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Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature

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PROLOGUE

An integrated approach to medieval Ireland's vast extant literature has long been hampered by a tendency to partition it into secular and ecclesiastical genres, the former written mostly in Old or Middle Irish and the latter in Latin or the vernacular. Medievalists dealing with obviously clerical sources, especially the Hiberno-Latin ones most readily accessible to them, have increasingly come to recognise the wide and up-to-date reading, erudite sophistication, and reasonably typical medieval western outlook, scriptural and patristic orientation behind them. By contrast, many Old and Middle Irish scholars have been prone to regard 'secular' or 'native' vernacular sources as barely adulterated repositories of ancient oral traditions and pagan beliefs compiled by remarkably complaisant antiquarian clerics and jurists in a backward and only superficially christianised Ireland.

Since all extant early Irish literature was undoubtedly produced in monasteries, this glaring apparent discrepancy in monkish attitudes has become an increasing source of disquiet for some scholars both in the field and outside. From the 1950s onwards the late James Carney, following in Rudolf Thurneysen's footsteps, insisted in the face of prevalent 'nativist' orthodoxy that most extant early Irish sagas bore a clear and deep monastic imprint, whatever their remote origins in pagan oral tradition. In the 1970s Donnchadh Ó Corráin began to assemble evidence that early medieval Ireland, far from being politically fragmented and hidebound by blind adherence to tradition, had developed a dynamic political system dominated by ambitious overkings whose monastic propagandists and genealogists were ruthless reshapers of the past in the interests of the present. Meanwhile Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and others have produced studies of early Irish sagas showing them to be deliberate literary compositions primarily geared to contemporary concerns rather than mere antiquarian assemblages, however archaic or traditional the elements so manipulated. Finally, the most jealously guarded of all traditionalist bastions, the early Irish secular law tracts, has fallen of late to the assaults of Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Liam Breatnach, who have pointed to pervasive scriptural, patristic and canonistic influence upon them and made an incontrovertible case for monastic authorship.

The net effect of these impulses has been to propel early Christian Ireland from an allegedly abnormal and stagnant 'Celtic fringe' into the mainstream of an early medieval European civilization that owes no small debt to her formative influence. Taken together, they amount to a revolution in scholarly attitudes that greatly increases the relevance of early medieval Irish culture to that of Western Europe as a whole without discounting its peculiarities.

Since these important new developments have almost inevitably accumulated piecemeal in learned articles on particular topics, it seems desirable to attempt to combine them and some further aspects into a provisional synthesis and overview. That, of course, is the main aim of the present volume, which argues that, for all its diversity, early Irish literature as a whole is rooted in a coherent, far-reaching and flexible construct or *senchus* adapted, synthesised and modified by monastic men of letters from the Bible and other Latin writings in conjunction with vernacular traditions both oral and increasingly, as time went on, written. Indeed, the level of scholarship, intellectual analysis and imagination they brought to bear upon this gargantuan undertaking bears striking testimony to the dynamism, creativity,

erudition and cohesion of the monastically based civilization that blossomed in Ireland from the sixth-century A.D. onwards and helped to lead Britain and Europe out of the Dark Ages.

This book owes a great deal not only to the published researches of the friends and colleagues mentioned above but also to suggestions made by them and others, including Joseph Nagy and Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, in discussions concerning general issues and points of detail. I am particularly grateful to my wife, Katharine Simms, for her unflagging interest, helpful comments and assistance in the correction of proofs and compilation of an index. Without these and other contributions this book would not have been written, but responsibility for the opinions expressed in it and for remaining errors great and small is, of course, mine alone.

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St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.
September, 1989.

To my parents

CHAPTER ONE

Medieval scholars and modern nativists

1. In addition to a very substantial Latin literature early Christian Ireland boasts by far the most extensive and diverse vernacular literature in medieval Europe. The period from the fifth to the twelfth century A.D. abounds in Latin, Old or Middle Irish and bilingual texts in prose, poetry or a mixture of both covering a wide range of genres such as liturgy, homiletics, biblical exegesis and paraphrase, hymnody and eulogy, hagiography, Latin and Irish grammar, etymology, onomastics, topography, annals, genealogy, legal tracts concerning the Church and lay society, gnomic literature, prophecy, vision and voyage narratives, saga and history.

The whole of this literature was undoubtedly produced either in monasteries or by people who had received an essentially monastic education. In many cases this is evident from the genre itself or from the use of Latin in whole or part of a given text. Even in works composed almost entirely in medieval Irish casual snatches of Latin or the sudden switch to a more substantial passage in the language of the Western Church often betray a clerical author writing for readers likewise familiar with Latin as a result of a monastic training. Moreover, all of the comparatively few manuscripts that have come down to us from the pre-Norman period are quite clearly of monastic provenance, including those three great twelfth-century repositories of saga, genealogical and ecclesiastical material in Irish *Lebor na hUidre*, Rawlinson B 502 and the Book of Leinster. The recorded titles of lost manuscripts known to have contained saga material in Irish, e.g. *Cín/Lebor Dromma Snechta* or 'The Book of Drumsnat' (a monastery in Monaghan, cf. Thurneysen, 1921, 15-8) and *Lebor Buide Sláne* or 'The Yellow Book of Slane' (a major monastery in Meath, cf. Dillon, 1953, 12), are equally significant in this respect, and early Christian Ireland would in any case have been quite abnormal by medieval western European standards if literacy in Latin or the vernacular had existed there on any scale outside the sphere of her monasteries and their alumni.

Formidable linguistic difficulties associated with the vast corpus of Old and Middle Irish texts, most of them preserved in manuscripts written in or after the fourteenth century, have tended to restrict the number of scholars working upon this material since the serious revival of interest around the middle of the nineteenth-century. Because the pioneers of the new discipline rightly concentrated their efforts upon improving the linguistic analysis indispensable for a proper understanding of

the material and upon making texts, translations and synopses available to a wider scholarly audience, broader questions of interpretation were, by and large, postponed until a later and fairly recent stage. Hence the paradox that Europe's most abundantly documented early medieval culture, particularly where vernacular sources are concerned, remains among the least thoroughly researched. Rich seams of information have yet to be tapped, and these can be expected to enhance our appreciation of early medieval European literature and civilization as a whole.

2. For the last three or four decades the most influential and fashionable approach to the evaluation of early Irish literature has, at least until quite recently, been the one aptly dubbed 'nativist' by its major and for a long time largely isolated critic, James Carney (1955, 276). Scholars such as Myles Dillon, D.A. Binchy, Kenneth Jackson, Proinsias Mac Cana and Seán Ó Coileáin have in various different ways discussed medieval Irish society, law and letters from a broadly common standpoint stressing the conservatism of the 'tradition', its fundamentally oral transmission and continuity with a pagan past rooted in Celtic and Indo-European antiquity. While the role of Christianity and literacy in this process could hardly be ignored, the tendency was to minimise their impact upon 'secular' genres. The two major props of this interpretation were the Indo-European hypothesis and theories about the oral composition and backward looking nature of various epic literatures such as the Homeric poems of ancient Greece.

