancient Greek accounts of Arcadian, Spartan and other customs (ibid., 121-7), the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus (ibid., 127-35; see 7 below) and the particularly well researched early Germanic material (ibid., 101-4).

Moreover, at the genetically crucial level of basic vocabulary the early Irish contrast between the settled *tuath* under its king (*ri*) and the vagrant *flan*, formerly *cuire*, of young warriors (*oac*) can be reconstructed for Indo-European itself on the strength of plentiful cognates in the sister languages. Thus OIr. *tuath* continues IE \**teuā*, OIr. *ri* IE \**reks*, OIr. *cuire* IE \**koryos* and OIr. *oac* IE \**hyukhkos* alongside \**hyuhen-* without \**ko-* suffix as in Lat. *iuvenis*, Skt. *yuvan-* (ibid., 110-1, 116-8, 141).

7. The account of Cormac mac Airt's conception, birth and youth according to *Scéla Éogain ⁊ Cormaic* has already been summarized (ch. 8, 6), and attention will now focus upon the broadly similar but on comparative and political grounds (ch. 10, 9) probably older version known as *Genemuin Chormaic*.

This begins with Art's sleeping with his host Olc Aichi's daughter Étan the night before his death in battle against Mac Con and instructing her to give the son due to be born from this union to his friend Lugnac Fér Trí of Connacht for fosterage. "The king is then killed in the battle as he himself relates. Then Étan was pregnant and it came into her mind to set out to the house of Lugnac so that it might be there she would give birth to the offspring that was in her womb" (ll. 23-4). Having set out in her chariot with a single maidservant, she was seized by labour pains and bore a son on the way. Hearing a thunder-clap, Lugnac realized that this betokened the birth of a great king in the person of Art's son entrusted to him for fosterage, and set out to find him. Meanwhile Étan slept after giving birth and instructed her attendant to watch the baby boy. "The maidservant, then, fell asleep and a she-wolf reaches them and takes the lad to the place where her whelps were and to the rocky cave that is in Cenn Craibigi in Conachail. That is Cormac's Cave today. The woman awoke thereafter and uttered her lament, for she could not find the son. Then Lugnac reaches her and asked them what was the matter with them. The maiden told him everything, that it was to seek him she had come since it was to him the lad had been entrusted for his fosterage. Lugnac takes the woman with him to his house thereafter and said that he would grant his wish to whoever should discover information about or the whereabouts of the lad" (ll. 39-46).

Greic mac Arod happened upon the wolfcubs and boy playing at the cave's entrance, notified Lugnac and was duly rewarded with land. Then they recovered the boy and cubs, whereupon Lugnac uttered a second prophecy of Cormac's greatness, including the words *bid féindid* "he will be a *flan*-member" (cf. end of 3 above) among the list of attributes prefaced to his later kingly accomplishments. "Thereafter the boy is fostered with Lugnac and mention of his lineage to his father's enemies was not dared . . . Once Cormac and Fér Trí's sons, i.e. Ochomon



and Úathnach, were playing. He struck one of them. 'Alack,' said he 'I have been struck by a man whose parentage and family are not known except that he is a fatherless bastard'" (ll. 68-76). Distressed by this slur, Cormac complains to Lugnae, who then reveals his exalted royal parentage and prospects to him. They then set out for Tara, where Mac Con receives them well and accepts Cormac as a foster-son. This leads to Cormac's famous correction of Mac Con's judgement about the sheep and the queen's woad, whereupon Mac Con is banished and Cormac duly becomes king (ch. 5, 6).

The classic narrative of this type is, of course, the story of Romulus and Remus as told by Livy (I, 3-16). Having deposed his brother Numitor and become king of Alba Longa in his stead, Amulius guarded against rivals by killing Numitor's son and committing his daughter to the chaste life of a Vestal virgin. When she nevertheless bore twins to the god Mars, Amulius ordered these to be exposed. However, having been rescued and suckled by a she-wolf, they were then found and brought up by the herdsman Faustulus and his wife Larentia in the wilderness. At this point Livy records an attempt to rationalize the role of the she-wolf away: "there are those who think that Larentia was called *lupa* 'she-wolf, prostitute' among the herdsmen for making her body available and that opportunity for the legend and miracle arose thence" (4, 7). At any rate, the twins in the wild eventually established a *Mannabund* predictably devoted to hunting and plunder, the latter activity being rather romanticized by Livy along 'Robin Hood' lines: "so born and so brought up, when their age had first reached maturity, they avoided inactivity in homesteads and among cattle by wandering through the woodlands hunting. Having derived strength for their bodies and souls from this, they were no longer content with wild beasts but attacked brigands laden with booty and divided the takings amongst the herdsmen, and celebrated serious and jocose matters with these as their band of youths grew day by day (*crescente in dies grege iuvenum*)" (4, 8-9).

At a subsequent celebration of the Lupercal rite whereby "naked youths (*nudi iuvenes* - cf. 2 and 6 above) should run in sportive wantonness in honour of Lycæan Pan" (5, 2), "brigands who had laid an ambush through anger at lost booty captured Remus after Romulus had defended himself by force, and handed the prisoner over to king Amulius with accusations to boot. The main charge they made was that an attack was made by them upon Numitor's estates, (and that) thereafter, having gathered together a band of youths (*collecta iuvenum manu*), they took booty in hostile fashion. Thus Remus was given to Numitor for punishment" (5, 3-4). Remus' subsequent arraignment before Numitor leads to his and Romulus' recognition by their grandfather and then to a successful armed insurrection by them and their youthful followers (*iuvenes*), who depose Amulius and restore Numitor to the throne. Thereafter Romulus and Remus set out to found a new city, ultimately Rome with Romulus as her first king through a series of events too well known to require comment here.

The Roman and Irish tales obviously have a good deal more in common than can be plausibly ascribed to coincidence. One solution, monastic Irish borrowing from a well known classical source like Livy is likely enough *a priori*, and has been mooted by Carney on the strength of the shared feature of suckling by a she-wolf above all (1955, 291, n.6; also in Dillon, 1968, 153). No doubt Carney is right in assuming that early Irish *litterati* saw the parallel with Romulus and appreciated its imperial implications for the Tara monarchy, but this does not necessitate a hypothesis of direct borrowing.



This and similar cases must, of course, be argued on their individual merits or defects, and in the present instance, as Ó Cathasaigh judiciously observes, "it is true that a writer with even a moderate acquaintance with classical literature would be expected to know something of the story of Romulus, and it is possible that both SEC and GC have derived the Suckling-element from a source which was influenced by the story of Romulus. But it seems most unlikely that this was the case. For the suckling of a hero by an animal is an integral part of the international heroic pattern: de Vries gives a host of examples. The story of Cormac carries on the old tradition, but the story of Romulus has become a 'twin saga', which Mommsen considered a development away from the original saga. It is only in the form of a 'twin saga' that the Romulus story could have been known in Ireland, and there is nothing in Cormac's biography to suggest that it has borrowed from such a source. As Cormac's Suckling is closer to the postulated common original, we are not justified in assuming that it has been borrowed from the Romulus saga unless some definite evidence can be adduced to support such an assumption. Moreover, the lupine element is so strong in the Cormac tale that it seems unnecessary to regard wolf-suckling as an 'external element', except in so far as it derives from the international pattern" (1977, 54-5).

To these arguments may be added a further one. A very close ancient Iranian analogue recorded by the fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus (I, 107-30) is clearly independent of the Romulus legend, as are certain Greek and Germanic variants of the basic type. As should emerge below, the only economical explanation of these detailed correspondences is derivation from a common Indo-European original, with which the Cormac tale too is perfectly compatible. That being so, the story of Rome's foundation would only become a more likely source for the latter on the strength of more distinctive similarities than can actually be adduced.

Herodotus' anecdote about the birth, youth and accession to the throne of the founder of the Persian empire begins with the Median monarch Astyages being warned in a dream of the threat posed by his daughter's future offspring and accordingly marrying her to a quiet Persian named Cambyses. The son born to them was then exposed on the king's orders but rescued by a herdsman and his wife and brought up in a mountainous area: "the name of the woman with whom he cohabited was Kúnō 'bitch' in the Greek tongue and Spakó in the Median, for the Medes call the bitch 'spax' (*tên gâr kúna katéousi spáka Mēdoi*)" (110). The child was then named Cyrus. "Now when the boy was ten years old the following happening to him revealed him. He was playing in this village in which were the herdsmen's quarters, and was playing in the road with others of the same age. And the boys at play chose for their king this alleged son of the cowherd. And he set some of them to build houses, others to be bodyguards, one of them to be the king's eye and to another he granted the privilege of bearing messages, enjoining upon each his task. Now one of these children playing together, being the son of Artemhates a notable man among the Medes, did not perform what had been commanded by Cyrus. He bade the other boys seize him and, when the boys obeyed, Cyrus treated the boy very roughly to a flogging" (114). The scourged boy inevitably complained to his father, who duly brought the outrage at the hands of a mere cowherd's son to the king's attention. Cyrus's bold demeanour when brought before him and a certain family likeness raised Astyages' suspicions and eventually he forced the truth out of the boy's cowherd fosterer. Further events bring about a successful revolt by Cyrus



against his maternal grandsire, whom he replaces as king to turn the Median into a Persian empire.

Although the nurturing "she-wolf" or "bitch" is presented in this account as a woman so named, suspicions of a Greek rationalization similar to that sometimes applied to the Romulus and Remus story on Livy's evidence above are fully confirmed by Herodotus' comment that Cyrus "said he had been reared by the cowherd's wife and kept on praising her throughout and his whole story was full of *Kúñē* 'bitch'. Then his parents, taking up this name, put about the rumour that a bitch (*kúñē*) had suckled the exposed Cyrus in order that the survival of their boy might seem the more miraculous to the Persians" (122). Obviously, then, the Iranian original used by Herodotus, who correctly reproduces the Iranian outcome *spa-* (e.g. Avestan *spā*) of Indo-European *\*kwō(n)* "hound", shared with the Roman origin legend and the early Irish Cormac tale a two-stage upbringing in the wild for the future king involving suckling by a she-wolf and then fosterage with herdsmen or the like.

The rationale of this scheme in the context of the heroic biography and its essential liminal attributes has already been discussed (ch. 8, 6-7). The narrative main-spring of the initial threat to the hero and king-to-be's existence, his exile among lowly helpers and eventual return for elevation to his proper status comprises essential constituents of the international pattern that are correspondingly weak as evidence for a genetic relationship based on derivation from a common Indo-European prototype. On the other hand, there is no obvious reason why the Indo-Europeans should not have known a commonplace enough mythical schema along these lines, and circumstantial shared details within this framework would, indeed, create a presumption that this was so.

In the present instance suckling by a she-wolf or bitch specifically and disclosure of the future king's identity as a result of strife with his peers seem to constitute rather strong genetic indicators. These probabilities are significantly increased by the realization that this mythical pattern of a king's son or successor expelled from his kin and initiated by a wolf into a life in the wilds correlates closely with the demonstrably Indo-European social institution of youth in the wilderness as a member of a predatory werewolf Männerbund or *\*koryos* (6 above). Once the wolf's specifically Indo-European role as the symbol or embodiment of such associations is recognised, a further Indo-European witness for this basic constellation of motifs can be found in the ancient Greek myth of Zeus' birth, youth and displacement of his father Kronos as king of the gods (e.g. Hesiod, *Theogony* 453-506; Apollodorus I, 1, 5 - 1, 2, 1).

Kronos was notoriously wont to devour children born to him by his wife Rhea in order to thwart a prophecy that one of these would dethrone him. Understandably vexed at her wasted labour, Rhea gave her husband a stone instead of the sixth child Zeus, who was born to her in the cave of Dikte in Crete and left there to be nourished on a she-goat's milk and protected by the warrior band of Curetes. Later Zeus rescued his brothers and sisters, led them in a successful rebellion against Kronos and the other Titans, deposed his father and became ruler of the gods. Allowing for the trivial inversion of the animal and human functions in this tale (martial wolf > pastoral goat, herdsmen > warriors) and the absence of a revelation motif, it reflects the archetypal scheme quite accurately and thus corroborates it.



In Germanic tradition the *Völsungasaga* (4-8) tells of king Völsung's murder by his son-in-law, and the exposure of his ten sons, bound and helpless, in the forest. Of these only Sigmund survived the nightly attacks of a she-wolf, lived secretly in the wood with the connivance of the sister married to his father's murderer and incestuously fathered a son Sinfjotli on her. After father and son had dwelt in the forest for a time in wolfish guise, Sigmund wrought vengeance on his father's murderer with Sinfjotli's help and returned home to become king. Saxo Grammaticus tells a similar story in the first book of his *Gesta Danorum* (see McCone, 1987, 139). This time the two sons of a king murdered by his brother are rescued from a similar fate by faking their laceration by wolves. Thereafter they were brought up in a hollow tree like hounds (*sub specie canum*) before being discovered by their uncle and banished. Later they returned and after acting like berserks destroyed their uncle, one of them becoming king in his stead. In these cases too the (she-)wolf, although malign rather than unexpectedly benign, provides the key to the hero's destiny in a further independent version otherwise close enough to the posited original Indo-European pattern.

The widespread and detailed correspondences considered here leave little doubt that the early Irish story of Cormac mac Airt's birth and youth, particularly as told in *Genemuin Chormaic*, continues an Indo-European myth of regnal succession with little essential modification in the course of three or more millennia of presumed oral transmission. Nor does this contradict Vansina's well founded dictum that "oral traditions are conditioned by the society in which they flourish" and "no oral tradition can transcend the boundaries of the social system in which it exists" (see ch. 1, 3), given that the Indo-European age-grading institution of the werewolf society of unmarried and mostly youthful warrior-hunters seems to have survived relatively intact in early medieval Ireland as the *fian*, rather as it apparently persisted amongst Nordic peoples. The resilience of an institution attested in various forms well beyond the confines of Indogermania was doubtless due to the kind of social and economic factors identified earlier (4 above).

8. If further proof were needed that the *fian* was part of early Christian Ireland's pagan heritage, this is supplied by plentiful literary evidence for the Church's strong disapproval of this practice in the pre-Norman period. Preceding chapters have documented at some length the early Irish Church's success in adapting or reinterpreting appropriate pre-Christian concepts and institutions as necessary, the upshot frequently being an antique shell, sometimes more fake than genuine, capable of housing a new or significantly modified ideology attuned to ecclesiastical requirements. Although Old Testament figures such as Jephthah of Gilead (ch. 8, 8) and, above all, King David himself had considerable potential as justificatory models for a youth spent in the wilderness at the head of a band of outlaws prior to becoming a leader or king of settled society, the clerical establishment tended to pass over this option in favour of outright condemnation of the *fian* and what it stood for. Indeed, given the centrality of sexual licence, gratuitous violence and pillaging to this way of life, it is hard to see how the Church could have reached a meaningful compromise compatible with fundamental Christian tenets. Moreover, any temptation to do so was doubtless minimized by the *fian*-members' general lack of property and their potential to disrupt settled society.

Still more to the point, perhaps, this pillaging or *diberg* apparently extended to



Church property, to judge from the late Middle Irish *Immram Curaig Ua Corra* or "Voyage of the Uí Chorra's boat". The Faustian beginning of this tale involves a *bríugu* or "hospitaller" proposing to remedy his and his wife's childlessness by doing a deal with the devil. "They then performed a fast against the devil (*do:ronsar farom troscad ria Deman*) and the maid was pregnant forthwith and she was nurturing her pregnancy until the end of her nine months. Then there came the mighty blows and woes of birth pangs to assault the maid and she bore three sons at that great begetting, i.e. a son at the beginning of the night, a son in the middle of the night and a son at the end of the night, and they were baptised according to the pagan baptism (*ro:baisted do réir in baisted[ai] geinntide iar*)" (par. 5). As these sons of darkness grew, their prowess and beauty were generally admired but fault was found with "their baptism into the devil's possession (*a mbaisted i selb diabail*). 'It is hard for us', they said 'not to perform raiding and brigandage and assault (*fogail 7 díberg 7 ingreim*) on the enemies of the devil, since it is he who is our king or lord, i.e. to kill clerics and to burn and destroy churches'. It is then that those sons arose and came to Tuam, and they destroyed and burned the place and they performed astonishing raiding and brigandage (*fogail 7 díberg adbal*) throughout the province of Connacht on clerics and churches, so that the evil and awfulness of their raiding was fully heard of in the four corners of Ireland. They continued in this fashion to the end of a year until they destroyed half of the churches of Connacht in that period" (pars. 7-8).

The probably seventh-century vernacular text *Aipgitir Chrábaid* or "The alphabet of piety" offers the following comprehensive clerical condemnation of the *fian*-life: "four things that *fiannas* causes a man, i.e. it contracts territories (*to:imairc crícha*), it increases hostility (*to:formaig écráit*), it destroys life (*etar:diben saéguil*), it prolongs torments (*ar:cúirethar píana*)" (par. 25). The term *maic báis* "sons of death" applied to *fian*-members obviously reflects this unfavourable view of them as murderers destined for hell. The *AU* entry for 847 A.D. provides a particularly conclusive example, proving that *fianna* could be a real menace at least as late as the mid-ninth century, by recording "the sack of the island of Loch Muinremair by Máel Sechnaill against a large *fian*-host of sons of death (*fian-lach mór di maccaib báis*) of the Luigni and Gallenga who had been overrunning the kingdoms (*oc indriud na tíath*) in the manner of pagans (*more gentium*)".

Early Irish hagiography abounds in episodes where a saint gets the better of small bands of what were evidently *díbergs*, often miraculously thwarting their murderous intentions by harmless delusions and not infrequently bringing the miscreants to penitence or even to monastic vows (Sharpe, 1979, 80-5). Moreover, her 'First Life' (Bollandus, 1658, 118-35) has St. Brigit give the following reason for refusing to bless a barren queen when prepared to help more lowly members of the *plebs* (-*tíath*) in this way: "because all the men of the *tíath* (*plebei cuncti*) serve God and all pray to the Father. However, the sons of kings are serpents and sons of blood-lettings and sons of death (*fili vero regum serpentes sunt & filii sanguinum filiique mortis*) except for a few chosen by God" (par. 60). Evidently the eighth-century author of this Life, and presumably his seventh-century source too (cf. ch. 8, 2), regarded a disreputable life as "sons of death" in the *fian* as the norm for kings' sons in his day, only a minority resisting the temptation to enter this phase, and this, of course, fully matches evidence presented earlier (3 above) for the *fian*'s predominantly aristocratic make-up.



In the course of its description of the *aithech ara:threba a deich* (see 3 above) *Criib Gablach* insists that the robbery and violence typical of *diberg* activity are incompatible with good standing as a Christian member of settled society: "this one is a 'baptized freeman (*aithech baitside*)' if he be in his purity without (theft), without robbery, without killing people (*cen gait, cen brait, cen guin doine*; see 3 above) except on a day of battle or someone who seeks his head (= life), and have a proper marriage with (sexual) abstinence on fast-days, Sundays and Lents" (ll. 142-5).

To Robert Serpell of the University of Zambia I owe references from an unpublished thesis by Mapopa M'Tonga and further information about an interesting African parallel to this tension between the Church and a secret male society in existence before the advent of Christianity. The Nyau societies of the A-Chewa people straddling the borders of Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique basically cater for young males aged between about ten and twenty, but contain older members and are led by adults well over thirty. In essence this is a masked dancing society characterized by animal symbolism, ancestral spirit worship and a strict code of discipline liable to be physically enforced. Both the Church and the colonial administration were predictably opposed to this organization, campaigned against and in the 1930s banned it, with the result that "in certain areas, the *nyau* secret societies retaliated by forcing all the boys to boycott schools . . . In addition, the *nyau* code included the banning of such items as books, papers or pencils which were considered as symbols of christianity and colonialism. Those who disobeyed these rules were either beaten up or banished from the village and the entire *nyau* movement" (M'Tonga, 1980, 130-1; cf. further Schoffeleers, 1972). Spectators may observe their ceremonies at a proper distance but those venturing too close are physically expelled, and during *nyau* performances the women tend to sing exorcising hymns near the local church. Since Nyau societies continue to exist in a somewhat attenuated form, the ban proved at most only partially successful despite the Christian establishment's earnest efforts. On leaving the Nyau society a young man would, of course, have no undue difficulty in being readmitted to the Church's fold, should he so wish.

9. Early Irish clerical condemnations frequently associate certain other categories of person, notably the druid (*druí*) and satirist (*cáinte*), with *fian*-members alias *dibergaig*. As Sharpe points out, "brigandage, that is the activity of organized bands of killers, was particularly abhorrent to the Church, and in the Old Irish *Arrat* is associated with druidism and satirizing among the sins for which there could be no remission of penance. It was regarded as a pagan practice and evidently had its own ritualistic code of conduct" (1979, 82).

To begin with, "in glossed fragments of *Cáin Pháithirbe* in Dublin, Trinity College, MS H.3.18 *dualaing* 'intolerable' is glossed *cáintí* and *escoman* 'excommunicate' is glossed *cáintí* ⁊ *dibergaig* (CHH 772.36 and 38). These *dibergaig* or the like had werewolf attributes, and *Cóir Anmann* par. 240 significantly bases an etymology of *cáinte* on similar features: '*Cáinte* from *canis* 'hound', on account of the head of a hound on a *cáinte* as he hays (satirizes?)'" (McCone, 1989, 128). The diametrically opposed status and deserts of the admirable *fili* and the despicable *cáinte* according to the Church-oriented ideology of early Irish literature are well brought out in the deliberately juxtaposed episodes involving Crídenbél the satirist's misbehaviour justly avenged by his host the Dagdae and Cairbre the poet's proper



punishment of his host Bres for maltreatment at his hands in *Cath Maige Tuired* (ibid.).

According to an Irish penitential probably dating from the seventh century (Sharpe, 1979, 82), "this is the penitence of a druid (*magi*) or a cruel man vowed to evil (*uel uotiu mali [si] crudelis*), i.e. a *dibergach* (*id demergach*), or a crier (*praeconis*, - *cáinte!*) or a cohabiter or a heretic or an adulterer, namely seven years on bread and water" (Bieler, 1975, 160, par. 4). A similarly hard line is taken by the Old Irish table of penitential commutations: "for there are some sins of them that are not entitled to remission of their penance though the period prescribed for them be long, unless God Himself shorten it through death or a message of sickness or the amount of mortification someone impose on himself. Such are brigandages, druidries and satirizings (*diberggae* ⁊ *druithdechta* ⁊ *cantechda*) and such are adulteries and incest and perjury and heresy and transgression of holy orders" (par. 5; Binchy, 1962c, 58-9). A manifestly tendentious passage in *Bretha Crólige* reveals the determination of monastic lawyers to reduce the entitlement of such reprobates to sick-maintenance below the relatively high level apparently still quite often observed, rather as the Crídenbél episode in *Cath Maige Tuired* (pars. 26-30) implies that a *cáinte* should be refused normal hospitality: "there are three in the kingdom who are maintained according to the maintenance of a *bó-ave*. Neither their dignity (*míad*) nor their inviolate status (*neimthe*) nor their entitlement (*dliged*) nor their tonsure (*ceud-gelt*, lit. 'head-cropping') increases their sick-maintenance (*othrus*). (These are) the druid, the brigand, the satirist (*druí, dibergach, cáinte*). For it is more fitting in God's sight to spurn them to support them" (par. 51; Binchy, 1938, 40-1).

The eighth-century legal tract *Córus Béscnai* introduces a neat delineation of the three main early medieval Irish estates of Church, settled laity and various types of outcast with the question: "how many feasts (*fleda*) are there? Not difficult. Three. A godly feast (*fled déoda*), a human feast (*fled dhénda*), a devilish feast (*fled demúnda*). What is the godly feast? A gift to God, a gift of Sunday on a weekday, celebration of a festival, the feeding of an anchorite, a gift to a church, the feeding of a company, refection of God's guests, comforting the wretched, consecration of a church, feeding paupers, comfortings that may sustain them for the poor. It is required of lords that they enforce each of them on their clients. What is the human feast? Everyone's alchouse feast for his lord according to his entitlement with which there go according to deserts dinner party (*feis*), supper (*fuiririud*), lunch (*dithit*). In the equal divisions of refections distinctions are arranged, refection of maintenance for a kingdom's allies, for the seeking of truth and right, for answering wrong. Mutual obligation of the *Féni* in feastings (and) refection. The propriety of service regarding hosting, encampment, pledge, assembly, vengeance, posse and vigilante action, serving God, furthering the work of a lord and of everyone for his lord, for his kin, for his abbot. Protecting his lord with every enrichment and benefit according to God and man as regards good conduct, good law, good attention. For every proper profit, every render, every nobility, every good reputation due to a lord is lawful. Attending to the warding off of every loss from his lord. Every due is bound, levied, enforced, paid for inviolate persons (*do neimhib*) according to God and man. A devilish feast, i.e. a feast which is given to sons of death (*do macaib báis*) and had people, i.e. to buffoons (*do druthaib*, but in view of attested confusion between forms of *drúth* and *druí* possibly originally *do drúdh* "to druids") and



satirists (7 *edintib*) and begging poets (7 *oblaireib*) and fartars and clowns (7 *fuirseoraib*) and bandits and pagans (7 *geintib*) and whores (7 *merdrechaib*) and other bad people. For every feast that is not given (read *na tabarr*) for earthly exchange and is not given for heavenly reward, that feast belongs to the devil" (CIH 524.18-526.19).

Here too, then, we find "sons of death" or *fian*-members accompanied by druids (or buffoons), satirists, other reprobates and pagans (*geinti*) in general at a feast stigmatized as "devilish" in contrast with the "godly feast" entailing Church dues or other acts of charity and the "human feast" centring around hospitality or other obligations due from a client to his lord.

This collocation of devilish, godly and human feasting is given narrative expression in a long entry under the year 721 in the so-called 'fragmentary' Annals concerning the Cenél nÉogain king of Tara Fergal mac Máele Dúin (+722) and his two sons and eventual successors, the warlike *fian*-leader Áed Allán (+743) and the pious Níall Frossach (+778), founder of a whole line of Tara monarchs. "At that time Fergal made a prophecy for his sons, i.e. for Áed Allán and Níall Cundail, and it is from this that that came about for him, i.e. one day they came to him in Ailech Frigrenn, i.e. Áed the elder son, who was a clever, cruel and vigorous prime young warrior (*cét-óclach*), it is thus that he came, with large well armed hands to Ailech. It is thus, however, that the younger son came, quietly, temperately and peacefully with small numbers, and what he said through his own diffidence and in his father's honour was: 'it is better for me', he said, 'to go outside for lodging than to stay as guest with you tonight' . . . Thereafter the older son, i.e. Áed, was brought into the great palace with his people. However, the young son, i.e. Níall, was taken to a lovely secluded house. They were entertained in due course and their father wished to test them together and came at the end of the night to the house in which the older son was and was listening to that house. It is vehement and foul that people were in that house. There were clowns (*fuirseoiri*) and satirists (*edinteda*) and whores (*techtacha*) and hegging poets (*oblairei*) and louts (*bachlaig*) roaring and bellowing there. One lot drinking, another asleep, another vomiting, another piping, another whistling. Drummers and harpers playing; a group boasting and arguing. Fergal heard them thus. And then he came to visit the secluded house in which the younger son was and he was listening to that house and did not hear anything there except thanksgiving to God for everything they had received, and quiet melodious harping, and songs praising the Lord being performed. And the king greatly perceived fear and love of the Lord in that house. Thereafter the king came to his own bed and greatly took heed of the situation of those two houses" (Radner, 1978, 60-3).

On the morrow king Fergal, unable to stay in the elder son's house for the filth and stench from the previous night's debauchery, visited the younger son Níall and found him praying. After some sleep "the son said to his father, 'dear father,' he said, 'it is proper for you to feast with us awhile here, since there remains with us half of what food and drink was given from you to us last night'. And he had not finished that, when servants brought out a great vessel full of mead and numerous foods and they feasted silently and peacefully together then. When everyone had got up, the king came out into his own house and recounted in the presence of all how the fortunes of those two sons would be. And he said that the older son would assume sovereignty and that his reign would be sturdy, valorous, vigorous, terrifying and lustful. The younger son, however, that he would assume sovereignty



piously and decently and that his descendants would be famous and royal and would take the kingship every second time. That is, moreover, what has been fulfilled hitherto" (*ibid.*, 62-3).

Here, as in the hagiographical record and elsewhere, we find monastic authors quite prepared to acknowledge that life in the detested *flán* might precede succession to the kingship. However, this barely avoidable concession to current realities did not blunt their desire to draw a congenial moral where possible, in this case by admitting that both sons became kings of Tara while reserving the foundation of a major royal line to the pious non-Ionian brother.

Given the evidence already presented (3 and 8 above) for a tendency on the part of kings' sons to join a *flán*, the *cáinte*'s connections with such company are further evinced by the figure of Glasdám "the satirist of the king of Ireland's son with his nine satirists around him" seeking hospitality in the *Bórama* text (LL 38391-2; *cáinte meic rig Hérend cona nóbor cáinte imne*). Similarly noteworthy is the legendary Cathbad's status as both druid and *flán*-member (*sech ba drú-side ba fénnid*) who goes on a murderous "circuit of *flán*-activity (*cúaird fénnidechta*)" in the opening section of *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa*.

It would seem, then, that in marked contrast to the ecclesiastically esteemed and connected *filii* and *brithem* (ch. 1, 10-12) some sections of the *des dáno*, notably the druid and various types of versifier such as the *cáinte*, were an object of clerical opprobrium and excommunication by virtue of pagan attributes and a tendency to associate with the similarly stigmatized *flán*. For this reason it is quite inadmissible to use a king's slaughter of satirists (*cáinte*) as evidence for royal hostility towards poets (*filii*), as Mac Cana does in the case of the *Bórama* tale just mentioned about the deaths of Glasdám and his *dám* or following of satirists (1979, 472-3).

As the foregoing discussion has shown, the clerical establishment seems to have been quite successful in marginalizing what it saw as these unsavoury elements, a process doubtless facilitated by the fact that the vagabond *flán* was intrinsically peripheral anyway. However, the continuing role of some senior *flán*-members like the *fergnia* and *aire échta* in the public enforcement of law and order (5 above) suggests that obvious clerical propaganda for complete outlawry of the *flán* and its satellites proved relatively unsuccessful, presumably because of the institution's usefulness for military training and the partial relief of pressure upon the food supply as well as inadequate inheritances (4 above). After all, as Goody observes, "we cannot expect the same close fit between religion and society that sociologists often perceive in non-literate cultures when the reference point is not some locally derived myth subject to the homeostatic processes of the oral tradition but a virtually indestructible document belonging to one of the great world (i.e. literate) religions" (1968, 5), and there is no reason why the Church should have been more successful in early medieval Ireland than elsewhere in securing full implementation of its social and moral aspirations by a more or less sinful Christian majority. Indeed, even certain satirists may have had a public examining function in the *tuath*, albeit one hardly calculated to endear them to *filii*, if one is to believe the following gloss on *cáinte* in the passage from *Bretha Crólige* (par. 51) cited earlier in this section: "for the lampooner's knowledge of all the metres (*ar uachai na n-uili n-uisti acin druidae*) so that he does not let a poet (*filii*) into the territory except according to paths of entitlement".



10. After enumerating eight types of *sóer-bard* or "free bard" and a further eight of *dóer-bard* or "base bard" the first Middle Irish metrical tract asks: "and the free bards, then, what differentiates them into grades? Not difficult. According to their skills (*asa ndónaib*) do they increase and differ. As each grade of poets (*filea*) increases beyond the other in learning and composition (*i sous 7 airchetai*), so does each of these increase beyond the other in amount of learning and metre (*in imud sois et seoda*), apart from letters and syllables and inflections etc. And it is on that account that they only attain half the honour-price of the poets (*leth-enecland na filea*). For he is not paid in grades who neither learns nor is learned from (*nád:foglaind nád:foglainnir kúad*), who neither studies nor is studied from (*nád:frithgnai nád:frithgnúither uad*)" (par. 3; Thurneysen, 1891, 6). Then, after exemplifying the various rhyming syllabic metres practised by them and assigning them to these different grades, the same text concludes: "it is for this reason that a regulation of rewards is not defined here, because these metres are new forms (*núa-chrotha*), because it is recent authors (*núa-litridi*, see ch. 1, 12) who discovered them. But it is in accordance with the generosity and liberality of everyone for whom they are made and in accordance with the skill and excellence of everyone who makes them that their rewards are paid. However, if it be according to true entitlement of poetic art (*éicse*), their rewards are paid at half the value of the chief metres (*na próm-aistí*, i.e. those exclusive to the *filea*). For it is not easy to despise them, since their gifts are from God . . . It is thus that they are not paid with equalities of honour price to the folk of study (*fri hóes ind frithgnama*)" (par. 68; *ibid.*, 23).

As has already been pointed out (ch. 1, 12), the *Ériu* 13 tract on the privileges and responsibilities of poets explicitly states that the bard's method of composition was essentially oral in the pre-Norman period. Consequently the above passage's equally categorical ascription of the invention of the metres they used to recent writers, themselves apparently influenced by Latin hymnody (ch. 2, 6), provides about as strong an indicator of the dominant influence of literacy in early medieval Irish culture as one could wish for.