Increasingly intensive European involvement with India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a handful of western missionaries and administrators acquiring some knowledge of the sacred language of the Hindus, Sanskrit, and being struck by the notable similarities between it and the learned languages of Europe, Latin and Greek. The most influential and accurate early observation along these lines was made by Sir William Jones in 1786: "the *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothick* and the *Celtic*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the *Sanscrit*; and the old *Persian* might be added to the same family, if this were the place for discussing any question concerning the antiquities of *Persia*" (e.g. Muller, 1986, 1-2). This notion of a genetic relationship between Sanskrit and various European languages was taken up with enthusiasm in Germany, where the nascent romantic movement was stimulating interest and pride in tracing linguistic and cultural origins as far back as possible. In the course of the nineteenth century the inventory of related languages was established with ever greater precision and methods for comparison between them and reconstruction of the forms of the unattested parent language, termed *Indogermanisch* in German but *Indo-European* or the like otherwise, were steadily refined. By the end of the century the major languages or language groups recognised as Indo-European were *Indo-Iranian* (Sanskrit, Avestan, Old Persian etc.), *Greek*, *Italic* (Latin and less well attested languages such as Oscan and Umbrian), *Germanic* (Gothic, Scandinavian, German, English etc.), *Celtic* (Irish,

the three British languages Welsh, Cornish and Breton, plus fragmentarily attested Continental Celtic, notably Gaulish), *Slavic* (Old Church Slavonic, Russian, Polish etc.), *Baltic* (Lithuanian, Latvian, Old Prussian), *Armenian* and *Albanian*. The early twentieth century saw the significant additions of *Tocharian* (6th-8th centuries A.D.) from Chinese Turkestan and *Anatolian* (notably Hittite with texts from the second millenium B.C.) from Asia Minor to the canon.

It can, then, be rigorously demonstrated that the linguistic affinities of Irish are firstly with other languages of the Celtic group and that this in turn is part of a much wider family descended from a hypothetical common parent termed Indo-European. The details hardly require exposition here but some importance attaches to the fact that a shared language is usually held to imply cultural community or penetration on a broader scale. From this it would follow that Ireland's Celtic and Indo-European heritage extended beyond the strictly linguistic sphere to other facets of culture such as law, institutions, mythology or oral literary techniques. In the field of ideology a particularly influential theory has been the one elaborated over the years since the late thirties by Georges Dumézil, who has identified a tripartite scheme of socio-mythological functions in ancient India, namely *sovereignty* in its twin magico-religious and contractual aspects, *warfare* and *fecundity*, and has sought to establish its Indo-European provenance by isolating evidence for similar structures in other branches, including Celtic (cf. Littleton, 1973). Aided by a nativist enthusiasm for things Indian to be discussed below, the impact of this approach upon medieval Irish studies has been considerable of late and is, perhaps, most apparent in the work of Alwyn and Brinley Rees (1961). However, comparisons between Ireland and India alone hardly suffice to put the Indo-European provenance of various motifs and institutions beyond reasonable doubt, and the Dumézilian approach may be criticised for setting too much store by the Indian evidence. Where possible, a wider range of Indo-European literatures should be compared simultaneously in the interests of more balanced socio-mythological reconstruction, and it has recently been argued that the results call for significant modification of Dumézil's model (McCone, 1987). The importance of tripartition in early Irish ideology will emerge at various points in this book, but one should beware of facile assumptions about Indo-European origins and correlations with the Dumézilian system.

3. Studies by Albert Lord (1960) and Denys Page (1959) in the late fifties had a major impact upon attitudes to the Homeric poems and led to emphasis upon formulaic oral composition and transmission, the secondary and essentially uncreative later role of writing in their survival, and the ability of such a strictly regulated oral tradition to preserve a reasonably accurate, if patchy, record of earlier social and political conditions over a long period. This approach was applied to early Irish saga by Jackson in a small but influential book published in 1964, page 4 of which states the basic hypothesis succinctly as follows: "the immediate setting of the oldest hero tales, that is to say the state of endemic warfare between Ulster and the rest of Ireland and various other features of the Irish political construction, material civilization, and way of life, which are very archaic in appearance, very circumstantial, and on the whole very consistent, belong to a period some centuries older than the time when they were first written down - belong in fact to a *pre*historic Ireland".

If the premise is granted, this basic picture can only have been preserved orally until it entered an apparently equally reactionary written record, but recent anthropological studies of oral traditions have tended to stress the decisive role of contemporary social and political factors in shaping them. Thus according to Jack Goody "it seems probable, at least, that the form in which non-literate societies conceive the world of the past is itself influenced by the process of transmission described. The Tiv have their genealogies, others their sacred tales about the origin of the world and the way in which man acquired his culture. But all their conceptualizations of the past cannot help being governed by the concerns of the present, merely because there is no body of chronologically ordered statements to which reference can be made. The Tiv do not recognized any contradiction between what they say now and what they said fifty years ago, since no enduring record exists for them to set beside their present views. Myth and history merge into one: the elements in the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance tend to be soon forgotten or transformed; and as the individuals of each generation acquire their vocabulary, their genealogies, and their myths, they are unaware that various words, proper names and stories have dropped out, or that others have changed their meanings or been replaced" (1968, 34). In the same vein Jan Vansina states: "oral traditions are conditioned by the society in which they flourish. It follows therefore that no oral tradition can transcend the boundaries of the social system in which it exists" (1973, 172). Finally, Ruth Finnegan makes a poignant protest along similar lines: "because primitive tribes were supposed to be preoccupied with tradition rather than innovation, 'traditional' tales were sought and 'new' ones ignored or explained away. Because interest was focused on broad evolutionary stages, few questions were asked about the idiosyncratic history, culture, or literary conventions of a particular people. Finally because origins and early history assumed such importance in people's minds, there was little emphasis on the *contemporary* relevance of a piece of literature" (1970, 37).

As a representative of what Joseph Nagy has called "the emerging new school of Celticists who share an 'oral traditionalist' appreciation of medieval Irish literature" (1983, 130), Edgar Slotkin has put the nub of the matter thus: "was Celtic literature which originated in the pre-Christian period preserved meaninglessly? I think not. It had an audience which appreciated and understood it at some level other than pre-Christian myth. Our perfectly legitimate interests in the pre-Christian codes have tended to blind us to the codes tales carried at the time they were written down" (1983, 222). This type of approach has recently been applied by N.B. Aitchison to extant 'Ulster Cycle' tales, his conclusion being "that these sources are neither the literary transcriptions of Iron Age oral traditions, nor do they offer a 'window' on Iron Age society. Instead, the study of the processes behind the composition and transmission of this literature represents a remarkable potential addition to our knowledge of secular and religious affairs in north-eastern Ireland during the second half of the first millenium A.D." (1987, 87). It can now be regarded as axiomatic that, assumed oral origins for some of its constituents notwithstanding, the proper frame of reference for early Irish literature is early Christian Ireland rather than the preceding pagan period.

Nevertheless, the attractions of orality to nativist scholars have been such that it has been accorded pride of place even in the evaluation of written material without attested oral parallels, as when Gerard Murphy states that "though our knowledge

of ancient Irish storytelling comes mainly from manuscript versions of the tales, there can be little doubt that Irish narrative tradition has on the whole been essentially oral" (1961, 5-6). Moreover, "when we think of the well-constructed narratives which even the unlearned peasant narrator to-day can produce, and when we judge of the greater power of Old Irish story-tellers by consideration of certain passages scattered through the inartistic manuscript versions of their tales which have been preserved, we can be fairly certain that the tales, as really told to assembled kings and noblemen at an ancient *óenach*, were very different from the poorly-narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature" (ibid., 8). Mac Cana confidently refers to "official tradition, whether oral or written (though in the insular Celtic context it remained mainly oral even after the introduction of writing)" (1971, 109) after making substantially the same claim in scholastic guise: "the more closely one studies these early tales in their written form, the more one is persuaded that they are in substance, if not always in the accidents of style, a fair reflection of the oral narrative of pre-literate tradition" (ibid., 97-8). Referring to the story of Cenn Fáelad's pioneering literary activities in the seventh century, Ó Coileáin asserts that "in some such way oral learning came to be launched on its uncertain journey through time, some of it to reach the twentieth century out of a past that has no real beginning. Nor should the writing of a text of whatever kind be seen as somehow marking the end of an oral tradition; rather, it has captured it, however imperfectly, at a given point in its life cycle" (1985, 526b).