Although his very lack of the literacy, formal learning (*foglainn*) and long course of study (*frithgnam*) required of a *filea* (ch. 1, 12) restricted the oral bard's honour-price and rates of pay to at most half that of a trained poet, certain types of free bard were nevertheless highly regarded in lay society: "thus one of the grades of *sóer-bard* is called a *tuath-bard ad-daim tuath* 'a *tuath-bard* whom the *tuath* acknowledges', while of the others the *tigern-bard* is an aristocrat with twelve clients as well as being a bard and the *rig-bard* is both king and bard" (McCone, 1989, 129). To Liam Breatnach we now owe an extensive collection of material relating to the grades of *filea*, *baird* etc. (1987, 3-60), on the strength of which he makes the following important observations: "an essential feature of the seven grades of poets is that they are the successive stages in a progression which an individual may make in his own lifetime . . . Here we have one of the features which distinguish the *filea* from the *baird* . . . Nowhere . . . do we find mention of the bards progressing from grade to grade. Note especially the definition of *tigernbard* as a person who is both a lord and a bard, and of *rigbard* as a person who is both a king and a bard in BN XIII. That factors other than ability in *bairdne* are taken into account surely indicates that we have a ranking due to relative importance, rather than a system of progression from grade to grade" (*ibid.*, 87-8).

However, when we move from the free (*sóer*-) to the base (*dóer*-) bards, whose



inclusion of the *cáinte* and his ilk can just be discerned through a tangle of terms, our sources register a steep decline in respectability and entitlements. Thus two categories on the first metrical tract's list of base bards, the *long-bard* and *drisiuc*, are spoken of slightly in Breatnach's *B(retha) N(emed) IV* passage (ibid., 36-9), and the *dul* and *drisiuc* are similarly lowly rated in *BN V* (ibid., 40-1).

As regards terminological confusion or overlap in this area, "the law tract *Míad-shleachta* follows the descending seven grades of *fili* with *hard*, *fer cerda* and *cáinte*, defined as *fer ura-rósar a biad (fres) in ainim aire* 'a man on account of whom his food be obtained through the blemish of satire' with obvious relevance to the behaviour of Crídenbél, but *cáinte* does not normally figure explicitly in lists of this type. However, some of the terms found in other lists may be associated or even equated with the *cáinte* elsewhere. Even if such equations were not entirely accurate, they would still indicate that the profession in question was regarded as very similar to that of the *cáinte*. *Mittelirische Verslehren II* pars. 132-35 is a section describing the metres of the base bards or *dáer-baird* and of the so-called 'subgrades of poets' (*na fográd fíled*) consisting of *taman*, *drisiuc* and *oblaire*, and the same three subgrades are given by *Uraicecht na Ríar* and by glosses on *Uraicecht Becc* whereas some *Bretha Nemed* material presents a collocation of *hard*, *drisiuc* and *dul*. It has already been pointed out that *dul* and *cáinte* appear to be interchangeable in the Crídenbél tale and Cormac's Glossary..., and we have seen that *oblaire* and *cáinte* appear together at 'devilish' feasts. In *Mittelirische Verslehren I* par. 1 and *Ériu 13*, 41.12 the *drisiuc* appears as a grade of the *dáer-baird*, but at *Bretha Crólige* par. 51 *cáinte* is glossed .i. *in drisiuc* and elsewhere it is said of the *drisiuc* that 'he sticks in the face/honour of everyone' (*lenuid i n-inchaib cáich*) and 'is a briar on account of laceration and a hound on account of fierceness and wickedness' (*is dris ar letarthaigi 7 is cú ar aminnsige 7 ar anble*). The *taman fíled* appears as an alternative to the *sucaire* or, in one version of the relevant material, the *cáinte* in a passage relating to the *fian*. To some extent this interchangeability of terms may be due to the fact that *cáinte*, like *fili*, is generic whereas *oblaire*, *drisiuc* and so on, like *dos cano* etc., refer rather to specific grades within the class. At any rate, *Uraicecht na Ríar* informs us that the *drisiuc* should have ten compositions for an honour-price of a scruple but the *oblaire* only five for an honour-price of only half a scruple" (McCone, 1989, 129).

The Crídenbél episode in *Cath Maige Tuired* (see 9 above) depicts a *dul* or *cáinte* demanding food from his victim by means of an implied threat to assault his honour if refused (McCone, ibid., 123-4). This is precisely the import of doggerels put into the mouths of the *drisiuc* and *oblaire* elsewhere, the *taman* likewise being given a short begging poem (ibid., 129-30), and it seems clear that their offensive threat of satire for gain rather than its properly defensive use to avenge wrongdoing was made a target for criticism by clerics and their *fíled* allies (ibid., 130-2).

A further obvious ground for disapproval was the *cáinte*'s already documented tendency to serve members of the *fian* loathed by the Church, and the native etymology of *drisiuc* just given agrees with that of the *cáinte* (9 above) in stressing canine or lupine aspects also typical of the *díberg(sach)* or *feindid* (6-7 above). Furthermore, the association of certain presumably base types of *bard* with the *fian* rather than the *tuath* is indicated by the personal name *Fíán-bard* and by a reference in the *Ériu 13* tract to bards supported by young warriors of the *fian* (McCone, ibid., 129). It thus seems that early Ireland's *literati* recognized a threefold stratification of



versifiers according to the sort of training involved and the social milieu in which they operated. First came the exalted *fili*, literate by dint of a long monastically oriented education and able to function in Church or aristocratic lay society (ch. 1, 10-11 and Breatnach, 1987, 89-94), then the skilled but illiterate *sóer-bard* operating within the respectable confines of the propertied laity, and finally the dubious category of *dáer-bard*, including the *cáinte* etc., apparently hard put to find willing patrons outside the propertiless *fian*. The latter's members in turn presumably found such versifiers' threats of shame through satire a useful adjunct to or substitute for the menace of physical violence in the quest for hospitality.

11. There is, then, clear evidence for clerical hostility towards the various categories of actual or alleged pagan outlaw and excommunicate with which this chapter is principally concerned. Since the *fian* appears to have been unusual in an early Christian Irish context in that its very survival depended upon resistance to rather than accommodation with the ecclesiastical interest, it is hardly surprising that its basic ethos should have been little affected by Christianity and have proved so retentive of a pagan inheritance with deep Indo-European roots evinced by a wealth of comparative details. It was, moreover, almost inevitable that such an institution should have provided a focus for other elements such as druids and satirists that the Church disapproved of and sought to eliminate or at least ostracize from civilized society.

The reference to *geinti* "pagans" in a text like *Córus Béscnai* (9 above) proves that such people, or at least people so regarded by the Church, were still to be found in pre-Viking eighth-century Ireland. Although paganism may have survived among the settled population in some remoter parts, *Félire Óengusso's* triumphalist assertions of Christianity's total victory in Ireland at the end of that century would have had an embarrassingly hollow ring if this had been the case on any scale. At any rate, the only good evidence that admittedly tendentious texts offer for anything approaching organized paganism in early Christian Ireland relates to the *fian* and its satellites. However odious such recalcitrants may have been to the Church, life in the *fian* was frequently a mere youthful phase prior to the inheritance of property and sometimes even accession to the kingship, processes of settling down that seem normally to have gone hand in hand with marriage and admission or readmission into the Christian community. Indeed, the monastic literature's somewhat grudging acknowledgement of this behavioural paradigm, especially in the common hagiographical motif of *abbergs* brought to repentance and forgiveness, could only serve to underline the transience of a period spent sowing wild oats at a relatively convenient remove. Perhaps this helps to explain why the Church's bark apparently proved worse than her bite in this matter.

Although the details cannot now be recovered, conflict between Church and *fian* will have introduced new tensions into a hitherto cohesive social system in which male age grades played a prominent role. This in turn presumably presented the *des dáno* with an increasingly stark choice between a career amidst the Church and her adherents in the settled *tiath* or one with the *fian* of excommunicates. The inherent paganism of his calling inevitably placed the druid on the wrong side of the tracks, while figures like the *cáinte* may already have been strongly associated with the *fian* and simply shared its fall from grace. Among the less affected, perhaps, was the free bard (*sóer-bard*), who continued to compose orally for the secular nobility, albeit



eventually in metres born of literacy, and the success stories were undoubtedly the *fili* and *brithem*, whose early association with monastic literacy and learning brought high status and great rewards in its wake (ch. 1, 10-12).

The anticlerical stance of the *fian* in association with certain *des d'ano*, notably the *drui* and *edinte*, and others stigmatized as pagans by the Christian establishment makes this the obvious place to expect the relatively unsullied survival of non-Christian oral traditions. In view, however, of the demonstrable dependence of such traditions upon their immediate social environment (ch. 1, 3) and of what Goody terms "the homeostatic organization of the cultural tradition in a non-literate society" whereby "what continues to be of social relevance is stored in the memory while the rest is usually forgotten" (1968, 30-1), it would be surprising if the corpus in question were not rather radically affected by the shrinkage and increased marginalization of the social base to which it referred. Those traditions geared most closely to the institution least shaken by the change in religion, the *fian* itself, would be expected to survive best, and the comparative evidence presented earlier indicates that this was indeed the case.

A further 'distorting' factor for the oral purist must also be recognised. Since the literate have no difficulty communicating orally with the illiterate, even limited literacy has resulted in "cultures which were influenced to some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups or individuals who could read or write. They lived on the margins of literacy, though this is a fact that many observers have tended to ignore" (Goody, *ibid.*, 4-5). In early Christian Ireland an obvious case in point is the illiterate bards' adoption of metres developed by the literate from Latin models (10 above).

Nevertheless, interesting though snippets of evidence in the written record for the survival of paganism on the fringes of medieval Irish society may be to the social historian, this phenomenon can be of little or no relevance to our assessment of the ideology underlying an extant literature known to have emanated from the monasteries. Indeed, the prejudice and antipathy consistently displayed towards the *fian* and its satellites by these selfsame sources show just how hostile the authors of our texts were to practices and beliefs they perceived as pagan. Like it or not, the early Irish literature available to us is "the thoroughly processed product of a monastically oriented literate learned class whose material and intellectual interests extended far beyond the confines of the cloister" (McCone, 1989, 134).

12. It has already been pointed out (ch. 1, 9) that the post-war nativist notion of the *fili* as the old druid 'protectively metamorphosed' or the like by superficial Christianization is no more than wishful thinking. Hard to square with the attestation of both in the early Christian (9 above) and, arguably, the pre-Christian period (ch. 4, 1 and ch. 7, 4)), it is quite at variance with the early medieval Irish sources' determined but possibly tendentious denial of any such relationship between the two. This ideological point is particularly well made in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick*, which consistently depicts *magi* or druids as virulent and inveterate opponents of the Christian mission (e.g. 1 10, 15-17, 20 in Bieler, 1979) in marked contrast to the judge Erc and poet Dubthach, who adopt the new faith with alacrity as prime representatives of their respective professions (ch. 4, 3). Tirechán, on the other hand, brings out the incompatibility of druidry with Christianity by stressing the need to abandon it as a prelude to conversion in the episode of two initially hostile



druid brothers who finally believe in Patrick's God, do penance and accept a new tonsure in token of entry into the Church (26 (17-19), *ibid.*). Whatever the truth about the missionary period itself, this view is doubtless first and foremost a reflection of the contemporary seventh-century druid's actual paganism.

With greater apparent justification Gerard Murphy had already offered the early medieval Irish *fili* an alternative pagan Celtic ancestor scarcely less attractive than the beloved druid. "*Fili* according to its etymology might mean 'see' (cf. Welsh *gwel* 'see'), and ninth-century Irish tradition tells us that *fili*d were indeed considered capable of attaining mystic vision by the method of divination known as *imbas forasnai* (*Sanas Cormaic*, ed. Meyer, *Anecdota*, IV, p. 64, 756). Poetry, which in medieval Ireland was the special function of a *fili*, might formerly have been called *gwawd* in Welsh, and Welsh *gwawd* is etymologically akin to Irish *fáith*, 'a prophet'. *Fáidsine*, the function of a *fáith*, is attributed to *fili*d by an ancient law-tract (Laws III 30, cited in translation by Professor MacNeill, R.I.A. Proc., XXXVI, C, p. 273, n.2). Moreover, a *fili* is called a *fáith* in the *Colloquy of the Two Sages* (par. 272), and Fedelm, the *banfháith* of the *Táin*, is sometimes called *banfhili* (Professor and Mrs. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, I, 613). There is therefore reason for believing with Professor and Mrs. Chadwick (*l.c.*) that *fili*d and *fáitha* were originally the same. If that is so, they represent an Irish order identical in origin with the Gallic learned and mantic order known to the Romans as *vates*" (1940, 200).

As Murphy's own diffidence implies, the etymological case for tracing the Christian *fili* back to a pagan *fáith* is too weak to be taken seriously. Moreover, equations of *fáith* with *fili* in the literature are similarly inconclusive, since Old Irish *fáith* is commonly applied to biblical prophets (see *DII*) and Ireland's righteous pre-Patrician poets had been deliberately correlated with prophets of the Old Testament in the native typology devised by early Irish *litterati* (ch. 4, 3-5).

Earlier still, Thurneysen had ventured the shrewd, if unromantic, opinion that the *fili*d were a pre-Christian outgrowth of the bardic order (that entered into a close relationship with monastic learning particularly soon after the introduction of Christianity (1921, 66-7). Quite recently, solid textual evidence has been adduced for a considerably later differentiation along these lines. Arguing that the poetic grades were modelled upon a system of seven ecclesiastical grades hardly established before the seventh century, Breatnach concludes: "the earliest text we have which sets out the seven grades of *fili*d is the eighth century *Bretha Nemed*. The version of BN in *Ériu* xiii also has eight and seven grade systems for the bards. In two passages in the Nero Avii *Bretha Nemed*, however, we have a different system, viz. the six grades of *fili/deán*, *lethcherd*, *admall*, *hard*, *drisiuc*, and *dul* . . . I would suggest, then, that in these two passages we have a trace of an earlier state of affairs where the *hard* and *fili* were not so sharply distinguished, and that the seven grade system of *fili*d, which cannot be much earlier than the eighth century, reflects a reorganisation of the system on the basis of scholarship, which is the essential feature which distinguishes the *fili* from the *hard* (see pp. 97-8). This hypothesis would fit in well with what we know of the close co-operation between the secular and ecclesiastical learned orders at this period, and with the fact that writing in Irish, to any significant extent, is hardly much earlier than the seventh century" (1987, 99-100).



13. As has already been seen, portrayals of recalcitrant post-Patrician druids in the literature tend strongly to be negative. Harsh treatment in penitentials or the like and diminution of status in the laws (9 above) were obviously due to their continuing paganism in the face of Christianity, an authoritative actiology for this rejection by the Church being supplied by Muirchú's depiction of the leading druids' vicious hostility towards St. Patrick and his message in king Lóegaire's day (12 above).

A further typical enough instance occurs in the Latin Life of St. Berach, which recounts a protracted and royally adjudicated conflict between the saint and a powerful local druid anxious not to be supplanted by him (Plummer, 1910, I, 80-5). To the druid's expostulation that he should not be deprived of his native territory the saint replies "your father Satan, having been cast out of heavenly inheritance, wretchedly plummeting to the bottom, sought the depths of hell. You, therefore like your father are not fit to possess this land dedicated to God; rather shall you share an infernal inheritance with your father the devil" (par. 13). In view of evidence already presented for druidic connections with the *flan* of mostly young aristocrats, some significance attaches to the the druid's incitement of noble youths (par. 14, *iuvenes nobiles*) against the saint, an assault duly foiled by their miraculous immobilization. When the druid (*magus*) proved unable to save the youths, the king sent his soothsayer (*ariolus*, see below) to discover the cause of their misfortune, and then begged the saint's forgiveness (par. 15). The continued intransigence of the druid "full of treachery and malice" (*perfidia atque invidia plenus*) in the face of St. Berach's further miracles eventually led to his own destruction as well as that of the descendants who sought to avenge his death (par. 23).

Clear evidence for the influence of biblical models upon clerical thinking about and literary representation of the druid is provided by the consistent employment of *magus* as a Latin equivalent of Old Irish *drúí*, a usage already well established by the mid-seventh century on the evidence of our earliest extant saints' Lives, penitentials and so on. The Book of Daniel has already been identified as the source for the evil *magi*, *incantatores* and *auruspices* at Lóegaire's Tara court in Muirchú's narrative (ch. 2, 3), and the general incompatibility of *magi* or *arioli* with true religion is uncompromisingly expressed by God's commandment *ne declinetis ad magos, nec ab ariolis aliquid sciscitemini, ut polluamini per eos* "do not turn aside towards magicians, neither inquire aught of soothsayers to be defiled by them" (Lev. 19:31).

King Lóegaire of Tara is forewarned of the victorious coming of Patrick and Christianity by two druids or *magi* in a poem, given in Latin by Muirchú (I 10), who makes it clear that the composition was not his own, and in Irish by the Tripartite Life (Mullehrone, 1939, 22). Any doubts that this scenario is based upon the disturbing message of the *magi* to Herod concerning the advent of the King of the Jews in Matthew 2 are dispelled by the unmistakable verbal echo of that very episode at Muirchú I 16, 1 after his druids' second warning to Lóegaire about the new faith (see ch. 2, 3).