Prior to the acquisition of the Roman alphabet along with organised Christianity in the fifth century Ireland was to all intents and purposes a non-literate society. Consequently oral tradition is the sole possibility for the preceding period and is hardly likely to have been eradicated by the introduction of limited, if expanding, clerical and monastic literacy from the fifth century onwards. The fact remains, however, that we have no direct knowledge of this presumed oral tradition and that what have come down to us from the period in question are exclusively the written products of the monastically educated. To deny that these were influenced by and drew upon an oral tradition with pagan roots would be as fatuous as the unprovable and unsupported nativist assumptions about the dominant role of orality and paganism in the creation of the so-called 'secular' genres of this monastic literature. *A priori* arguments about the role of an unattested oral tradition in the constitution of an abundantly documented literary record evidently put the cart before the horse as far as methodology is concerned, and all too often substitute vague speculation for solid inferences founded upon scrutiny of the texts themselves.

The main objection to nativist attitudes towards early Irish literature is that they preclude the appreciation of this vast material in its own terms by treating it as a more or less haphazard, imperfect and unthinkingly antiquarian inky precipitation out of an infinitely richer and more extensive oral solution. As Donnchadh Ó Corráin has pointedly remarked of late, "far too often, the modern critics - on generally unspoken grounds of aesthetics, good order, propriety or some such - are prepared to be harsh in their judgements on the scholars who transmitted their texts to them. We hear and read a great deal about scribal clumsiness, late and corrupt texts (as if there were once a gleaming fault-free archetype), careless and contradictory patchwork and the awkward merging of different recensions which should, indeed, have been kept apart. The implication is that those who transmitted, re-

edited, re-wrote or merely copied a text were, to a greater or lesser degree, mindless conduits of a Great Tradition whose intelligence and taste was, of course, much inferior both to that of their modern critics and to that of the founders of the tradition itself" (1986, 141).

These views tie in well with recent trends in other disciplines, such as the reaction in biblical studies to the atomistic tendencies of the so-called 'higher criticism' in vogue since the nineteenth century. As Robert Alter and Frank Kermode have put it, "the characteristic move was to infer the existence of some book that preceded the one we have - the lost documents that were compiled to make Genesis as it has come down to us, the lost Aramaic Gospel, the lost "sayings source" used by Matthew and Luke and so on. The effect of this practice was curious: one spoke of the existing books primarily as evidence of what must once have been available in an original closer to what actually happened. That was their real value - as substitutes for what had unfortunately been lost" (1987, 3). Thus "the biblical texts were valued less for what they actually were than for what they told us about other putative texts or events to which there was no direct access. What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated" (ibid., 4). Similarly Northrop Frye maintains "that textual scholarship has never really developed the 'higher' criticism that made such a noise in the nineteenth century. Instead of emerging from lower criticism, or textual study, most of it dug itself into a still lower, or sub-basement, criticism, criticism in which disintegrating the text became an end in itself. As a result its essential discoveries were made quite early, and were followed by a good deal of straw-thrashing. There are any number of books, for example, telling us that the account of creation with which the Book of Genesis opens comes from the priestly narrative, much the latest of the four or five documents that make up the book. A genuine higher criticism, I should think, would observe that this account of creation stands at the beginning of Genesis, despite its late date, because it belongs at the beginning of Genesis. That would lead to an integrated study of the Book of Genesis, and eventually the whole Bible, as it now stands, concerning itself with the question of why the Bible as we know it emerged in that particular form" (1982, xvii). There are encouraging signs that the study of medieval Irish texts is likewise emerging from a troglodyte phase.

4. In view of the overwhelming evidence that the so-called medieval Irish 'ecclesiastical' genres, whether in Latin or the vernacular, provide for vigorous and wide ranging intellectual activity from at least the sixth century onwards, the passive approach allegedly adopted by the same monastic learned class towards the native oral tradition obviously required some explanation. One response was to endow them with a suspiciously modern and disinterested desire to record the remnants of a moribund pagan tradition. Thus Murphy castigates "poorly narrated manuscript versions noted down by monastic scribes as a contribution to learning rather than to literature" above, Ó Coileáin speaks of "antiquarians assembling, as best they could, pieces of a rapidly fragmenting past" (1985, 521b), and according to Mac Cana "it is well known that early Irish churchmen were remarkably liberal and sympathetic in their attitude to pagan tradition and that were it not for their goodwill and enthusiasm it would have gone the way of most oral tradition in a changing and literate world. But this is not to say that the monastic recording of native tradition was free of censorship, and there is in fact clear indication of such censorship in

the absence of material whose former existence is implicit in the extant literature" (1971, 99).

Statements such as these are all the more surprising in view of good evidence that the attitude of early Irish clerics to paganism was unenthusiastic, to say the least. For instance, Patrick's later seventh-century biographer Tírechán links a number of native expressions and customs with paganism, contrasts these with monastic usage and describes the suppression of undesirable pagan practices by the saint (e.g. 12, 26 (17-21), 32 in Bieler, 1979). Equally noteworthy is the consistent condemnation of contemporary druidism and associated lifestyles with pagan connotations as diabolical practices in our sources, of which more in chapter nine. Moreover, the triumphalist author of *Félire Oengusso* around 800 A.D. notes with grim satisfaction that "the great kings of the pagans wail ever in burning: the hosts of Jesus without a fall, they are joyous after triumph" (Prol. 61-4) and illustrates his claim that even in Ireland "the Faith has grown, it will abide until the Day of Judgement: guilty pagans are carried off, their forts are not inhabited" (173-6) by contrasting the desolate pagan royal sites of Tara, Crúachu, Ailenn and Emain with the bustling monasteries of Armagh, Clonmacnoise, Kildare and Glendalough. Such by no means untypical attitudes do not square easily with a desire to preserve a written record of the pagan past for its own sake. There is no sign here of the 'benign ecumenism' towards certain pagan beliefs that Mac Cana (1976, 95-8) ascribes to the Christian authors of the extant versions of *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai,* and Carney has rightly insisted that "there can be no question of regarding these stories as semi-sacred compositions, transmitted for centuries in an almost unvarying form and finally 'written down' by an enthusiastic antiquarian with the scientific approach and attitude of a modern student of ethnography" (1955, 277).

As far as T.F. O'Rahilly was concerned, the monastic recorders of these pagan traditions, far from being broad-minded conservationists, had insidiously subversive aims. Thus "our Irish pseudo-historians were thoroughgoing euhemerists; so, too, were the inventors of the pre-Christian parts of our genealogies. By thus humanizing and mortalizing the divinities of pagan Ireland, they hoped to eradicate the pagan beliefs that still lingered on among many of their countrymen" (1946, 261). By way of illustration in the field of saga, "*Esnada Tige Buchet* is thus one of the most striking examples we have in Irish of how a tale, originally mythic, can in the course of time be stripped of all its pagan characteristics. All trace of the supernatural and the mysterious has been eliminated; and indeed the story is told in the most prosaic and matter-of-fact way. In harmony with the period of pseudo-history in which the action is made to take place, no element of Christianity is permitted to intrude" (1952, 19). Since, however, supernatural beings and features occur abundantly in the sagas, as will become clear later, these early Irish clerks are scarcely more convincing as totalitarians than as liberals. Moreover, one might well ask supporters of both views why monastic writers should have gone to the trouble of saving the debris of a pagan tradition from imminent extinction and then imposed a distinctly haphazard censorship, whether "of selective silence" (Mac Cana, 1979, 460) or worse, in order to hasten the demise of those very beliefs and practices.

Clearly we need a better explanation for this monastic activity than either of these flawed approaches can provide, but the quest for this will be left until the next two chapters. A further desideratum in line with Ó Corráin's strictures above is the avoidance of patronising assumptions that in various fields of vernacular litera-

ture the artistic and intellectual aspirations of early Christian Irish scribes hardly went beyond the more or less garbled reproduction of alleged oral pagan originals. All too often such attitudes have led to cavalier treatments geared to restoring an assumed older or oral 'original' rather than to interpreting what is actually attested in writing, but fortunately the main trend of late has been to attach increasing value to the contemporary import and structural integrity of extant texts. As the following chapters should show, the results speak for themselves and point to a profoundly literary tradition that had developed its own momentum in the monasteries from an early period, regardless of the probable or possible pre-Christian roots of many of its constituents (cf. Aitchison, 1987, 93-103).

5. A major nativist tenet closely connected with insistence upon orally transmitted pagan survivals is that early medieval Irish society and literature were remarkably archaic and conservative until rudely roused from their naturally supine state by foreign intruders, notably the Vikings in the ninth and the Normans in the twelfth century. The classic statement of this view regarding the impact of the Vikings on the Irish body politic is Binchy's 'The Passing of the Old Order' (1962). This celebrated article depicts a pre-ninth-century Ireland in which "the political and administrative unit had been the tribal state, or *túath*, a very small territory ruled by a king (*rí*), whose status and functions had remained strikingly similar to those which modern anthropologists attribute to the old Indo-European tribal king" (122). Such monarchs "had very limited 'governmental' functions within the territory" (123) on an island that was, politically speaking, merely "a *congerie* of tribal states tenuously linked together in five larger groups" (126). Happily, however, this political fragmentation did not lead to constant internecine conflicts because "in pre-Norse times, all wars, inter-tribal and inter-provincial alike, followed a curiously ritual pattern. They were hedged around with taboos: one did not continue the fight after after one's king had been slain; one did not annex the enemy's territory or confiscate any of their lands; one did not dethrone the 'sacred' tribal dynasty; one refrained from attacking a number of 'neutral zones' on enemy soil – the monastic settlements, the property of the learned castes (*áes dána*), and so on" (128). It was the refusal of the unsporting Northmen to play by the local rules that led to the disintegration of this cosy system by setting the natives a bad example.

It is dangerous to extrapolate from legal ideals to actual practice in this manner. After all, the notion that rules are made to be broken is a familiar one and it would, for instance, be unwise to deduce from a law prohibiting homicide that murder was unknown or even merely rare in the society in question. The annals provide far better evidence for what was going on in the real world and have been duly used by Ó Corráin to show "that in the eighth century and possibly earlier the independent legal position of the *túath* or petty tribal kingdom was being steadily eroded by the greater overlords" (1972, 29) and "that long before the Viking attacks the dominant dynasties ruthlessly expelled and extruded less powerful peoples, and intervened to their advantage in the domestic struggles of their inferiors" (ibid., 30). It thus appears "that the *túath* and its king, the tribal kingdom with its privileges and the sacred tribal king with his taboos, had become things of the past long before the year 800. Ireland had become (if in reality it was ever otherwise, I doubt) a land of dynastic overlordship in which the kings of the paramount dynasties extended their authority and their kindred in every direction which their resources allowed"

(ibid., 31). More recently Patrick Wormald has lodged an incisive protest against the 'outlandish' notion that "an early Irish king was a priestly vegetable; he tells more of the distant past than of the historical development of European monarchy" (1986, 153).

Various points to be made in subsequent chapters should chime in well with these substantial arguments that early medieval Irish kingship was a good deal more normal and up to date by contemporary European standards than nativists like to admit. Meanwhile two examples of the considerable authority wielded by a provincial monarch over his sub-kings even in the later seventh and early eighth centuries must suffice.

Críth Gablach, par. 38, lists various types of *rechtgae* or "legal ordinance" a king can impose upon his *túatha* in the wake of military defeat or pestilence. The plural *túatha* "kingdoms" clearly points to an overking, as does the third category "a king's ordinance (*rechtgae ríg*), as is the ordinance of the king of Cashel (*rechtgae ríg Caisil*) in Munster. For there are three ordinances that are proper for a king to pledge on his *túatha*: an ordinance for expulsion of a foreign race, i.e. against the Saxons, an ordinance for the preparation of crops, a law of the faith that enkindles, as is the law of Adomnán". As Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha's meticulous study of the guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* itself shows (1982), great provincial kings, supported by various of their more important sub-kings, played a crucial role in the promulgation of ecclesiastical *cána* (cf. Herbert, 1988, 51), as when the exiled abbot Artrí of Armagh "proceeded to proclaim the *Cáin Phátraic* in Munster in 823 (*AU*) with the support of king Feidlimid mac Crimthainn of Cashel and again in 'the three Connachts' in 825 (*AU*)" (McCone, 1984, 317).

St. Brigit's hagiographer Cogitosus provides the following social context, which was evidently meant to seem plausible to his readers, for one of her posthumous miracles (par. 33 in Bollandus, 1658, 140; par. 30 in Connolly and Picard, 1987, 23-4). The king of Brigit's home province (*patria*) of Leinster issued "an edict throughout the petty kingdoms and sub-provinces which were under his authority and yoke (*edictum per plebes* [=OIr. *túatha*?] *et provincias* [=OIr. *mór-thúatha*?] *quae sub eius erant ditione et iugo*)" for the building of a major road. "When many peoples came by kindreds and families (*conuenientibus multis populis* [=OIr. *túatha*?] *per cognationes* [=OIr. *cenéla*?] *et familias* [=OIr. *fini*?]), they divided the work up among themselves. Here, surely, we see the *túath* and smaller subdivisions within it functioning as subordinate links in an efficient chain of provincial command rather than as loosely federated independent units owing little more than nominal allegiance to an over-king.

Early Christian Irish society was intensely competitive in the upper echelons, both lay and clerical, about which we are best informed. Great monasteries as well as, and usually in tandem with, great dynasties were concerned to extend their power and influence (see ch. 10, 5), and warfare, far from being "rather like a ritual game" (Binchy, 1970, 17), was a deadly serious instrument for furthering political ambitions. For example, the Annals of Ulster (*AU*) record battles fought by Clonmacnoise against the monastery of Birr in 760 and the Columban house of Durrow in 764. We are told that on the latter occasion Durrow lost no less than two hundred members of its community. Internal monastic conflicts could be savage enough on occasion and might have wider repercussions. Thus the Annals of Tigernach (*AI*) record "the slaying of bishop Echthigern by a priest at the altar of Brigit, as a result

of which a priest does not perform mass in the presence of a bishop in Kildare" in 760 and state that the "battle of Emain Machae between the Ulaid and the Southern Uí Néill" in 759 was caused by a dispute between a priest of Armagh and his abbot. Whether secular, monastic or mixed, such conflicts can hardly be described as "nothing more than punitive expeditions by an over-king to levy by force tribute which had been withheld by a subordinate" or as "just examples of the *crech*, the armed raid for booty, chiefly livestock" (Binchy, 1954, 65).