14. The unrepentant druid's representation as a devilish anti-Christian reprobate worthy of death from the coming of Patrick onwards inevitably raises the question as to why monastic writers were prepared to represent him as an awesome figure of great dignity in sagas and other narratives set in the pre-Patrician past. Are we dealing with the uncritical preservation of genuine 'pan-Celtic' pagan traditions



reflecting the druids' erstwhile high priestly status before Christianity knocked him from his perch, as nativists are prone to claim (e.g. Mac Cana, 1983, 14)? If so, the clerks responsible for propagating this favourable image while inveighing against the surviving druid's diabolical paganism can only have been stupid, schizophrenic or both. Since the evidence accumulated in preceding chapters strongly suggests they were neither, a more rational explanation for this clearly deliberate distinction between the pre- and post-Patrician druid is called for.

Given the druid's apparently continuing, if shrinking, role as a pagan priest in the Christian period, the basis of this dichotomous perception presumably lies in the change of established religion mythologised as Patrick's conversion of Lóegaire and his minions. An extremely obvious precedent for a priesthood lapsing from somewhat patchy virtue into outright villainy through murderous hostility towards the bringer of Christianity is, of course, provided by the climactic Gospel narratives of Jesus' rejection and arraignment by the priests and scribes of Israel, who thus forfeited their privileged status. However, this dramatic transformation did not prevent the Church's exegetes from forging typological and allegorical links that made the Old Testament Jewish priesthood serve as a justificatory model for its Christian successor. Thus the Irish Canons, citing Isidore, urge contemplation of the fact "that Aaron was the archetype of the high priest, i.e. the bishop, and that his sons foreshadowed the type of the (Christian) priests (*Aaron summum sacerdotem, id est episcopum figurasse, et filios eius presbiterorum figuram praemonstrasse*)" (*Can. IIIb. 1, 4*).

Since scriptural patterns and current exegetical techniques were undoubtedly exploited in abundance by early Christian Irish *literati* to present the history of their island and people as a microcosm of a world history centred upon the Bible (e.g. ch. 3, 7-11), the druid's incorporation into this scheme would be almost inevitable. From the Church's standpoint the highly desirable corollary would be that pre-Patrician druidic privileges and endowments could be claimed by clerics, just as the Old Testament priest's mantle had descended upon his New Testament counterpart.

The episode of Berach and the druid (13 above) revolves round the latter's hereditary claim to the land miraculously granted to the saint. Berach's retort, quoted in the previous section, amounts to a blanket assertion of clerical rights to the patrimony forfeited by druids on account of their diabolical paganism, just as Satan was justly deprived of his heavenly inheritance.

The three groups represented by the *Senchus Már* prologue and *Uraicecht Becc* as major contributors to the Patrician legal settlement were clerics or bishops (*ecclasa/episcuip*), poets (*filid*) abetted by judges (*brithemair*) and kings (*flaithi*) (ch. 4, 6), but the great pre-Patrician lawmaking assembly held by Cormac mac Airt according to *Scél na Fír Flatha* (ch. 4, 7) sought "to arrange his proper due to each in the drinking hall (*a dligeid ddes d'ordugud do chach den i tig midchúarta*)" according to the portions of meat that came out of a cauldron over which an "incantation of king and poet and druid (*díchetal flatha ⁊ filid ⁊ druad*)" had been sung (par. 8). Both sets of guarantors correspond not only to the three Old Testament orders of *reges* "kings", *prophetae* "prophets" and *sacerdotes* "priests" (or alternatively kings, judges, priests; see Ó Néill, 1979, 154) recognised by early Irish exegesis (ch. 4, 6) but also to each other, due allowance being made for the paradigmatic interchangeability of cleric and druid. This, of course, leaves little doubt that *Scél na Fír Flatha* deliberately equates the two as the pre- and



post-Patrician occupants respectively of the *sacerdos* slot in biblical typology.

A further striking example of such assimilation is provided by the ordeal of *airsem oc altóir* or "waiting at an altar" described as follows in the same text: "i.e. a proof that they used to have at that time to distinguish between falsehood and truth (*etir gai 7 fír*), i.e. waiting at an altar, i.e. going nine times around the altar and afterwards drinking water with a druid's incantation on it (*tria díchetal druad fair*). Now, the sign of his sin was manifest upon him if he were guilty. No harm was done to him, however, if he were innocent" (par. 24). The subsequent claim (loc. cit.) that this ritual had been brought from Israel by the righteous pre-Patrician judge Cai Caínbrethach (ch. 4, 7) is a clear indication of adaptation from an Old Testament original, the obvious candidate being the divinely sanctioned ordeal in Numbers 5:11-28 to determine whether or not a woman has committed adultery: "the priest (*sacerdos*) shall offer it and set her before the Lord and shall take holy water in an earthen vessel and shall put a little earth from the floor of the tabernacle into it . . . and thus let him give the most bitter waters to the woman to drink. When she have drunk them, if she is defiled and is guilty of adultery in her husband's despite, the waters of malediction shall pass through her and after her belly hath swollen her thigh shall rot and the woman shall be as a curse and an example to the whole people. But if she be not defiled, she shall be innocent and shall bear children" (vs. 16-7, 26-8). One wonders if this could have been the source for the saga motif in *Compert Con Culainn* and elsewhere of miraculous pregnancy from a small creature in a drink (ch. 8, 9), but the essential point for present purposes is rather that the priest's officiating role in the Old Testament ceremony is taken by a druid in its ostensibly pre-Patrician Irish adaptation.

It was argued earlier that the depiction of saints in early Irish hagiography owed more to biblical, particularly Old Testament, models than to alleged druidic prototypes (ch. 8, 8). Indeed, some similarities may well have arisen because the druid's literary image, too, probably reflects biblical and other ecclesiastical influences. In other words, the druid of Latin and vernacular early Irish sources, particularly those pertaining to the pre-Patrician period, may best be seen as the largely artificial creation of monastic *literati* concerned with historical typology. This would not, of course, preclude the incorporation of genuine druidic attributes into a hybrid construct concocted when druidry still continued to exist on the fringes of Christian Irish society, albeit probably in a somewhat adulterated form. Nevertheless, the idea that the medieval monastic literature preserves anything approaching a reliable record of the pre-Christian druidic establishment must be dismissed as naive.

The basic issue here can be illustrated by the well known motif that the men of Ulster were forbidden to speak except in reply to their king Conchobar, while Conchobar himself could only speak in reply to one of his three druids (e.g. *Táin* 3428-9; *ba airmert dí Ultaib ní: labrad nech dib acht fri Conchobar, ní: labrad Conchobar acht resna tríb druídib*). Even if this should be a literary survival of the pagan druid's exalted pre-Christian status as his king's social equal or even slight superior, one must still ask why such a tradition was deliberately perpetuated in writing by representatives of a monastic interest otherwise demonstrably determined to undermine the position of actual druids. The answer, surely, lies in the typological divorce of the post- from the pre-Patrician druid to make way for the latter's association with the Christian priest or bishop. In that case the pre-Christian chief druid's high standing in relation to the king would constitute a useful historical



precedent for that claimed by monastic lawyers for his Christian successor. Thus *Críth Gablach* grants the bishop a retinue predictably equal to that of a king (cf. ch. 1, 10) before posing its final question: "which of them is more venerable, the king or bishop? A bishop is more venerable because the king rises before him on account of the faith (*fa bích creitme*). A bishop, however, (only) raises his knee before a king" (par. 48).

The final major piece of the typological jigsaw has now fitted into place. Through being correlated with the law and the prophets that reached fulfilment by foretelling Christ and paving his way in the Bible, the monastically oriented jurist (*brithem*) and poet (*filí*) could be accorded a similarly positive role in relation to Patrick and the coming of Christianity to Ireland. The recalcitrant pagan druid (*drui*), by contrast, invited comparison with the priests (*sacerdotes*) of Israel, who became unredeemably degenerate through rejecting Christ and thus left the way clear for the Christian clergy to become the true successors of their generally admirable Old Testament precursors. It is to be stressed that early medieval Irish ideology treats the *filí*'s godly prophetic role as a historical constant and accords him no share in a priesthood or *sacerdotium* seen as the exclusive preserve of the pre-Patrician druid and the post-Patrician cleric successively.



## Politics and propaganda

1. Genealogy lay at the heart of early medieval Irish *senchus* and could, indeed, like law simply be referred to as *senchus* (e.g. Meyer, 1912, 295, 302, 317, 324) or its Latin equivalent *peritia* (ibid., 361; *Corp. Gen.*, 67 etc.). The sheer size of the extant written record bears abundant testimony to its assiduous cultivation and manipulation. In Ó Corráin's expert opinion, "the very bulk of the Irish genealogical materials is daunting. The published genealogies and origin-legends of the twelfth century and before contain the names of some 12,000 individuals. But this is by no means all. If we add the materials in unpublished tracts (and these are still, unfortunately, unindexed) the total should come to not less than 20,000 names. This covers the prehistoric or mythological period, proto-historic times, and the historic period proper which begins about AD 550 (and I have excluded the detailed genealogies of the later middle ages). I believe that the most - and certainly over two thirds - of the individuals named are historical personages. Thus, for a period of about 650 years (roughly equivalent to twenty-two generations), we have 12,000 individuals whose names, family connections and dynasties are given in the genealogical tracts. When we turn to collectives, the sources record some 2,500 tribes, families and dynasties - and that is a conservative estimate. It may be useful to indicate the degree of detail. For the Cianachta, a relatively obscure people, we have the names of over 100 individuals and eight lineages. For the Corcu Modruad, a relatively minor kingdom in Co. Clare, we have the names of some 290 individuals and some 94 collectives. For the Uí Bairrche, an (un?)important Leinster people, we have the names of about 200 individuals and 80 lineages. For the tiny Meath kingdom of Lócgairé (whose dynasty claimed to be descended from Lócgairé mac Néill and whose genealogies were evidently kept at the monastery of Trim) we have the names of 552 individuals (amongst them those of some of the abbots of Trim and their wives) and 44 lineages" (1985, 55-6).

The prodigious scale and elaboration of what is, after all, a written corpus go well beyond the retentive capacities of actual oral traditions as observed by anthropologists, who regard even royal pedigrees some twelve to fifteen generations deep as remarkably long (e.g. Vansina, 1973, 153; Goody, 1968, 31) and northern Somali examples "sometimes consisting of more than thirty named ancestors" as quite exceptional (Lewis in Goody, *ibid.*, 272). For an oral testimony to remain



manageable it seems that "the added depth of lineages caused by new births needs to be accompanied by a process of genealogical shrinkage; the occurrence of this telescoping process, a common example of the general social phenomena which J.A. Barnes has felicitously termed 'structural amnesia', has been attested in many societies" (Goody, *ibid.*, 32-3).

The best prospect, then, for an addict of orality confronted with an early Christian Irish record bearing all the marks of elephantiasis would be to argue that an enormous number of local oral genealogies had been gathered, harmonised and codified by *literati*, but even so improbably arduous and disinterested an undertaking would hardly have been technically feasible without significant doctoring of the raw data. Add to that the early linkage of Irish with biblical genealogies (ch. 2, 2; ch. 3, 7), plus the interweaving of ecclesiastical and secular figures (cf. Ó Corráin, *ibid.*, 52; 1981), Latin and Irish in the older genealogical collections, and the case for a decisive monastic role in their compilation and maintenance becomes virtually unanswerable. Indeed, in a recent article Ó Corráin has argued cogently "that they are a historical source that is fully rooted in a written tradition, that there is no evidence to demonstrate an oral tradition later put into writing, and that it is Ireland's learned clergy who composed and preserved these same genealogies" (1986b, 71) by showing among other things that "there is usually a connection between the antiquity of the text and the amount of Latin in it: the older they are, the more abundant the Latin" (*ibid.*, 73).

These claims are, of course, fully consonant with the monastery of Foiny's fame as Ireland's main centre for *senchus* and with the known monastic affiliations of the greatest specialist in his field, the *senchaid* or "historian" (ch. 1, 10; cf. Thurneysen, 1921, 67).

The comprehensive genealogical system was further tied to a prolonged chronology going right back via Noah to Adam, one in which major figures at least were liable to be given more or less precise dates, as in the Rawlinson B. 502 list of Irish kings accompanied by the length of their various reigns (*Corp. Gen.*, 117-22). As a result, early Irish genealogies were apparently more prone to expansion than to telescoping due to 'structural amnesia' in a strictly oral milieu, an undisputed instance of such 'farcing' being the substantial number of intervening ancestors required to link the Milesian pedigree to the biblical Gomer son of Japheth son of Noah (ch. 2, 2; see the table in Scowcroft, 1988, 16). This process was presumably applied quite liberally to the large part of the genealogical corpus covering the period prior to the later sixth and earlier seventh century, when a broadly reliable system of contemporary written documentation seems to have come into being as in the analogous case of the annals.

As well as sheer invention, favoured methods of farcing seem to have included duplication (O'Rahilly, 1946, 202-3), the abstraction of eponymous ancestors from a people's name (Mac Niocaill, 1972, 3) and the incorporation of euhemerised pagan deities such as Lug and Nuadu (O'Rahilly, *ibid.*, 262; see *Corp. Gen.*, index). However, it seems most unlikely that the presence of such divinities in a given pedigree served to "give explicit expression to the association between deity and tribal groupment" (Mac Cana, 1983, 20), a fundamental relationship commonly supposed to underly the names of certain 'archaic' population groups (Mac Niocaill, *ibid.*, 3-4) as well as the oath formula *tongu do dia toinges mo thiath* "I swear to the god to whom my tribe swear" in sagas (e.g. Mac Cana, *ibid.*, following Vendryes).



A major prop of this interpretation has been undermined by Ruairi Ó hUiginn's recent careful study of this formula's syntax and textual development, from which he convincingly concludes that it must be understood as "I swear to God what my people swear" and that "(the god in question is the God of christianity)" (1989, 339). Similarly there is no need to suppose that the value of figures like Iag and Níadu for monastic compilers of genealogies went much beyond their usefulness as royal stuffing, and it seems quite inconceivable that they could have ascribed any legitimating function to the presence in a pedigree of pagan deities as such.

Be that as it may, endeavours to winnow fact from fiction, genuine pagan elements from inventive padding and so on in the earlier sections of extant genealogies seem largely pointless in the absence of proper controls. The real issue, surely, is the contemporary purpose of genealogies and the way in which this affected their transmission and manipulation.

2. It is a commonplace of modern anthropological studies of genealogy in so-called 'primitive' or 'traditional' societies, whether illiterate or, like early Christian Ireland, partially literate, that its primary function is to legitimise current socio-political relationships and concerns by mirroring them. As Vansina puts it in a purely oral context, "genealogies are sources in which distortions are very prone to occur, because they form the ideological framework with reference to which all political and social relationships are sustained and explained. Because of the functions they fulfil, they undergo many alterations, and are frequently telescoped" (1973, 153).

Goody provides an illuminating actual example from his own field work: "the state of Gonja in northern Ghana is divided into a number of divisional chiefdoms, certain of which are recognized as providing the ruler of the whole nation. When asked to explain their system the Gonja recount how the founder of the state, Ndewura Jakpa, came down from the Niger Bend in search of gold, conquered the indigenous inhabitants of the area and enthroned himself as chief of the state and his sons as rulers of its territorial divisions. At his death the divisional chiefs succeeded to the paramouncy in turn. When the details of this story were first recorded at the turn of the present century, at the time the British were extending their control over the area, Jakpa was said to have begotten seven sons, this corresponding to the number of divisions whose heads were eligible for the supreme office by virtue of their descent from the founder of the particular chiefdom. But at the same time as the British had arrived, two of the seven divisions disappeared, one being deliberately incorporated in a neighbouring division because its rulers had supported a Mandingo invader, and the other because of some boundary changes introduced by the British administration. Sixty years later, when the myths of state were again recorded, Jakpa was credited with only five sons and no mention was made of the founders of the two divisions which had since disappeared from the political map" (1968, 33).

Such factors making for rapid change mean that little credence can be attached by the modern historian to such 'genuine' oral genealogy as may be assumed to have found its way into the early Irish written record, even if these constituents could be isolated with any confidence. Thus Mac Niocaill remarks of the eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill dynasties associated with the prestigious Tara monarchy throughout the early medieval period: "in all, Niall is credited with fourteen sons. In a period



when polygyny was acceptable there is nothing remarkable about this, and it is only when one meets such feats of fertility as the thirty-three sons credited to Cathair Mór, allegedly ancestor . . . of the ruling dynasty of the Laigin, that cautious scepticism may yield to incredulity. But it is worth raising the question, even if it is unanswerable, whether all these links with Niall are not perhaps fictitious: whether, indeed, although some recent writers have accepted his existence, and seen in him the first king of Tara of his line, he ever existed at all, and if he did, whether he ever ruled in Tara" (1972, 12).

Whether or not Níall Noígiallach actually existed and sired fourteen sons, more or less, the claim that each of these managed to found dynasties of at least local importance surely stretches credulity, and this disbelief is encouraged by serious discrepancies in the sources regarding the number of sons ascribed to genealogical linchpins like him and Cathair.