Indeed, political motivation is apparent in many of the wars and battles that figure so prominently in the annals, both before and after the coming of the Vikings, and clearly involved considerable casualties on occasion. Thus the Annals of Ulster record "an encounter between the Munstermen and the Uí Néill, and Donnchad (of Clann Cholmáin, soon to be king of Tara) did great devastation in the territories of the Munstermen and many of the Munstermen fell" as well as "a battle in (the monastery of) Clonard between Donnchad and the community of Clonard" in 775, while in 793 we learn of "the outraging of Fáendelach by Gormgal son of Dindanach and the entry and invasion of Armagh and slaughter of people there by the Uí Chremthain (of the Clogher area). The reception of Fáendelach into Armagh again" (cf. McCone, 1984, 311-9). The notice of the battle of Allen in 722 records the deaths of a number of lesser kings on both sides as well as that of the defeated Cenél nÉogain king of Tara, Fergal mac Máele Dúin, whose designs upon Leinster were thus thwarted. Fergal's son and successor in the Tara kingship, Áed Allán, defeated the Cenél Conaill in 732 and fought them again in 733 and 734 in what was evidently a struggle for paramountcy among the Northern Uí Néill that went the Cenél nÉogain's way. Having secured his western flank, Áed turned his attentions eastwards to the Ulaid, whom he defeated in 735. In the same year there was a battle between Munster and the Laigin or Leinstermen "in which many of the Laigin and almost countless Munstermen perished". At last Áed was ready for the final stroke of a carefully laid strategy and fought the battle of Áth Senaig against the Laigin in 738. After the death of the king of the Leinstermen the wounded Áed's followers "were granted an enormous victory when they put their Leinster rivals to flight, trample, prostrate, overthrow and destroy them in extraordinary manner so that almost the whole enemy army is annihilated."

One wonders what those involved in this and similar actions recorded in the pre-Viking annals would have made of Mac Cana's recent suggestion that "one might almost describe the endemic warfare of early Ireland as 'harmless', for, while it could be barbarous, its primary aim was like that of the modern riot weapon: to sting and to stun but not to kill" (1982, 207). On the whole, it seems unlikely that the Irish of this period had much to learn from the Vikings about military ruthlessness, political aggrandisement or attacking monasteries. Far from being populated by primitive savages, whether noble or otherwise, early medieval Ireland had developed what Patrick J. Corish has termed "an integrated and confident Christian culture" (1972, 7) that was, to be sure, not without its peculiarities but seems to have enjoyed reasonably normal levels of intrigue and violence by the standards of the time and in some important respects to have stood in the vanguard of western Europe's emergence from the Dark Ages. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the field of monastic learning.

6. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, iv-v, informs us that around the middle of the

seventh century St. Columba's foundation of Iona was at the head of an extensive monastic federation or *paruchia* with houses in Ireland, Scotland and Northumbria. Apart from Iona itself in the Inner Hebrides this included such major centres as Durrow in the Irish Midlands and Lindisfarne just off the coast of northeast England, a situation that has now been thoroughly discussed along with subsequent vicissitudes down to the twelfth century by Máire Herbert (1988, 9-126). Bede III, xix, tells of the Irish saint Fursae's foundation of the monastery of Cnobheresburg in East Anglia in the first half of the sixth century. This he left in the hands of his brother Fáelán before proceeding to the north of Clovis's kingdom, present-day Belgium, to found the monastery in which he died. His remains were subsequently translated to Péronne, where his brothers Fáelán and Ultán apparently held the abbacy (Kenney, 1929, 501-5). When in the aftermath of the Synod of Whitby in 664 the Irish presence under abbot Colmán was withdrawn from Lindisfarne, Bede IV, iv, records that about thirty English religious followed him back to Ireland, where Colmán founded the monastery of Inishboffin off the Mayo coast. Subsequent tensions between the Irish and English contingents caused Colmán to relocate the latter in a new foundation, Mag nÉo (Mayo), which had become a notable monastery with English occupants by the first half of the eighth century. Indeed, Bede III, xxvii, states categorically of later seventh-century Ireland that "there were many aristocrats and commoners of the English race there at that time who, having left their native island in the time of bishops Finian and Colmán, had departed thither for the sake of sacred reading or a more continent life. And, indeed, certain of them soon bound themselves faithfully to the monastic way of life, while others rather took pleasure in attention to reading by wandering around the churches of teachers. All of these the Irish received gladly and gave daily sustenance as well as seeing to the provision of books for reading and free tuition".

Particularly good evidence of Irish cultural attainments and impact abroad in the late sixth and early seventh centuries is provided by the career and writings of St. Columbanus, a monk of Bangor in northeast Ireland who spent the last twenty-five years or so of his life on the Continent with Irish followers. During this eventful part of his career he founded monasteries in Alsace before losing the Merovingian monarch's favour, travelled through Switzerland, where his disciple St. Gall stayed to establish the monastery bearing his name, and finally established the major monastery of Bobbio in the Lombard kingdom of northern Italy shortly before his death in 615. Columbanus' writings, which have been edited and translated with introduction by G.S.M. Walker (1957), comprise impressive, if at times rather florid, Latin prose and poetry, reveal an extremely forceful and uncompromising personality, and display deep scriptural erudition along with a good knowledge of patristic literature and major classical authors. It seems virtually certain that these accomplishments were acquired in his native country, and it is hard to resist quoting a passage from the fourth paragraph of his first letter to Pope Gregory the Great (reigned 590-604) that illustrates his wit, style, knowledge of Scripture, confidence in Irish learning and lack of bashfulness. Defending Irish practices, by now at variance with those of the Continent, regarding calculation of the date of Easter, Columbanus derives a delicious and barely translatable pun upon Pope Leo's name from Ecclesiastes 9:4 (*melior est canis vivus leone mortuo*, "a living dog is better than a dead lion"): "perhaps, while you fear to incur the stamp of Hermagorean innovation, you are content with the authority of your predecessors and especially

of Pope Leo (*antecessorum et maxime papae Leonis auctoritate contentus es*). Do not, I beg, yield yourself on such an issue to diffidence or propriety, which are often deceived: in this problem a living dog is perhaps better than a leonine corpse (*melior forte est canis vivus in hoc problemate leone mortuo*). For a living saint can correct things that have not been corrected by another earlier. For you should know that Victorius has not been accepted by our teachers and Irish scholars of old and computists most learned in making calculation".

The works of Isidore of Seville (+636), particularly the famous *Etymologiae sive Origines* compiled as a kind of encyclopaedia of current knowledge during the last years of his life, are known to have exercised a major influence throughout medieval western Europe. This esteem was particularly marked in early Christian Ireland, where the Etymologies were known as the *Cu(i)lmen(n)* or 'summit' of learning and were supposedly acquired in exchange for the most highly regarded native literary product, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, according to an account surviving in different versions in the Book of Leinster (*LL* 32878-32909, trans. Kinsella, 1970, 1-2) and elsewhere (Thurneysen, 1921, 251-4). J.N. Hilgarth has pointed out that, whereas use of Isidore outside Spain is scarcely attested in other parts of Europe before the early eighth century, "there is a long series of Irish Latin seventh-century authors, many of whom cite Isidore" (1984, 7), surely an eloquent testimony to the Christian Irish establishment's openness to external influences and interest in the latest scholarly trends at this time. Cosmopolitan and up to date as it was for the period, early medieval Irish scholarship enjoyed a high international reputation that goes a long way towards explaining the demand for recipients of an Irish monastic education in Carolingian Europe during the eighth and ninth centuries and beyond (Tierney, 1967, 1-17) and the substantial corpus of Latin literature produced by Irish men of letters both at home and abroad during this long period (Kenney, 1929, 486-621; Lapidge and Sharpe, 1985, 77-221). Indeed, at various times and in various concentrations Irish connections with Britain, France, the Low Countries, Southern Germany, Switzerland, Bohemia, Northern Italy and Spain can be established between the late sixth and late ninth centuries of our era (cf. the map in L. and M. de Paor, 1978, 69).