For instance, the opening of *Esnada Tige Buchet* gives the latter a full complement of thirty-two sons in two manuscripts as against a mere twelve in the third, while only seven appear on the subsequent list naming them. Leinster genealogies variously grant him thirty-three or thirty sons, but claim that only ten of these left issue, the groups claiming descent from each then being enumerated (*Corp. Gen.*, 42-3, 44-5). This looks like a rationalization reflecting a reduction in the number of groups felt worthy of mention in the pedigree (cf. Ó Corráin, 1978, 33-4), and nicely illustrates the constraints to which a written genealogical record of some depth is liable. In an essentially oral tradition the ancestors of lines that later became extinct or insignificant might easily fall victim to total 'structural amnesia' as in the Ghanaian example above, but in a literate milieu less forthright discarding methods may be appropriate in order to ease conflicts with a tangible older record.

This process may, of course, also operate the other way round, Byrne giving the following documented example of Níall's unorthodox acquisition of a fifteenth son: "typical of the manner in which genealogies were manipulated to accord to changed political circumstances is the fact that some authorities treat the Ua Dublaige dynasty of Fir Tuilach Mide as a branch of their Ua Máelshechlainn overlords, while another traces their descent from a totally fictitious eponym Fer Tuilach son of Níall Noígiallach" (1973, 143). Similar accretion by a process similar to "the adoption and full genealogical assimilation of clients" observable, for instance, in the southern Sudan (Lewis in Goody, 1968, 273) may, of course, also have applied at earlier stages in the development of the Uí Néill pedigree, and might account for the discrepancy between the mere eight sons named in *Timna Néill* "Níall's Testament" (*Corp. Gen.*, 131-2) and the fourteen usually ascribed to him (e.g. *ibid.*, 133). However, the smaller number may well reflect a similar narrowing of focus upon the main lineages to that in the Leinster record, the so-called *secht finí Temra* or "seven Tara lineages" (with an at least theoretical claim on the kingship?) being listed virtually identically as eight elsewhere (*ibid.*, 358 = *I.I.* 318b47-9, but note the absence of Fiachu and the resolution of Crimthann [= Connall Cremthainne] into the eponymous Áed Sláine and Colmán descended from him). There is also mention of a still more select "four Tara lineages" (*ibid.*, 17), presumably the Cenél Conaill, Cenél nEógain, Sil nÁedo Sláine and Clann Cholmáin dominant in the historical period.

The use of genealogy to make political statements is as characteristic of the supremely literary Bible as it is of truly oral cultures. Goody, for examples, states



that "like the Bedouin Arabs and the Hebrews of the Old Testament, the Tiv people of Nigeria give long genealogies of their forebears, which in this case stretch some twelve generations in depth back to an eponymous founding ancestor. Neither these genealogies, nor the biblical lists of the descendants of Adam, were remembered purely as feats of memory. They served as mnemonics for systems of social relations. When on his deathbed Jacob delivered prophecies about the future of his twelve sons, he spoke of them as the twelve tribes of Israel. It would seem from the account in Genesis that the genealogical tables here refer to contemporary groups rather than to dead individuals: the tables presumably serve to regulate social relations among the twelve tribes of Israel in a manner similar to that which has been well analysed in Evans-Pritchard's work (1940) on the Nuér of the southern Sudan and Fortes' (1945) account of the Tallensi of northern Ghana" (*ibid.*, 31-2).

As has already been pointed out (ch. 2, 2), both the *timnae* or "testament" genre, whereby a father assigns his sons their various fortunes, and the two main methods of representing genealogical relationships in the monastically compiled early Irish corpus conform to, and may well have been modelled upon, familiar biblical patterns. It thus appears that in this fundamental area, as in so many other departments of early Irish literature discussed in previous chapters, modes of thought and presentation with likely enough pagan oral roots were fitted by assimilation to biblical and other ecclesiastical norms for a role in an emergent syncretistic literary *senchus* firmly under the Church's control (cf. the end of ch. 3, 13).

3. It has already been pointed out (ch. 3, 8) that the key socio-political distinction between inferior *aithech-thuatha* or "vassal peoples" and their betters was expressed genealogically by making the latter descend from Míl of Spain, whereas the former were ascribed to defeated Fir Bolg stock. So desirable was a Milesian pedigree that it was acquired by more and more groups as they sought to jettison their Fir Bolg status with its demeaning 'Canaanite' connotations (ch. 3, 8). Whether or not this led to a partial genealogical redefinition of the dichotomy between the tributary and non-tributary kingdoms of a province in terms of *fortuatha* "dependent kingdoms" and *sóer-chlanna* "free lineages", the basic situation in the early medieval period was that "the dominant tribe or dynasty of a province was normally itself split into several kingdoms. Under the developed dynastic polity of the Old Irish period kings who belonged to the same dynasty as the high king of a province acknowledged his suzerainty indeed by accepting *rath* or *tuarastal*, but paid no tribute. In the *Book of Rights* such kingdoms are termed *sóer-thuatha*, as opposed to tribute-paying *dóer-thuatha*. In the genealogies kingdoms not ruled by members of the dominant dynasty of a province are commonly called *fortuatha* 'extern tribes'. It is difficult to distinguish these from the *aithech-thuatha* or 'unfree tribes'. While the word *aithech-thuatha* could be a derogatory term for tributary kingdoms, its more precise definition seems to relate to population groups which had lost real political status and were mere rent-paying communities without a real king" (Byrne, 1973, 45-6). In this situation, which may be regarded as a political correlate of the social trichotomy between free client (*sóer-chéile*), base client (*dóer-chéile*) and unfree vassal (*aithech* etc.; cf. Scowcroft, 1988, 59-60), genealogical affiliation to the free lineages would obviously be very desirable as a token of promotion from tributary status, where the privileged could be induced to concede it.



Since convenient political maps of early medieval Ireland are readily available in the book by Byrne just cited, it will suffice here to refer briefly to the most important divisions. The overkingship of Mumu or Munster symbolised by Cashel and chiefly competed for by the main Éoganacht dynasties corresponded closely enough to the area of the present-day province. The same held good for Connacht with its royal site at Crúachu and major dynasties of the Uí Ailella, the Uí Fiachrach dominant in the seventh century and the Uí Briúin dominant in the eighth and ninth. However, the Ulaid or Ulstermen were confined to the present-day counties of Down and Antrim, and the Laigin or Leinstermen to the southern half of the present-day province roughly below Dublin's river Liffey. The two most powerful Leinster dynasties in the historical period were the southerly Uí Cheinnselaig and the northerly Uí Dúnlainge, the latter of whom dominated the provincial kingship from the mid-seventh century onwards. The rest of the country came under the Tara kingship of the Uí Néill, supported by their Airgialla subjects in present-day county Armagh and areas to its immediate North and West. The Uí Néill themselves fell geographically into two main groups. The Cenél Conaill of mid-Down were dominant among the Northern Uí Néill in the seventh century until outstripped by the Cenél nÉogain's expansion from Inishowen in northeast Down into the present-day counties of Derry and Tyrone. Among the Southern Uí Néill, centred upon the present-day midland counties of Meath, Westmeath and Longford, the eastern Sí nÁedo Sláine virtually monopolised the Tara kingship in the second half of the seventh century but had been supplanted by the western Clann Cholmáin in alternation with the northern Cenél nÉogain by the middle of the eighth. Another major political and geographical division of Ireland recognised in texts is that between a southern Leth Moga or "Mug's half" supposedly named after Mug Nuadat and comprising Munster plus the Laigin, and a northern Leth Cuinn or "Conn's half" consisting of Connacht, Uí Néill and Airgialla, with or without the Ulaid, and said to take its name from Conn Cétchathach.

The political dimension may be made quite explicit in tracts indicating which groups converge (*contd):recud*) at particular points in a genealogy or which groups are descended from whom. The table opposite gives a massively simplified scheme based upon extant genealogies but pared down to focus attention upon the nodes, relationships and individuals featuring at various points in the remainder of this chapter. A double vertical line indicates a father-son relationship and a horizontal line links brothers, but many such collateral offshoots have been ignored. Single vertical lines, by contrast, are non-specific as to the number of intervening generations involved, which may be as high as twenty or thirty in the heavily pruned top half intended to present a very broad political canvass above the *sóer-chlanna* watershed. Thereafter more detailed genealogies are provided only for earlier defining stages of the most important conglomerates of Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga, namely those centring on the Uí Néill and the Éoganacht respectively. The Laigin, Airgialla, Connachta and so on could, of course, have been similarly treated.

The following passage is a good textual example geared to the major divisions: "at Conn Cétchathach, then, are divided the free lineages (*sóer-chlanna*) of Leth Cuinn, and they are dependent peoples (*fortuatha*) of the descendants of Conn (*Sí Cuinn*) apart from that. At Catháer Már son of Feidelmid are divided the free lineages of the Laigin, and they are dependent peoples apart from that. At Ailill Ólomm are divided the free lineages of Munster, and they are dependent peoples





apart from that. Two sons of Úgaine: Cobthach Cól Breg from whom come Leth Cuinn and Láegaire from whom come the Laigin. At Níadu Argarlám the Munstermen join the lineages of Úgaine (*tri clannaib Úgaine*). Níadu Argarlám [apparently here confused with Níadu Fínd Fáil] had two sons: Glass and Cú-oiss. Glass from whom come the Sí Cuinn and Dál Riata and Ulaid and Laigin and men of Ossory (*Osráige*); Cú-oiss from whom come the Munstermen, moreover . . . At Níall Noígíallach all of the Uí Néill join, i.e. Connall [= Cenél Conaill] and Colmán [= Clann Cholmáin] and Fogan [= Cenél nFogain] and Áed Sláine [= Sí nÁedu Sláine] and Tethba and Cairbre [= Cenél Cairbri] and Cenél nÉrna and Láegaire [= Cenél Lócgairi]. At Eochaid Muigmedón the Northern and Southern Uí Néill join the Connachta. At Cairbre Liphechair the Airgíalla join the Uí Néill and Connachta. At Feidelmíd Rechtaid the Fothairt and Déissi Temrach and Déissi Muman and Corcu Roida join the lineage (*clann*) of Conn. At Óengus Tuirmech of Tara [i.e. some nineteen generations before Feidelmíd] the royalty of the Ulaid and Scotland and the Érainn join the Uí Néill and those (others) we have mentioned. At Úgaine Már [i.e. some ten generations before Óengus] the Laigin and Osráige and Leth Cuinn join" (*Corp. Gen.*, 137).

Viewed from an essentially Uí Néill standpoint, there is evidently a broad correlation here between genealogical proximity and the basic political relationships applying in the early Christian period. To begin with, the various Uí Néill dynasties are brought under the aegis of their eponymous ancestor Níall Noígíallach, their further linkage to the main Connacht lineages is then defined by Níall's father Eochaid, and the Airgíalla are given a somewhat more distant relationship to their Uí Néill overlords. Further out still at the defining node of Feidelmíd Rechtaid various subordinate Fothairt and Déissi peoples are incorporated, the Dál Fíatach royal stock of the generally hostile Ulaid being grafted on well back to complete the main Leth Cuinn inventory. Turning then to Leth Moga, the genealogy brings in the Laigin and their Osráige neighbours at a considerable remove, and finally the main Munster rivals of the Uí Néill. Similar pecking orders are, of course, liable to be established within a province's main lineages, Ó Corráin remarking, for instance, of his tabular summary of the main Munster relationships that "this schema most probably represents, not the strictly historical ancestry of the various dynasties of the Eóganacht but the political affiliations amongst them as seen by an eighth-century genealogist" (1972, 175).

The genealogical framework presented above is unusual in that the chief Munster stock is separated from the rest some generations after the Milesian invasion, whereas standard practice was to trace their descent from Mil's son Éber, that of the Ulster Dál nAraide from his son Ír, and that of the main lineages of Leth Cuinn and the Laigin from his son Érimón. For example, "at Érimón there converge (*cond'raicir*) the three Connachta and the Southern Uí Néill and the Northern Uí Néill and the Airgíalla and the Déisi and the Laigin and the Osráige and the Érainn and the Orbraige and the Fothairt and Dál Riata and Dál Fíatach and the royalty of Scotland . . . At Éber there converge the seven Éoganachta and the Lemnaig of Scotland. At Ír there converge the descendants of Fergus and Connall and Celtchar . . ." (*Corp. Gen.*, 358). The ambiguous position of the Laigin as geographically part of Leth Moga but genealogically affiliated to Érimón's predominantly Leth Cuinn line (cf. Scowcroft, 1988, 47) in this, the usual arrangement, neatly reflects their intermediate geographical and political position between two powerful



neighbours, Munster and the Uí Néill, against each of whom in turn they had to fight major battles in 735 and 738 A.D., for example (AU; cf. ch. 1, 7).

Scowercroft has made the point that the *Lebor Gabála's* scheme of the pre-Christian Tara kings of Ireland shows a deliberately analogous pattern of hiving off "according to which the principal line of descent from Éremón to Loegaire mac Néill enjoys a sovereignty interrupted three times and shared in each of the four eras with a cadet branch from which descend the kings of a *coiced*. Thus the descendants of Éremón and Éber (whence the kings of Munster) share the sovereignty until the *flaithius Ulad* (descendants of Ír mac Miled), which lasts for seven generations (or 100 years) between the reigns of Níadu Find Fáil (XXXI) and Úgaine Mór (LVI). Two of the latter's many children, Cobthach Coel Breg (LVIII) and Loegaire Lore (LVII, whence the Laigin and Osraige), establish dynasties that share the sovereignty until a *cess* ('debility') that afflicts them between the reigns of Énna Aignech (LXXIII) and Eochu Feidlech (LXXXII). Thereafter, the descendants of Énna and his brother, Fiachu Fer Mara (whence the Ulidian kingdoms of medieval Ireland and Scotland), share the sovereignty until the slaying of Fiachu Findoilches (or Findfolaid, XCIII) by the provincial kings (*coicedaig*). His son, Tuathal Techtmar (XCV), reconquers Ireland, and from him descend the Airgialla, the Connachta, and the Uí Néill. The Airgialla never control the kingship of Tara - surviving only as *tuatha* tributary to the Uí Néill - but tract V portrays it as shared by the descendants of Níall Noígiallach (CXIV) and of Fiachrae (whence the Connachta), sons of Eochu Muigmedón" (*ibid.*, 46-7; see table and map, 48 and 50).

4. Both genealogical schemes given above are broadly similar apart from the position of the Munstermen, who were ascribed in the first to Éremón's line by making Cú-niss the son of a Níadu descended from him rather than of Éber's great-great-grandson Níadu Déclám (*Corp. Gen.*, 251 = Rawl. 154b23-8) and by superimposing Glas son of Níadu Déclám (*Corp. Gen.*, 187 = Rawl. 147a26-7) upon the Laginian Aedán Glas son of Níadu Find Fáil (e.g. *Corp. Gen.*, 6 = Rawl. 116a50-2). However, the real significance of this divergence lies in its connection with two conflicting views of Ireland's political organization.

One of these sought to assert Munster's integrity by claiming equal spheres of influence for the Éoganacht and the Uí Néill in the halves of Conn and Mug respectively: *diuisa est Hibernia insula in duas partes compures etar Conn Cétchathach et Éogan Már qui et Mug Níadat* "the island of Ireland was divided into two co-equal parts between Conn Cétchathach and Éogan Már, who was also Mug Níadat" (*Corp. Gen.*, 206). This eponymous partition was then traced right back to the two immigrant Milesian brothers Éber and Éremón, and corroborated by an equally fundamental genealogical separation of the Éoganacht from the Síol Cuinn. Furthermore, corresponding claims to ecclesiastical independence from the chief Uí Néill church of Armagh and her founder were based upon the allegedly pre-Patrician missions of certain southern saints, notably St. Ailbe of Munster's chief church Emly (cf. McCone, 1984b, 49-54; Sharpe, 1989). Finally, the recorded view of "others" that Éber was the eponym of Hibernia (*Corp. Gen.*, 186; ch. 3, 7) may be a vestige of Munster claims to overall hegemony. In this respect the entry of the southern-biased *Annals of Inisfallen (IF)* for 721 A.D. is worth noting for its unusual claim, at least in the context of the bulk of our extant materials, that "these are the five kings of the Munstermen who took (the kingship of) Ireland after the



faith (*iar cretinn*), namely Óengus mac Nad Froich (+492, *AI*) and his son, i.e. Eochaid who ruled Ireland for seventeen years, and Cathal mac Finguine (+742, *AI*), and Feidlimid mac Crimthain (+847, *AI*) and Brian mac Cennétig (+1014, *AI*). Finally, the Munster-biased tract *Da Bunad Imthechta Éoganachta* in the Laud genealogies insists upon the equal right of the kings of Cashel and Tara to "set a king over every kingdom (*tuath*)" in Munster and Leth Cuinn respectively, but implies an honorific preeminence for Cashel by virtue of the asylum accorded by the Munster monarch Fiachu Muillethan to Cormac mac Airt after the latter's expulsion from the Tara kingship by the king of the Ulster Dál nAraidi. Indeed, it is claimed that Cormac, as an unmistakable gesture of submission, "gave him (Fiachu) hostages in return for a hosting of the Munstermen (*giállais dó ar slógeith fer Muman*)", whereupon the forces of Leth Muga regained his throne for Cormac, who awarded Fiachu the Ciannachta lands in gratitude (Meyer, 1912, 314.6-16).

The influential alternative maintaining the Uí Néill king of Tara's supremacy in tandem with Armagh can be traced at least as far back as the seventh century. In Byrne's words, "Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* depicts fifth-century Tara as the Irish Babylon, a druidic centre which is a fitting stage-setting for his rhetorical narrative of the saint's confrontation with Lóeguire, that *rex quidam magnus, ferox, gentilis-que imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria, quae erat caput Scotorum* (a certain great, fierce, pagan emperor of the barbarians reigning in Tara, which was the capital of the Irish). He also asserts that Lóeguire's father Niall was 'founder of the royal line of almost all this island', (*origo stirpis regiae huius pene insulae*). Muirchú's contemporary Adomnán categorically states that Niall's great-grandson Diarmait mac Cerbaill was 'ordained by God ruler of all Ireland', (*totius Scotiae regnatorem a deo ordinatum*), and he tells of the warning given by Colum Cille to Diarmait's son Aed Sláine against embroiling his hands in the blood of his kindred, lest he lose 'the prerogative fore-ordained to you by God of the monarchy of the kingdom of all Ireland' (*tibi a deo totius Euerinae regni praerogativam monarchiae praedestinatum*). Such high-flown language testifies to ambition rather than achievement. At this date neither the Ulaid nor the Laigin had acquiesced in subordinate status, and the kings of Cashel took little cognisance of northern affairs. Muirchú was writing in the interests of Armagh, perhaps to wean the Uí Néill from their attachment to the paruchia of their own saint Colum Cille, and certainly to link the mission of Patrick with their own ancestral figures. The primacy which Armagh won by the end of the seventh century was largely due to the success of this new alliance, but it would remain precarious until supported by a parallel secular institution. The prerogatives of the abbot of Armagh, as set out in the *Liber Anguelli* were modelled on those of an as yet theoretical high-king of Ireland. As for Adomnán, he was himself a member of the Uí Néill dynasty of Cenél Conaill" (1973, 255).

The standard lists of *ríg Érenn* or "kings of Ireland" in the genealogies and *Lebor Gabála* are obviously intended to bolster these claims. To begin with, they represent the Tara kingship as a truly national monarchy held at one time or another by ancestors of all the major provincial dynasties in the manner described by Scowercroft earlier. This, however, leads up to claims of an Uí Néill monopoly or near-monopoly of it from the coming of Patrick in the fifth to the rise of Brian Bóruma in the late tenth century. These emerge clearly from the list of believing kings introduced with the words "and it is to be realised that no king of any descent but Niall's has held Ireland after Patrick's arrival with two exceptions, namely Baetan



and Brian reigned. But yet some do not count Bactán among the great kings" (*Corp. Gen.*, 124). Presumably the less diffuse variant genealogy merging the Munstermen with the rest some generations after Mil's invading sons is likewise geared to the doctrine of a Tara high kingship of all Ireland in Éremon's line developed by Uí Néill propagandists.

Unexceptionable though Byrne's comments above are as a statement of Armagh's ambitions and incipient rise to power, doubts may be entertained as to how fully she had established herself even as the main Uí Néill church by the late seventh century (Herbert, 1988, 52-5), and her broadly conceded primacy of Ireland was certainly still a century or more in the future at that time (McCone, 1984 and 1982, 136-44). This seems to have gained acceptance in the southern half with the help of a roughly late eighth-century change in Armagh strategy "from the simple claims to episcopal and other major churches made in the *Book of the Angel* in the mid-seventh century to a more flexible policy allowing some such churches virtual independence in their own spheres of influence in return for at least a nominal acknowledgement of Armagh and Patrick's primacy in Ireland as a whole" (McCone, 1984b, 52). There are two particularly good examples of such status being delegated by Patrick as *primus inter pares*. The first is the rider appended at the end of the *Book of the Angel* whereby Patrick (on behalf of Armagh) grants Brigit (representing Kildare) control over her federation of churches (*paruchia*) in Leinster in return for their cession to Armagh elsewhere (Bieler, 1979, 190-1; McCone, 1982, 107 and 144). The second is inserted at par. 29 of Ailbe of Emly's *Salamanca Life* (Heist, 1965, 125) and depicts the Munster saint meeting Patrick in king Óengus mac Nad Froich's company at Cashel and being made father of "all the men of the Munstermen" by Armagh's founder (McCone, 1984b, 52-3). It seems likely that a similar primacy of honour falling well short of real control eventually came to be accorded the Tara kingship even in Munster ideology, whence the overwhelming consensus on this basic point in the extant texts.

It thus emerges that even in the more remote prehistoric sections underpinning this "elaborate origin-legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country" (Ó Corráin, 1978, 35) the genealogical record and associated king-lists were firmly geared to current political considerations, both ecclesiastical and secular.

5. This framework was taking shape "as early as the seventh century" and may be said to reflect the centripetal nation-moulding efforts "of a mandarin class of monastic and secular scholars whose privileged position in society allowed them to transcend all local and tribal boundaries" (*ibid.*). However, such trends towards homogenization were to some extent counterbalanced by more local political biases and the tyranny of change itself, factors inevitably conducive to a measure of diversity. Indeed, a cursory glance at *Corp. Gen.* will show that even highly edited tracts (Ó Corráin, 1978, 32-3) are characterised by discrepancies, some apparently trivial and others highly significant, both within a single manuscript or between different manuscript versions. The handful of instances already discussed, including the occasional mention in a text of alternative views, need not be multiplied here, and there is no reason to ascribe this variation to the vagaries of secular oral tradition.

The fact is that the senior personnel of monasteries great and small was prone to be connected by mutually beneficial ties of birth, geographical proximity or both with major and minor dynasties (cf. McCone, 1984b, 56-7). As Ó Corráin points out



with appropriate examples, "the church establishment of the eighth and ninth centuries and before was rich, comfortable and powerful. By now, clerical and lay society had become so intermeshed that any attempt to distinguish the traditional categories of church and state does some violence to the evidence . . . Already, Armagh and the Uí Néill kings were working in tandem, each it would seem content to boost the pretensions of the other. In Leinster, the monastic town of Kildare can quite properly be regarded as a dynastic capital in the ninth century, though of course its connections with the Uí Dúnlainge dynasty . . . were intimate even in the seventh century, when Cogitosus, the biographer of the foundress, describes Kildare as a great and metropolitan *civitas* where the treasures of kings were kept . . . In the case of Emly, . . . two, if not three of its abbots, held the kingship of Munster in the ninth century. A Munster king-list, edited at Emly, stresses the participation in the kingship of Munster of the dynastic stock which dominated its area and supplied many of its abbots (Meyer, 1913, 478-9, 482). A general principle can be stated in regard to abbatial succession though as we shall see some modifications will be required: the great hereditary clerical families were usually discard segments of royal lineages, pushed out of the political struggle and forced to reprise themselves in the church. Once established there, they proved extremely tenacious and were displaced by later royal segments or by new and expansive dynasties only with the greatest difficulty" (1981, 327-8).

The socio-political or even family concerns shared by the monastic keepers of a genealogy and the secular dynasty to which it referred (*ibid.*, 329-31) doubtless helped to promote local interests as well as the intermeshing of lay and ecclesiastical, kingly and saintly pedigrees in individual compilations reflecting a very practical *comuaim n-ecalsa fri tuisith* or "joining of church with kingdom" (ch. 1, 11). This interpenetration is confirmed by general statements to the effect that the same basic genealogical rules apply equally to both estates, e.g. "all, both saints and kings (*erir nóebtu 7 rígu*), whose genealogy is not traced to Conn are *fortúatha*" (*Corp. Gen.*, 358 = *LL.* 318c5) or "Níall Noígíallach, Catháer Már son of Feidlimid, Fiachra Araide [Ulaid, Dál nAraidi], Ailill Ólomm, these are the four noble pillars to which are traced the genealogies of the high kings (*ard-ríg*) and noble people (*deg-dóene*) and superior saints (*úasal-nóeb*) of Ireland and all the well born (*so-chenélach*) of Ireland" (*ibid.*, = 318b29-31). Obviously both lay and ecclesiastical political issues can be expected to figure in the different intertwined branches of a monastically based *senchus* or 'tradition' consisting of the "literary and highly conventionalised products of specialist learned classes, retainers of the contemporary holders of power, who were at pains to legitimise all change by giving it the sanction of immemorial custom and who ruthlessly reshaped the past to justify the present" (Ó Corráin, 1978, 12).

6. As far as the basic means of articulating these is concerned, "it has become increasingly clear that saints' Lives, like other branches of early Irish tradition such as sagas and genealogies, are first and foremost documents of their own time of composition, social and political propaganda that makes use of traditional materials in a kind of code" (McCone, 1984, 306). Primary importance consequently attaches to "the contemporary aims of the composition in question, however historically remote the figures and events it purports to describe were supposed to be. The key to such interpretation of saints' Lives and similar material is to realize that a



particular saint essentially represents his main foundation and prominent laymen, particularly kings, the dynasties tracing descent from them in this narrative code, which makes it possible to cast the driest of political claims in the form of a good story about people" (ibid.).

This principle is, of course, well illustrated by the brief examples near the end of section 4 above, where the spheres of influence agreed by Armagh with Kildare and Emly are justified by stories of Patrick's friendly personal dealings with Brigit and Ailbe. Similarly the record in the Book of Armagh's *Additamenta* of Áed of Sletty's seventh-century submission of his Leinster church, linked to the Uí Cheinnselaig and founded by Fiacc, to Armagh during Ségène's abbacy (par. 16; ch. 4, 3) is directly preceded by a justificatory tale rather obviously produced for the occasion despite being set in the fifth century (pars. 13-4; Bieler, 1979, 176-7). This individualises the new relationship between the two monasteries and projects it right back to the alleged beginnings of Christianity in Leinster by telling of Fiacc's ordination as bishop by Patrick, who then marks out and consecrates the Sletty site for him on land granted out of gratitude for baptism at Patrick's hands by king Crimthann son of Énna Cennsalach, eponymous ancestor of the Uí Cheinnselaig.

Further typical hagiographical personalizations of inter-church relations include some striking Airgialla examples: "their Lives and genealogies indicate for Tigernach of Clones and Éogan of Ardstraw (a mere thirty miles further north) remarkable, not to say highly suspicious, similarities in background and early careers . . . This parallelism between Tigernach and Éogan is made quite explicit time and again in the latter's Life, whereas there is no mention of Éogan in the life of Tigernach. Nevertheless, the same basic framework can be observed in both . . . The most probable explanation of these clearly deliberate parallels and associations in our two Lives is that the churches of Clones and Ardstraw had discovered a considerable measure of common ground politically, at least by the time that the core of Éogan's Life came to be written . . . At all events, both Lives stress the Leinster orientation of their subjects and, by implication, their churches, and completely ignore Patrick in a manner suggesting that neither Clones nor Ardstraw contemplated submission to Armagh's claims at the time of composition. Indeed, resistance to Armagh pressure would provide motive enough for an alliance that may also have included the church of Coleraine in Dál nAraide territory just beyond the north-eastern fringe of Airgialla, to judge from the claim in Éogan's Life (chap. 2) that Cairbre, 'subsequently bishop and founder of the monastery of Coleraine', was a 'fellow disciple' at Candida Casa with Tigernach and Éogan, whose abduction to and subsequent release from Gaul he shared" (McCone, 1984, 307-8).

This hypothesis is corroborated by references in *Tirechán* indicative of rivalry and disagreement between Armagh and the aforementioned churches (ibid., 308-9). On the other hand, in addition to a hint in *Tirechán*, both the Tripartite Life of Patrick and Mac Cairthinn's acephalous Salamanca Life stress the latter's subordination to Patrick at the foundation of Clogher, thus creating a "balance of probability that Clogher, unlike Clones and Ardstraw, was counted a Patrician church, i.e. connected with Armagh from at least the later seventh century when Muirchú wrote" (ibid., 310). The respective fortunes of pro-Armagh Clogher and anti-Armagh Clones may well have swung with the pendulum of the local Uí Chremthainn dynasty's fluctuating relations with Armagh and her Uí Néill backers (ibid., 311-3).



At any rate, the following episodes seem to use past monastic and dynastic founders in a typically coded reference to a roughly contemporary tense situation in which Clogher apparently succeeded in maintaining its status as the dynasty's chief church despite at least one attempt to thrust Clones to the fore: "in the Life of Mac Cairthinn the saint is told by Patrick to establish his church 'in the plain before the royal seat of Airgialla' . . . The Uí Chremthainn ancestor king Echu . . . is hostile to Mac Cairthinn but the saint's power eventually brings about his submission, rather as Patrick overcomes the reluctant Lóegaire of Tara in Muirchú's narrative. When Tigernach arrives in Airgialla in chapter twelve of his Life, the same king Echu, who is his maternal grandfather according to the beginning of the Life, offers him the seat and dignity of bishop Mac Cairthinn . . . and promises to expel the said bishop in his favour. The virtuous Tigernach rejects this in horror and withdraws in the direction of a distant mountain, where he stays for a long time in a church . . . that he founded" (ibid., 313-4). Also noteworthy is the Clones-biased Life's implication, most likely disingenuous, that Mac Cairthinn and hence Clogher were in the debt of Tigernach and hence Clones for not acceding to this plan.

Tigernach's Leinster connections mentioned above are accentuated in his Life to the extent that it is "quite deferential to Kildare, in marked contrast to the attitude it shows towards Armagh, and makes considerable claims for Brigit and her church. Brigit herself is made a decisive influence on Tigernach's career, being responsible for his baptism, ordination as bishop and mission to Airgialla. When one saint performs such services as these, especially episcopal ordination, for another in saints' Lives, the explanation usually seems to be that the text in question is claiming the beneficiary's foundation or foundations for the benefactor's *paruchia*, a procedure particularly apparent in Tirechán's work on Patrick. Accordingly it looks as if Clones is here acknowledging a degree of subordination to Kildare" (ibid., 321).

The question as to why this should be so brings us back to the case of Sletty alluded to near the beginning of this section: "situated as it was on the middle Barrow, Sletty was close to the northern limits of Uí Cheinnselaig territory and not far from the large area to the North controlled by their powerful dynastic rivals the Uí Dúnlainge and their main church of Kildare. Since this was precisely the period when Kildare was vigorously pressing primatial claims with Cogitosus as her mouthpiece, Sletty's submission to Armagh and incorporation into her *paruchia* was surely aimed at bolstering her position against strong pressure from her northern neighbour Kildare and her backers. Accordingly the principle behind the 'Sletty syndrome' seems simply to be: if a powerful church nearby is threatening your independence, protect yourself by submission to a powerful church further away whose control is likely to be less pervasive and irksome. This, I take it, is precisely what Clones did, Armagh being the powerful neighbour and Kildare the more distant power in a kind of mirror image of the Sletty situation" (ibid., 323; cf. ch. 4, 3).

This section may be fittingly concluded with an example of Muirchú's use of biblical allusion (ch. 2, 3) to implant a congenial political message subversive of what, from Armagh's standpoint, must have been the rather unappealing surface implications of his account of Patrick's burial: "when, however, the angel came to him he gave him (Patrick) advice concerning burial: 'let two untamed oxen be chosen and let them proceed whither they will, bearing your body on a cart, and wherever they stop, a church will be built in honour of your body. And as the angel



had said, two unsteady bullocks were chosen and draw the cart (*plaustrum*) with the holy body placed on their shoulders at a steady pace (*stabili... gestamine*), and from a place called Clogher, from the east of Fíndabair (in Co. Down?, see Hogan, 1910, 420, 1.7) selection from Conall's cattle distinguished the oxen. And they went forth directed by God's will to Dún Leithglaisse (Downpatrick), where Patrick is buried" (II, 11 in Bieler, 1979, 120-1). Muirchú finishes by telling how two battles over the saint's remains between the Airthir of Armagh, a division of the Airgialla, and the Ulaid, in whose territory Downpatrick was, were miraculously thwarted and peace restored (II, 13-4). These were probably identified with the "storming of Downpatrick (*expugnatio Dúin Leithglaisse*)" ascribed to the years 496 and 498 A.D. in *AU* shortly after Patrick's own death, traditionally dated to 493, although Muirchú may have been seeking to defuse more recent tensions.

Muirchú obviously modelled the episode of the cart drawn by cattle on the Old Testament account of the Philistine priests' recommendation for finding out whether or not God was responsible for the woes piled upon them after capturing the ark of the covenant from the Israelites: "now, therefore, set to and make a new cart (*plaustrum*) and yoke two milch kine, upon which no yoke hath been put, to the cart and shut up their calves at home. And ye shall take the ark of the Lord and lay it on the cart . . . and send it away, that it may go. And if it go up by the way of their own territories to Beth-she-mesh, He hath done us this great evil. But if not, at least we shall know that his hand hath not touched us but it hath happened by chance" (1 Sam./Kgs. 6:7-9). "Therefore, they did so . . . And the kine went straight on the way that leadeth to Beth-she-mesh and walked in unison (*ittinere uno*), lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left . . . And the cart came into the field of Joshua, a Beth-shemite, and stood there. Moreover, there was a great stone there . . . And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord . . . and put it on the great stone" (*ibid.*:10-15).