In view of these bracing perspectives it comes as something as a shock to be told that during this period Ireland as a whole was an isolated cultural backwater clinging unquestioningly to remarkably archaic practices and perceptions disturbed only by the occasional intrusion of more advanced foreigners. Binchy, for instance, claims that "the conservatism which philologists have often noted as a feature of the Irish language is paralleled in Irish law, and largely for the same reason. Between the Goedelic conquest and the Norse invasions Ireland remained insulated from the impact of foreign peoples, in other words from the most powerful factors making for legal change" (1943, 21). In still more general terms the Celts have been viewed as "peoples of the periphery whose achievements lay more in the spiritual and ideological than in the material and political fields, quintessential conservatives who maintained a tradition that was more Indo than European and who, when they innovated through borrowing, so transformed their borrowings as to make them hardly distinguishable from native idiom" (Mac Cana, 1982, 205). Thus "it would", in Ó Coileáin's words, "be difficult to overstate the inherently conservative nature of Irish medieval literature" (1985, 527b). Still more recently Gearóid Mac Eoin has invoked modern philistinism as a means of summarily dismissing the

incontrovertible evidence for medieval Irish scholars' major achievements in Latin letters: "the Romans never found time to invade Ireland, which is certainly the most important non-event in Irish history. Nonetheless, the Latin language made its appearance, spoken first by Christian missionaries and later by native churchmen who were probably no better at it than their twentieth-century successors who have breathed a great sigh of relief at its disappearance from the liturgy and the educational system" (1988, 595).

Given the phenomenal success of the Irish church in establishing within a mere hundred years or so of Patrick's fifth-century mission a forceful and flourishing monastic culture capable of importing and adapting the latest trends in scholarship from abroad and of exporting its own personnel and products to Britain and Europe, one can only ask with Wormald "whether (and if so, why) a civilization whose representatives have widely been believed to have changed the cultural destinies of north-western Europe can itself have been relatively impervious to its own message" (1986, 151). In a recent book that is at least useful as a compendium of nativist misapprehensions Michael Richter concedes that a "feature that marked Ireland very strongly was the openness of society to intellectual and cultural influences from outside" but envisages an effective counter to this in "the existence of a non-Latin intellectual tradition in Ireland from prehistoric times". This leads to claims of a type often made (e.g. by Mac Cana, 1982, 215) but never substantiated: "in the face of an incoming Latin civilisation, as it was then current in the Church, this tradition continued unbroken . . . All this was made possible by the existence of a socially respected and privileged intellectual élite which had developed from an archaic stage of culture in prehistoric times. The survival of this élite in Christian times is partly due to the fact that classical Roman civilisation could not, as elsewhere, eclipse and largely destroy things non-Roman and pre-Roman. Because of this, the archaic features of Irish society could become dynamic in the Middle Ages . . . Should all this be so, then the history of Ireland in the Middle Ages shows that there was a viable alternative development to that of the rest of Europe, dominated by Christian Latin culture" (Richter, 1988, 192-3).

It should emerge below and in subsequent chapters that the apparent discrepancy between Irish clerical attitudes at home and abroad is, as Wormald suspects, the child of modern fancy rather than medieval fact, but first we must turn our attention to the Orient.

7. Ancient India has long held a powerful fascination for scholars with nativist leanings as a favourite source of cultural and literary comparisons with early medieval Ireland aimed at demonstrating the impressive and surprisingly pristine condition of the latter's Indo-European heritage. Versed as he was in Sanskrit as well as Irish, Dillon made several classic presentations of this position, including lectures published with such significant titles as 'The Archaism of Irish Tradition' (1947) and 'Celt and Hindu' (1973). The basic aim of the former appears on page 9: "M. Vendryes referred to features of morphology and vocabulary which Celtic shares with Sanskṛit, and drew the conclusion that they indicate the archaic character of these languages and the survival east and west of ancient religious institutions. It is the theory which I am here attempting to confirm and to extend; and I would merely add that in the light of other evidence those points of agreement between Sanskrit and Celtic have an importance rather greater than Vendryes would

seem to attach to them, for they are part of a much wider measure of common tradition". On page 4 of the later work a theoretical framework was posited with reference to attempts in the field of dialect geography to identify "central areas, lateral areas and isolated areas, of which the first are sources of innovation and the last two are refuges of archaism", the basic claim being "that this method can be applied not merely to language, to the names of institutions, but to the institutions themselves; and the model has an obvious use when we are observing Ireland and India, at opposite ends of the Indo-European areas, when we are comparing Celtic with Vedic Sanskrit, Celt and Hindu".

This methodological approach has found considerable favour. For example, Binchy states of the Old Irish law tracts that he is "more than ever convinced of their importance as a record of archaic society" because "the Irish as well as the Hindu jurists were 'backward-looking' – men with a profound respect for antiquity" (1970, 1). Consequently in an Indo-European context there is a contrast "between Hindu and Irish law on the one hand and the dynamic legal systems, the Welsh as well as the Roman and the English, on the other" and "it is the Hindu and Irish jurists who, precisely owing to their lack of legal realism, can now give much more valuable information to social anthropologists" (ibid., 2). Mac Cana speaks of "Indian tradition, which otherwise preserves so many close analogues of items in insular Celtic tradition" (1972, 137) and has probably gone further down this particular path than anyone else. Richter similarly avers that "the reference to India is not arbitrary, nor are the parallels coincidental; remains of Indo-European civilisation have been preserved on the eastern fringes of the region influenced by Indo-European culture and, on the outer western fringes, in Ireland; they were preserved into historical times" (1988, 24).

However, the foundations of this 'Indo-Celtic' theory appear rather shaky on closer inspection. To begin with, dialect geography deals with areas such as present-day France where local speech variants are part of a continuum of mutual intelligibility at a given point in time, whereas the major attested Indo-European languages or language families meet neither criterion: the dates of their earliest adequate documentation vary enormously (e.g. Hittite c. 1600 B.C., Greek c. 1400 B.C., Vedic Sanskrit c. 1000 B.C., Latin c. 300 B.C., Gothic c. 350 A.D., Old Irish c. 650 A.D.) and there is no question of mutual comprehension. One can hardly, for instance, apply insights of dialect geography to two languages and cultures such as those of early Christian Ireland and Vedic India separated from each other spatially by numerous other language areas, some Indo-European and others not, and temporally by over one and a half millenia. Such notions would only be relevant to a hypothetical period of Indo-European linguistic unity, and we have no reason to suppose that the precursors of Celtic or Indo-Iranian had either begun to separate out as dialects or were in any sense peripheral at that stage. Moreover, the Celts first emerge into the light of history from the cultural melting pot of central Europe and may well not have reached Ireland more than two or three centuries B.C. (cf. Greene, 1983; Piggott, 1983). There is nothing very 'marginal' or 'isolated' about this formative phase of Celtic prehistory.