In view of the importance of a founder's relics as a means of bolstering a monastery's status in early medieval Ireland, Muirchú's apparently ready acquiescence in Armagh's embarrassing deficiency in this area is rather surprising at first sight (cf. McCone, 1982, 136-8). Although there is some amelioration in the claim that Patrick was on his way to his beloved Armagh to die until ordered by God's angel to return to Saul in return for certain privileges, Muirchú nevertheless clearly implies that Patrick's burial in Downpatrick was in accordance with God's will and that it is wrong for the Airthir to seek to recover his body by force. However, it does not necessarily follow that this was a permanent dispensation. Indeed, since the Bible informs us that the ark, far from remaining in Bethshemesh forever, was eventually brought back to its proper home Jerusalem in the reign of king David (2 Sam./Kgs. 6), there is an obvious presumption that Muirchú deliberately echoed the biblical episode of the ark's journey to Bethshemesh as a means of suggesting that Patrick's remains were likewise ultimately destined by God to return to Armagh in accordance with the saint's original wish.

Decoded in this way, at first sight naive hagiographical narratives about alleged persons and events in the missionary period and its immediate aftermath often prove to be precise and subtly nuanced justificatory treatises on contemporary, in this instance roughly seventh- and eighth-century, issues and power struggles. As further examples below will show, the indisputably monastic authors of Irish saints' Lives in Latin were as acutely alive to secular as to ecclesiastical politics, and it is no



surprise to discover similar aptitudes and concerns informing their endeavours in the field of vernacular saga.

7. Needless to say, a good deal more than mere attractive presentation was involved in cases like this. Although able to endow a narrative with political backbone, genealogical information alone can hardly go beyond the basic relationships expressible in terms of collateral affinity, matrimonial connection, generational distance, sibling seniority or lack of offspring. The addition of even brief snatches of narrative detail can put badly needed flesh on these bones and significantly enhance a genealogy's articulatory potential through a wider range of relationships and extra nuances of attitude or behaviour. It is thus no surprise to find the relevant genealogical set-up introducing a saga like *Cath Maige Mucramu* or to find quite substantial narratives inserted in genealogies at suitable points, for instance the brief account of Creidne and her sons (ch. 9, 3) and the longer tale of the three Collas in the Rawlinson B. 502 collection (*Corp. Gen.*, 154 and 147-52) or the whole of *Scéla Éogain 7 Chormaic* and *Do Bunad Imthechta Éoganachta* amidst the Laud genealogies (Meyer, 1912, 309-12 and 312-4).

The marginality of Creidne and her sons, ancestors of the Conaille Muirthemne, whose expulsion from their patrimony, conflict and eventual accommodation with their father, Conall Costamail, led to the latter's prophecy that the new lands granted to them would be theirs forever despite the destruction and forced migration of other Ulaid, has been explained as follows by Ó Corráin: "Conaille Muirthemne, whose royal line appears in the annals towards the end of the seventh century, were a people settled in the Louth region. They are regarded by the genealogists and historians (probably rightly) as a kingdom which formed an integral part of the historic overkingdom of the Ulaid (Ulster). By the eighth century, however, they were of Ulaid but not in it, for the Ulaid had lost heavily to the expanding Uí Néill and the Conaille came to form a buffer state between the Uí Néill, Airgialla and Ulaid. The text explains why and how this situation came about. Origin-legends and ancestral aetiologies of these kinds occur at nodal points in the historical record – points of departure, replacement, conquest" (1985, 83).

Another such nodal point, which hives the subject Airgialla off from the main Uí Néill and Connachta stock in conjunction with the conquest of Ulaid territory foretold by Conall above, is covered by the story of the three Collas, sons of Eochu Doimlén and each the defining ancestor of a major Airgialla people. This tells how they committed the heinous crime of *fin-gal* "kin-slaying" against their paternal uncle, the king of Tara Fiachu Sraiptine (son of Cairbre Liphechair son of Cormac mac Airt etc.), out of jealousy at the burgeoning prospects of Fiachu's son and eventual successor Muiredach Tírech (father of Eochaid Muigmedón father of Niall Noigíallach). This is the politically crucial factor invalidating any claim upon the Tara kingship by themselves or their descendants: *conid hí in fíngal sin ro:scar flathius nÉirenn fri clainn Echach Domplúin .i. frisna Collaib* "so that that kin-slaying is what separated the sovereignty of Ireland from the descendants of Eochu Doimlén, namely the Collas" (*Corp. Gen.*, 147, 142a23-4; cf. St. Colum Cille's warning to Áed Sláine in 4 above). Fiachu, by contrast, secures the royal future of his ultimately Uí Néill descendants by choosing defeat for himself and the kingship for his progeny (*maidm fair féin 7 ríge dia chlannaib*, 142a48) in response to his druid's prediction: "I can (secure) victory for you, but this follows from it. If



you are victorious, you will perform kin-slaying upon your brother's sons and will yourself be king and there will never be a king descended from you. If, however, you are defeated, it will be from you that the sovereignty of Ireland will stem and there will never be a king of Ireland from the three Collas". After their dastardly deed the Collas flee to Scotland but later return and make their peace with Muiredach, who eventually awards them sword land (*tír claidib*, 142b15) to be duly conquered from the hostile Ulaid.

This narrative, then, grants the Airgíalla their lands through the good graces of a Tara monarch in the direct line of ascent from the Uí Néill, while depriving them of any claim upon that kingship because of a previous delinquency. In this way the main ingredients of the contemporary Uí Néill ideal of a cooperative but subordinate Airgíalla are clearly enunciated in conformity with the basically identical but necessarily vaguer implications of the bare genealogical scheme.

The point at which the Connachta are eclipsed by the Uí Néill as claimants to the Tara kingship is marked genealogically by Muiredach Tírech's son Eochaid Muigmedón and narratively by the adventure or *echtrae* of his sons summarised earlier (ch. 8, 2). This tells how Níall Noigíallach overcame the disadvantages of illegitimacy, youth and expulsion to surpass his older half-brothers Ailill, Fiachrae and Brián, eponymous ancestors of the main Connacht dynasties, in various tests aimed at determining who should succeed Eochaid as king of Tara. The first of these involving a druid's prediction of the boys' futures on the basis of the implements they carried from a burning smithy is also given at the appropriate point in the Rawlinson genealogies (*Corp. Gen.*, 131). The crucial successive encounters of the brothers with the woman of sovereignty in *Echtra mac nÉchach Muigmedóin* show just how meticulous the narrative code's attention to detail could be. By sleeping with the initially hideous woman after his half-brothers had refused, Níall is guaranteed a virtual monopoly of the Tara sovereignty for himself and his descendants, but the tradition that two descendants of Fiachrae, namely Nath Í and Ailill Molt, were also kings of Tara, is neatly acknowledged by having him give the hag a perfunctory kiss.

The motif of a youngest son getting the better of his older brothers is too widespread in folklore (cf. the Grimms' 'Golden bird' in ch. 5, 3 end) for influence from the biblical stories concerning Jephthah of Gilead and king David's anointing (ch. 8, 8) to be confidently posited here, although the possibility can hardly be discounted. At all events, there seems little doubt that monastic propagandists for the Uí Néill would have at least appreciated the welcome implications of the similarity with David especially, in view of his status as an ideal pre-Christian ruler over a united kingdom.

8. A recurrent synchronism in Patrician hagiography brings the saint into contact with the sons of the apical or defining ancestor of dynasties important at the time of writing. Presumably this pattern's appeal resided in the fact that "this was as far back as contact with Christianity could be pushed without denying it the respectable antiquity of origins in the pre-Christian period, and the second generation also had the advantage of allowing pointed contrasts in attitude towards the new faith and in political fortunes to be drawn between rival brothers, themselves often 'defining' ancestors of further groups within the major dynasty" (McCone, 1984b, 36).

For example, the very end of Tírechán's seventh-century memoir claims that



Patrick "ordained Fiacc the Fair in Sletty and baptized the sons of Dúnlang, and arose via Belut Gabrain and founded a church in Roigne Martorthige and he baptised the sons of Nad Fróech in the land of Munster on Cothrige's rock in Cashel" (51, 4; Bieler, 1979, 162-3). Dúnlang was, of course, the eponym of the northern Leinster Uí Dúnlainge who dominated the provincial kingship and abbacy from the early seventh century, while Nad Fróech was the defining ancestor of the most central Éoganacht branches of Áine, Airthir Clíach, Glendamaín and Cashel. In both instances Armagh was apparently hoping to wean these important dynasties away from their major churches, Armagh's rivals Kildare and Emly respectively. A similar situation more in tune with contemporaneous political realities occurs in the *Additamenta* passage about the foundation of Sletty already discussed (6 above), which represents Patrick as having baptised Crimthann son of Éanna Cenósalach, eponymous ancestor of the southern Leinster Uí Cheinnselaig (14, 3; *ibid.*, 176-7).

A more elaborately structured encounter of this kind takes place in Tírechán's work between Patrick and three of Níall Noígíallach's sons from whom significant Southern Uí Néill lines claimed descent (McCone, *ibid.*, 54-5; Bieler, 1979, 132). At Tailtiu, site of the great Uí Néill *óenach* or "fair" (*agón regale*), the saint encounters the eponym of the Cenél Cairbri, who seem to have lost their position as the eastern Sí nÁedo Sláine's chief west midland rivals in the course of the seventh century (cf. Byrne, 1973, 84). This Cairbre proves to be an incorrigibly hostile pagan, who earns Patrick's curse for trying to kill him: "your seed shall serve the seed of your brothers and there shall be no king of your seed forever" (par. 9).

The second meeting on the site of Donaghpatrick (a few miles due west of Slane on the river Blackwater between Navan and Kells) is with the virtuous Conall, who "received him with great joy, and he baptised him and established his throne forever and said to him: 'the seed of your brothers will serve your seed forever, and you must render alms to my heirs after me forever, and your sons and (the sons) of your sons (must render) to my sons in the faith a perpetual due'. And he measured a church of sixty feet with his own feet for Patrick's God, and Patrick said: 'if this church be lessened, your reign shall not be long and secure'" (par. 10). This, of course, is Conall Cremthainne, ancestor of the Sí nÁedo Sláine, who virtually monopolised the Tara kingship during the second half of the seventh century. Since this dominance must have had an air of permanence when Tírechán and Muirchú wrote, Armagh had an obvious interest in establishing good and financially advantageous relations with this line while denigrating its main southern rivals.

Níall's third son, king Lóegaire of Tara, occupies an intermediate position in Tírechán "because he made a pact with him (Patrick) that he would not be killed in his kingdom, but could not become a believer" (par. 12). Muirchú's narrative, of course, centres upon a prolonged conflict between Patrick and Lóegaire, who is hostile to the saint and tries to kill him but is eventually forced rather against his will to accept the faith (1 15-21; Bieler, *ibid.*, 84-99). At the end of this "holy Patrick said to the king: 'since you have resisted my teaching and have been an obstacle to me, although the days of your reign shall be extended, yet shall there be no king of your seed forever'". Lóegaire's fate, then, is intermediate between those of Cairbre and Conall in line with his behaviour, whether as a friendly but recalcitrant pagan in Tírechán or as a murderous adversary turned reluctant convert in Muirchú. Reference has already been made to the significance of the struggle in Muirchú's narrative between the paschal fire lit by Patrick at Fertac Fer Féec (1 14,2), "i.e.



Slane or near it" (Hogan, 1910, 414), and the pagan fire of Lóegaire and his men at Tara as a symbol of the new religion's imminent triumph over the old (ch. 8, 10). The association of the victorious Christian fire with what was to become the monastery of Slane is not only comparable with the triumphant contrast in *Féilire Óengusso's* prologue (165-204) between prosperous monasteries and desolate nearby royal forts but can also be taken to connote the imminent eclipse of Lóegaire's lineage, the Cenél Lóegairi centred around Trim a few miles due east Tara, by Síl nÁedo Sláine, from whose territory around Donaghpatrick and Slane a little to the north of Tara Patrick's paschal beacon emanates. Needless to say, Tírechán and Muirchú's essentially identical message, conveyed somewhat differently by each of them, accurately reflected the current political situation.

Ancestral sibling rivalry was an obvious means of representing enmities between sub-sections of a broader lineage, and is duly used by the First Life of Brigit, compiled in the eighth century from seventh-century sources (cf. ch. 8, 3), to express the early hostility between Cenél Cairbri and Síl nÁedo Sláine already identified: "on that day Conall son of Níall came to holy Brigit as she walked on the road and said to her: 'O holy virgin Brigit, bless me diligently, lest my brother Cairbre, who hates me, kill me'. And Brigit said, 'I shall bless you. Let your group go in front, and we shall follow them. For it is not fitting for us to walk with them'. And when they were all climbing up the hill, one of Brigit's virgins said: 'Alack, Brigit, what shall we do? Behold, Cairbre is coming after us, and now those two brothers will kill each other'. Brigit said, 'not so shall our God act for us'. And when Cairbre had arrived, he said: 'O holy Brigit, bless me, since I fear my brother Conall in these places'. Then the two brothers passed over the hill at the same time, and did not recognise each other. God blinded their eyes, lest they recognise each other, on account of Saint Brigit. And Brigit blessed them, and Conall and Cairbre exchanged kisses without recognising each other. Each went off on his way, and all magnified God's name and Brigit in this miracle" (par. 62; Bollandus, 1658, 127).

The decline of Cenél Cairbri in the west midlands was matched by the rise there of Clann Cholmáin, whose alleged descent from an older brother of Áed Sláine's named Colmán Már presumably betokens their original status as allies or even a cadet branch of that eastern midland dynasty. However, the Cenél Cairbri's erstwhile role as major western rivals of Síl nÁedo Sláine soon devolved upon Clann Cholmáin, who by the middle of the eighth century had blocked Síl nÁedo Sláine off from an effective claim to the Tara kingship. This inevitably shifted the sibling rivalry motif to this part of the Southern Uí Néill genealogy, so that it was now the sons of Diarmait mac Cerhaill and their offspring rather than those of Níall Noigíallach himself who were at each other's throats. *Aided Diarmata* provides a nice example: "once Diarmait was in Tara feasting, Mugain daughter of Corcraed mac Duach of the Éoganacht Chaisil was beside him, i.e. the mother of Áed son of Diarmait, pregnant then with Áed Sláine. They then went out onto the green to refresh themselves in the company that was at the carousal. While they were there they saw Diarmait's grandson coming towards them on the green, namely Suibne son of Colmán, and a hundred horse was his company . . . As Suibne arrived at the assembly the woman's, namely Mugain's, womb screamed so that it was heard throughout the assembly. 'What is this, woman?' said Diarmait, 'is it upon the lad that your attention is?' 'You are not the prophet (*féid*),' said Becc mac Dé, 'There is a prophet with you'. 'You find out, then,' said Diarmait, 'since you are a prophet'.



'I know, indeed,' said Becc. 'The son who is in the woman's womb, it is he who will kill you lad'. That was true. Áed Sláine killed Suibne. He left a son, namely Conall mac Suibni, and it is he who killed Áed Sláine in turn . . . So that is the first kin-slaying (*fin-gal*) between Clann Cholmáin and Síl nÁedo Sláine, namely Áed Sláine's killing of his nephew, namely Suibne mac Colmáin, and Conall's killing of him then' (O'Grady, 1892, 74-5).

Two interesting narratives validate key dynastic relationships in seventh-century Munster by means of a mother's vision establishing a pecking order among her offspring. In one of these, from a text concerning Conall Corc and the Corco Loígde, Corc of Cashel's wife Osfind dreamed she was a bird hatching chicks in a nest. Three flew to south Munster and one to the centre, while a bird came after them from the West and the fifth chick remained in the nest. A druid interprets this as a prophecy that she will bear five sons, Mac Caiss, Mac Brócc (and Mac Iair) being the trio that flew south, Daig the one in the middle, Cairbre Luachra the later sixth and Nad Froích the one who stayed home (Meyer, *Anecdote*, 1910, 59.20-29). An equivalent version involving a litter of four pups bathed in wine (Nad Froích), ale (Mac Cas), fresh milk (Mac Brócc), and water (Mac Iair) respectively, plus an intrusive and vicious fifth bathed in blood (Cairbre Cruithnechán) has been translated earlier (ch. 5, 11).

Ó Corráin has remarked of "this text, which dates from the seventh century" that "apart from being an aetiology of the different branches of the Eóganacht, it is a legitimist document setting out the pre-eminent political claims of the Eóganacht Chaisil. Nad Froích, ancestor of the Eóganacht Chaisil (and of other sub-segments who also held the kingship) and Mac Cass, ancestor of Eóganacht Raichlind, are associated with wine and ale, the drinks of sovereignty. Their descendants, therefore, will hold the kingship, though those of Nad Froích will be pre-eminent. Mac Iair and Mac Brócc are associated with milk and water, evidently the symbols of the religious life, and from them descend the two leading hereditary ecclesiastical lineages of the Eóganacht, who ruled the great monastery of Cork . . . Eóganacht Locha Léin, the descendants of Cairbre Cruithnechán, are bloody interlopers, half-brothers only, and the descendants of a racially inferior Pictish woman . . . In fact, there was a fierce dynastic struggle in progress in the seventh century between the Eóganacht Locha Léin, on the one hand, and the other branches of the Eóganacht, on the other, and the text is a bitter and partisan expression of the views of the enemies of Eóganacht Locha Léin" (1985, 80).

The above narratives should give some indication of just how carefully genealogical relations, geographical locations, other attributes and symbols are combined by their monastic authors in order to convey with precision the desired political message, be it secular, ecclesiastical or both. Furthermore, intricate though they may be, such coded political statements by no means invariably constitute the sole or even central message of a narrative. Even in the frequent enough cases where they are palpably present, they quite often amount to only one level of discourse, however important, intermeshed with others geared to the sort of social, moral and religious concerns identified in previous chapters.

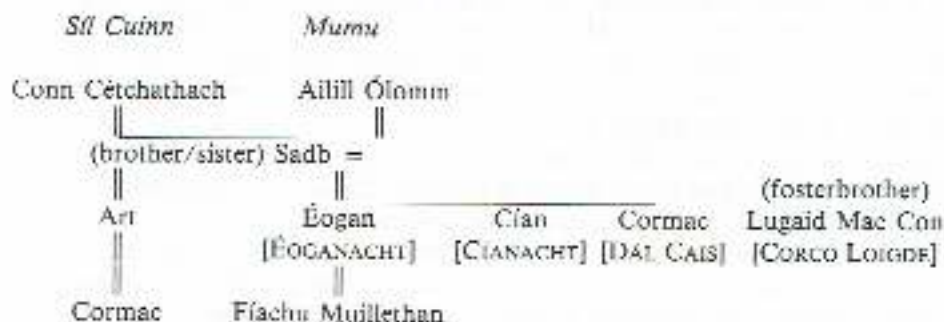
9. A marked tendency of monastic *senchas* already adumbrated in the foregoing was to create synchronisms and other parallelisms between corresponding nodes in different major genealogical lines. For example, bringing the sons of the apical

ancestors of major dynasties into contact with Saint Patrick (8 above) not only established explicit synchronisms at this level but also implied that Niall, Dúnlang, Énna Cennsalach and Nad Froích were coevals just before the arrival of Christianity. Due allowance must, of course, be made for local variation. For example, the synchronism of Niall of Tara with Nad Froích of Cashel implied by seventh-century Armagh and *Uí Néill* propagandists differs slightly from the early Munster text about Conall Corc referred to above, which makes Niall as eponymous ancestor of all the *Uí Néill* a contemporary of Corc, the defining forebear of the whole *Éoganacht* (Meyer, *Anecdota*, 1910, 58.19-20), rather than Nad Froích, ancestor of the central dynasties only. Nevertheless, the same basic type of parallelism is envisaged in both cases.

Bearing in mind that Niall and the eponyms of the chief Connacht dynasties were actually counted as half-brother and full brothers respectively, these synchronisms deliberately link the founders of the main dynasties of Leth Cuinn, the Laigin and Munster. Moreover, a similar link was established between the kings from whom the *sder-chlanna* or free lineages of each of these great political entities were supposed to be descended, namely Conn Cétchathach, Catháer Már and Ailill Ólomm.

A genealogical account of the peaceful coexistence of Catháer in Tara and Conn in Kells has already been translated as part of a discussion of how in *Esnada Tige Bucher* the now feeble old king Catháer's inability to check his sons' selfish excesses drives Bucher the hospitaller and his fosterling, Catháer's daughter Eithne Tháchfata, into the arms of Cormac mac Airt at Kells, a development deliberately juxtaposed with Cormac's permanent acquisition of the site of Tara through generosity towards Odrán (ch. 6, 11; cf. ch. 3, 3 and 11). Here a synchronism is established between Catháer's sons and Cormac, the implication being that Conn's son Art rather than Conn himself was Catháer's contemporary in this parable of the Laginian loss of Tara to the *Uí Néill*.

The saga *Cath Maige Mucrama* begins by establishing the following set of relationships and synchronisms, destined to prove crucial in the subsequent narrative, between leading figures in Leth Cuinn and Leth Moga:



The main sequences of offence and retribution in this tale are built around a quarrel between Éogan son of Ailill, eponymous ancestor of the *Éoganacht*, and his hitherto beloved fosterbrother, Lugaid Mac Con of the *Corco Loigde* in southwest Cork with their non-Milesian pedigree. Lugaid was defeated in battle and forced into a Scottish exile, but eventually returned at the head of large forces to take vengeance upon his persecutors. The allied kings of Munster and Tara, Fogay and



Art respectively, were slain in battle, Lugaid replacing the latter as king of Ireland until displaced by Art's son Cormac. Finally, Lugaid went to tend his fosterfather Ailill Ólomm, but was killed at his instigation in revenge for the battle of Mag Mucrama "in which fell Art son of Conn and Ailill's seven sons with the slaughter of the men of Ireland around them" (par. 76).

The genealogical correlation of Leth Cuinn's Art and Cormac with Leth Moga's Éogan and Fiachu is given significant narrative reinforcement in parallel but separate incidents the night before battle against Mac Con. In the first Éogan visits the blind druid Dīl maccu Chreoga of Osraige, who realises that the king is doomed and offers him his own daughter Moncha's favours for the night as a means of begetting a son. Éogan is then killed the day after Fiachu's conception (pars. 39-41). Due allowance being made for different *dramatis personae*, a virtually identical set of circumstances characterises Art's last night before dying in battle, the host and mare this time being the smith Ole Acha of Connacht and his daughter Achban (pars. 44-7). However, only Fiachu's actual birth is described (pars. 42-3; ch. 8, 5). *Scéla Eogain 7 Cormaic* begins with essentially the same parallel narrative, but after briefly narrating Fiachu's conception and birth (pars. 1-3) proceeds to give a much fuller account of Cormac's birth and fosterage as well as his conception (pars. 4-15; ch. 8, 6). In *Genemūn Chormaic*, on the other hand, this is recounted without any attempt to draw a parallel with Fiachu.

To comparative grounds for regarding the latter as the oldest extant version of Cormac's birth-tale (ch. 9, 7) can be added genealogical considerations elucidated by Ó Corráin, who points out that the "ties of *piatas*, loyalty and mutual support" resulting from it constituted "a model for the relationship which should exist between the descendants of ancestors bound by the tie of fosterage" (1986, 148). Cormac's fosterer Lugnae Fer Trí and finder Gree mac Arod in *Genemūn Chormaic* are ancestors of the Luigni, Corco Fer Trí and Greeraige, dwindling north Connacht septs that apparently "disappeared from the political map in the eighth century" and probably "were in decline long before" (*ibid.*, 149). By that stage the Uí Néill and their allies would have had little reason to continue to emphasise such an undistinguished and politically unprofitable liaison, and in the later *Scéla Eogain 7 Cormaic* "we find that some interesting changes have been made. Now the connection of Lugnae and with Connacht is far more tenuous and that section of the text dealing with that aspect of Cormac's birth is dramatically foreshortened. Lugnae becomes a hunter who merely happens on the boy as he ran with the wolves. He fostered him for a year until his mother came to hear about it and took her son away. She brought him to the north, to Fiachnae Cassán who welcomed him and fostered him, and it is from the north that Cormac set out for Tara" (*ibid.*, 151).

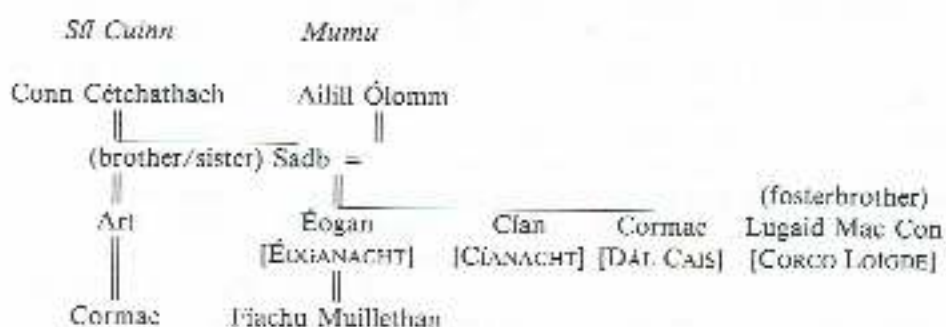
The political significance of this shift resides in the fact that "Fiachnae Cassán is none other than Fiachrae Cassán, ancestor of Ind Airthir, the group of Airgialla dynastic families who controlled Armagh and the kingdom in which it lay" (*ibid.*). The political instability that made the Armagh abbacy so contentious in the late eighth and early ninth centuries (cf. McCone, 1984, 316-9) may well have suggested that "the Uí Néill needed to be reminded of their special relationship with the Airgialla and with Armagh" with the result that "Armagh rose to the occasion and produced two superb pieces of political propaganda: the tale of the three Collas and the text under discussion" (Ó Corráin, *ibid.*). The latter implies that "because their ancestor fostered Cormac and his father Art, Airgialla and especially Ind Airthir are

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entitled to a 'favoured nation' status and to the special care and consideration of the Uí Néill. He it was, too, who first put the royal purple about the youth, a symbolic way of saying that Iní Airíthir and Armagh were the first to recognise the *imperium* of the Uí Néill" (*ibid.*, 152).

This, of course, is a fine example of the clerical manipulation of ostensibly secular 'tradition' for political ends. Furthermore, the establishment of narrative as well as chronological correlations between figures like Fogan and Ari, Fiachu and Cormac shows how intimately saga can interact with plain genealogy and *vice versa*. Since such narrative diptychs were presumably generated to match and emphasise key structures in the broad genealogical and chronological record elaborated in the monasteries, they too must be regarded as the primarily literary products of the cloister. As usual, one can only admire the skill and sensitivity with which the various strands were interwoven with each other and the whole in the vast web of socially, politically and religiously oriented *senchus* that early Christian Ireland's *literati* so painstakingly and creatively compiled and cultivated to explain their and their fellow countrymen's role in the world.



## Epilogue

The foregoing chapters have explored the decisive contribution of clerical attitudes and other contemporary factors to an early Christian Irish literature that might be described as for the monastery, of the monastery, by the monastery. These concerns were often secular rather than ecclesiastical, material rather than spiritual, local rather than national, but that merely reflects the Church's central role in the body politic from at least the early seventh century onwards.

Notwithstanding the wide range of issues great and small with which they deal, most medieval Irish texts seem to be explicitly or implicitly anchored in an ideological and historical continuum stretching back from the present, via the various invasions and migrations supposed to have affected Ireland and her rulers' ancestors, to the flood and thence to the creation of the world. This scheme daringly represented Patrick's fifth-century mission to Ireland as a small-scale reenactment of Christ's appearance in the world to bring the Old Testament law and prophets, including history, to fulfilment in the New. Historical typology could then accommodate the pagan past to the Christian present by viewing it as an Irish 'Old Testament' perfected rather than abrogated by the national apostle's Christian dispensation. In this way all Irish legal, genealogical and mytho-historical *senchus*, whether set in the pre- or post-Patrician era, could embody a broadly identical set of contemporary values and customs represented as essentially immutable but in fact adjusted and readjusted to the Church's ongoing interaction with current social and political realities.

Allegory and typology allowed 'homeostatic' traditional modes of mythical thought to operate beneath a veneer of historical dynamism and progressive revelation, thus enabling early Christian Irish secular and religious preoccupations to be projected back into a pre-Christian past conceived primarily as a model of and for the present. Keenly asserted ecclesiastical control over its revelation facilitated the endowment of convenient innovations with the prestige of antiquity by slipping them into a pre-Patrician *senchus* consciously cast in an Old Testament mould, and serviceable pagan elements were doubtless also absorbed into the new hybrid construct with varying degrees of modification.

So thoroughgoing was the operation of this ideological mixer that the modern scholar is hard put to separate pagan and Christian ingredients out of the resultant

blend. Attention to the two-way assimilatory process involved, and the purpose behind it, not only seems more profitable than an obsession with often unverifiable origins, but also provides an antidote to naïve nativist tendencies to take clerical representations of the pre-Christian Irish past at face value. Indeed, an appreciation of the way in which early Irish *senchus* was forged is an absolute prerequisite for any useful attempt to identify some of the myriad old, borrowed and new elements that went into its make-up. With all due reservations about its far less efficient applicability to culture and semantics than to linguistic forms, judicious and maximally exhaustive use of the comparative method remains the best means of establishing the presumption of a given feature's prehistoric provenance.

However, conclusions arrived at via this route must be balanced against the availability of plausible sources for direct borrowing. At all events, research of this type needs to be carried out with more sophistication and less wishful thinking than have commonly been brought to bear upon it hitherto. Even so, the results will often be far from certain, and should not be allowed to detract from study of the actually attested construct in its own terms.

Far from being mere clumsy and unimaginative redactors of oral traditions, early Christian Ireland's monastic moulders and transmitters of *senchus* combined literary creativity with intellectual rigour to such an extent in their pursuit of a coherent 'native Christian' mytho-history of their island and race that they have had little difficulty in duping many a modern scholar inclined to patronise their efforts. Instead of cocking a snook, we should take our hats off to them.



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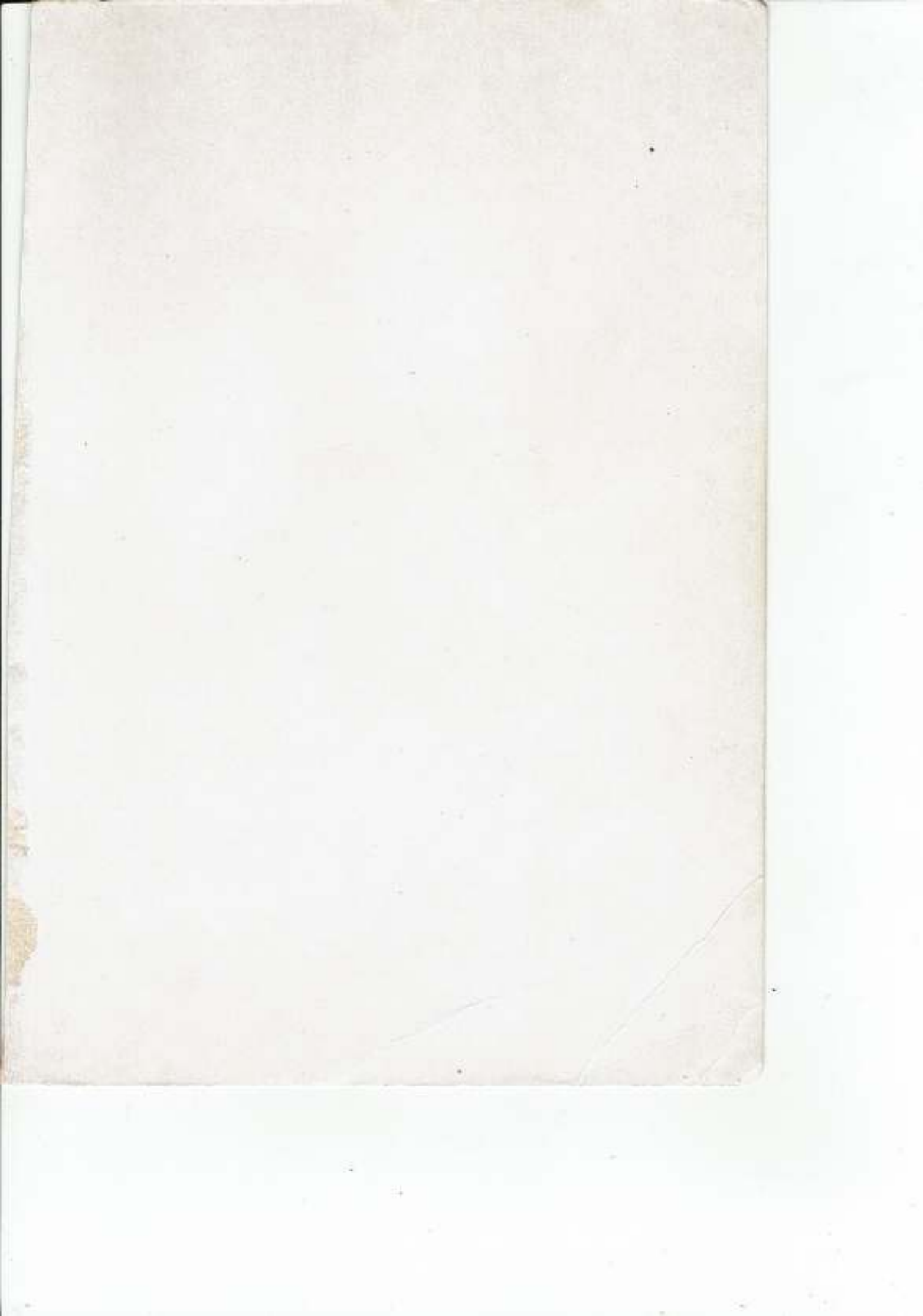
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