It is, moreover, doubtful whether Celtic or Old Irish can be meaningfully regarded as 'archaic' Indo-European dialects. Recent linguistic researches suggest that Celtic, like Indo-Iranian, can be accounted for in terms of a perfectly mainstream Indo-European prototype (e.g. Rix, 1977; McCone, 1986). Where a

given feature such as the Old Irish reduplicated future and the Old Indic reduplicated desiderative (McCone, 1986, 248-55) is peculiar to both and is too circumstantial to have arisen independently, it can be ascribed with confidence to the parent language, Indo-European, for the simple reason that there is no plausible later point of common origin. In other words, it is the nature of the evidence and not the allegedly intrinsic archaism of peripheral areas that validates such conclusions. A concrete example in the sphere of vocabulary is the word for 'king' appearing in Celtic as Gaulish and (probably) Celtiberian *-rix*, Old Irish *rí* (gen. *ríg*) and Welsh *rhi*, in Latin as *rex* and in Sanskrit as *rāj-ā*. Allowing for regular sound changes established for the relevant languages (e.g. IE *$\bar{e}$ > Skt. $\bar{a}$, Celt. $\bar{\imath}$), these precise correspondences point ineluctably to an Indo-European stem *$r\bar{e}\hat{g}$- (nom. sg. *$r\bar{e}\hat{k}$-s*), broadly meaning 'king' (cf. Binchy, 1970, 3), that is so far attested only towards the eastern and western extremes of the Indo-European world. Survival in this context merely implies phonetic continuity with a reconstructed prototype and by no means rules out change, which may be considerable as in Old Irish *én* 'bird' < **petnos*. Indeed, it is only an appreciation of the systematic changes involved that makes firm equations of this sort possible. The fact that changes in semantics and institutions cannot be formulated with the same precision is no excuse for ignoring them, and only makes the fullest possible documentation of the facts relevant to a comparison at this level all the more essential.

The survival of words relatively intact does not necessarily imply a corresponding stability in what they signify and conversely changes of designation do not always involve significant conceptual or institutional alterations. Consequently it would be rash to argue from the preservation of reflexes of *$r\bar{e}\hat{g}$- that Celtic, Roman and Indian kingship was more archaic than that of other Indo-European peoples that have substituted other words or that the substitution of, say, *fían* for inherited *cuire* < IE **koryos* to designate the early Irish 'Männerbund' or society of unmarried young warrior-hunters significantly affected the institution itself (McCone, 1987, 110-18). Furthermore, relatively few precise cognates are attested anything like ubiquitously among the major recorded Indo-European languages, and one usually has to be content with a more limited distribution. All manner of permutations between two or three daughter languages are found, and it will hardly do to single out Indic (,Italic) and Celtic for special treatment, especially when new discoveries can radically alter the picture and show just how fortuitous the quirks of attestation may be. For instance, the Greek word *kheír* 'hand' had only one known cognate, Armenian *jeṙn*, at the beginning of the present century, and these two languages are arguably too closely related for the reconstruction of an Indo-European form on that basis despite reasonable assurance that the Indo-Europeans, who were manifestly blessed with palms (Lat. *palma*, Gk. *palámē*, OEng. *folm* 'palm', OIr. *lám*, W. *llaw* 'hand' < **plḥmā* 'palm'), had actually had hands and a word for them. As Hermann Hirt put it, "are we to assume that the Indo-Europeans had known snow and feet but not rain and hands? That, of course, is nonsense, and must cause us to exercise great caution in concluding anything from the absence of correspondences" (1927, 76). Indeed, the subsequent discovery of *kessar(as)* 'hand' in Hittite and *tsar*, *ṣar* 'hand' in Tocharian A and B respectively put the existence of Indo-European *g^hesr- 'hand', from which the forms in all four of these languages derive, beyond doubt. Needless to say, one would hardly wish to argue on this basis that the Greeks, Armenians, Hittites and Tocharians bore a greater

manual affinity to their Indo-European forbears than the Indo-Iranians, Celts and so on or, indeed, that Celtic use of a derivative of **pḷhmā* for the whole hand reflects any widespread loss of fingers amongst them.

The truth is that there is no precise and necessary correlation between linguistic and broader cultural facts. Even if there were, a balanced appraisal of early Christian Ireland's linguistic heritage does not provide an encouraging analogy for those scholars inclined to stress her intense social and cultural conservatism. In comparison with Sanskrit, Greek or even Latin, the Irish language had by the time of the earliest substantial records in about the seventh century A.D. evolved very far indeed from the ancestral Indo-European prototype inferred by the comparative method. Profound changes in phonology, morphology and syntax had made Old Irish in some ways typologically closer to genetically unrelated verb-initial languages like Hebrew than to its ancient Celtic and Indo-European antecedents. Moreover, ecclesiastical influence can be detected in the shape of a not inconsiderable Latin input into the early medieval Irish vocabulary. In large measure this involved direct borrowings appropriately adapted to vernacular patterns of sound and inflection, e.g. OIr. *epscop* 'bishop' < Lat. *episcopus*, *scúap* 'broom' < *scopa*, *cásc* 'Easter' < *pascha*, *corcur* 'purple colour' < *purpura*, *eclais* 'church' < *ecclesia*, *senester* 'window' < *fenestra*, *póc* 'kiss' < *pacem* '(kiss of) peace', *léigend* 'reading, learning' < *legendum*, *penn* 'pen' < *penna* and so on. Recent studies by Damian McManus (e.g. 1983) have shown that this influx of Latin loanwords must have continued without serious interruption over a long period of time. It was, moreover, accompanied by a more subtle approach, correspondingly harder to detect, whereby native words were invested with latinized meanings either individually or in new combinations known as 'calques'. For instance, despite an Old Persian cognate *naiba-* 'splendid' proving pagan Indo-European and Celtic antecedents Old Irish *noíb* has been fully assimilated to Latin *sanctus* 'holy, saint' in the Christian sense, while a native word partly equivalent in meaning to a Latin counterpart might undergo expansion of its semantic range to make the match more complete, e.g. OIr. *bríathar* 'word' and then also 'verb' under the influence of Lat. *verbum* 'word, verb' or OIr. *cenél* 'race, kind' and then also 'gender' through assimilation to Lat. *genus* 'race, kind, gender'. The following are a few typical instances of the process of calquing, which entailed the fusion of two or occasionally three native words into a new larger unit capable of rendering a Latin term in vernacular guise: *con:éicnigedar* 'compels' (Lat. *com-pellit*), *con:éirig* 'arises (to attack)' (*con-surgit*), *remdéicsiu* 'fore-sight, providence' (*pro-videntia*), *etar-guide* 'intercession' (*intercessio*), *tairm-chruthud* 'transfiguration, transformation' (*trans-figuratio*, *transformatio*), *rem-eperthae* 'afore-said' (*prae-dictus*), *imm:díben* 'circumcises' (*circum-cidit*). It was even possible to calque Latin loans from Greek if the original etymology was known from Isidore or some other source. Thus Latin *Evangelium* 'Gospel' had been borrowed directly from Greek and Isidore duly states that "*Evangelium*, however, is interpreted as 'good news' (*bona adnuntatio*), for in Greek good is called *eû* and news *angelía*" (*Etym.* VI, ii 43). Armed with this etymological information, early medieval Irish men of letters came up with the erudite calque *soi-scélae*, literally 'good news', for 'Gospel', and this subsequently entered into common usage. Some learned creations of this type did not gain general acceptance, e.g. alongside common *epscop* the rare calque *for-décsam* 'bishop' (*CIH* 2213.22) inspired by Isidore's (*Etym.* VII, x 11-3) etymology

of originally Greek *episcopus* in Latin as 'over-seer, super-intendent' or the like.

Although at best a very approximate index of wider cultural processes, these linguistic considerations do lead us to expect something rather different from the reactionary milieu depicted by nativist studies of much vernacular Irish literature. Continuity with the pre-Christian past by no means precludes significant changes on the way, and Christian or ecclesiastical influence can operate beneath as well as upon the surface. Thus we may assume that native or native-looking elements could acquire new meanings relevant to the Church's teaching and practice in ideology or literature as well as in language either by varying degrees of reinterpretation or by rearrangement into new larger patterns.

8. Nativist failure to detect major clerical influence upon much of the 'secular' literature studied by them has been due above all to a tendency to acknowledge only the most obvious or superficial manifestations of this type and to discount the likelihood of a more profound or allusive use of scriptural and other ecclesiastical elements. Thus Mac Cana cautions "that the extant texts provide only a very incomplete index of a rich and complex oral tradition and that one should therefore be wary of too readily assuming borrowing on the part of the Irish monastic *literati* in those cases where items in native narrative can be matched by analogues in classical or ecclesiastical literature. By the very nature of the subject, absolute certainty in these matters is difficult to achieve, but the interests of sound methodology at the very least require that the analogous items be subjected to two checks before borrowing can reasonably be assumed and its extent adequately defined. The first is to determine, so far as is possible, whether the compared items occur in traditions other than Irish and classical/ecclesiastical, and if so, how extensively; the second, whether these items stand rootless and relatively isolated in Irish tradition or whether they mesh closely with the extant remains of the tradition, for, obviously, if they relate easily and incidentally to other themes and narratives in native literature the argument for borrowing becomes correspondingly less cogent" (1972, 141).

This approach is predicated on the unverifiable assumption that the bulk of so-called 'native literature' is rooted in an extensive oral tradition, and the onus is placed upon critics to offer indisputable proof that written ecclesiastical sources were involved in any given instance. This undertaking is, however, made as difficult as possible, since the hypothesis that the monastic authors of extant early Irish texts drew to any extent upon such demonstrably familiar sources as the Bible and related literature is apparently to be rejected if analogues can be found in other more remote traditions or if the features in question are at all widespread in or well integrated into the extant vernacular material. In effect, the central issue is thereby prejudged: there can have been no extensive or profound ecclesiastical influence upon these narratives because anything widely or deeply rooted there is regarded as by definition most unlikely to have emanated from the Church. Were one to ask why, the vicious circle would presumably be closed with reference to the fundamentally oral nature and origins of most vernacular literature recorded by monastic scribes.

In the article just cited Mac Cana discusses a tale in which Mongán mac Fíachna displays precocious wisdom as a youth and shows himself more knowledgeable than a prominent poet. This is compared with the boy Ambrosius' worsting of the king's *magi* in prophecy in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, a British Latin compilation of

obvious clerical provenance, the inference being "that insular Celtic oral tradition knew a version of the birth of the hero theme in which the wise wonder-child bested the druids of the king" (1972, 135). It is further claimed that "Indian tradition provides a particularly striking analogy" (ibid.) in the form of an elaborate and relatively late cosmogonic narrative revolving round the precocious wisdom of Vishnu, but "it is not so evident that the writer of the Ambrosius episode in the *Historia Brittonum* saw the parallel with the account of the child Jesus in the temple in Luke II, 41-52,; but, whether he did or not, the brief biblical story has not affected the Welsh narrative, which is quite independent and, as we have noted, is probably related collaterally to extant elements in the Mongán cycle" (ibid., 141-2).

Since, as Mac Cana rightly insists, certainty cannot be achieved in such matters, the only methodologically sound approach is to apply Ockham's razor and look for the most economical explanation compatible with the facts in any given instance. The question here is whether isolated attestations of a 'wonder-child' motif in two otherwise quite different literary narratives from Ireland and Wales justify the reconstruction of a common 'insular Celtic oral tradition' going a thousand or more years further back and whether vague similarities with a highly evolved Indian theological exposition point to an Indo-European prototype two or more millenia older still. These are large claims to base upon such flimsy evidence. Youthful precocity is an obvious and widely exploited means of foreshadowing a hero's future greatness the world over, and a far more detailed dossier of correspondences between these narratives would be required in order to make a genetic connection preferable to independent development as an explanation. Furthermore, since both the Mongán tale and the Nennius passage emanate from clerical pens, the young Jesus' remarkable display of erudition and insight in St. Luke's Gospel could surely have provided the impulse for both of these creations separately.

Moreover, it might reasonably be urged that inconclusive speculations about sources and origins should not be allowed to distract attention from the primary need to study the structure, contents and context of extant works with a view to establishing their contemporary import. It would have been surprising indeed if pioneers such as Zeuss and Thurneysen had chosen to concentrate upon the Celtic and Indo-European origins of various Old Irish forms while largely ignoring the language's actual grammatical system, and yet nativist scholarship has displayed just such a preoccupation in the field of early Irish literature and history. Once the perspective is shifted from archaic survivals to contemporary factors, it can be confidently asserted that medieval Irish *literati* were quite unaware of their Celtic and Indo-European roots, whereas the Bible and other Christian works played a central and indispensable role in monastic life and letters. Once it is conceded that monastic writers were capable of moulding their material creatively, it must be regarded as highly likely that ecclesiastical literature in general and the Bible in particular provided vital conceptual and narrative models capable of modifying inherited patterns where necessary or appropriate. At the very least, such scribes would have been very much alive to parallels from the Bible that they studied so intensively.

Telling arguments along these lines were advanced by Carney as long ago as 1955 with reference to some examples of saga and voyage literature, and recent studies by Ó Corráin, Breatnach and others are making the profound influence of the Bible and other clerical material upon the greatest of all nativist bastions, the Old Irish law tracts, increasingly apparent (cf. Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984;

Breatnach, 1984; Ó Corráin, 1987). As Walter Baetke's concise account of trends in the scholarly study of Norse sagas points out, a debate along these lines has already taken place with reference to a narrative literature generally held to have much in common with Irish sagas despite its rather later date. It may be helpful to quote some of his key statements in translation from the original German. Noting that "critical saga research begins with doubts about the reliability of the Icelandic sagas as historical documents" (1974, viii) around the middle of the ninteenth century, Baetke goes on to document the rise of various types of theory stressing the role of oral composition in their transmission but concludes that this approach has inevitably reached a dead end: "all in all it is true of the free-prose theory that it is less concerned with the sagas themselves than with their prehistory. The crux for this type of research resides in the fact that we are not acquainted with the oral tradition that is its object and are scarcely in a position to get through to it. Consequently it was and is impossible to get beyond speculations that will always remain doubtful. What we do know are the sagas that have come down to us in parchment and paper manuscripts. Only these can constitute an object of exact literary-historical investigation" (ibid., xi). Moreover, "because adherents of the book-prose theory basically break with the historical approach, they also have a different attitude to the tradition. They do not deny that there were oral traditions from the period of settlement and the following centuries and that part of these has issued into the sagas, but their main interest is in the written works" (ibid., xii-xiii). The latest stage has seen an increasing appreciation of the Christian and medieval western context of Icelandic saga literature: "there was little secular literature in Iceland at the beginning of the thirteenth century. As a result scholarly attention has recently been directed more intensively upon the ecclesiastical writings that constituted the greater part of the written literature at the time. Legends, saints' lives, homilies, Gregory's dialogues and other edifying and instructive works had already reached Iceland in the twelfth century and were translated in part. They cannot have failed to affect the authors of sagas, particularly since it can be confidently posited that not a few of these were clerics. At first sporadic discoveries revealed that the Icelandic sagas have adopted and adapted motifs from sermon illustrations, the 'Disciplina Clericalis' and other sources. More recent researches have unearthed in addition a mass of Christian concepts as well as illustrations of Christian morality and outlook on life, which lurk in them. These had previously been almost entirely overlooked because under the spell of the traditional theory people regarded these tales as documents from Iceland's pre-Christian period and looked for evidence of pagan religion and custom in them" (ibid., xvii-xviii). Surely there is a lesson here for students of the vast literary output of Irish monasteries in the early Middle Ages?

9. If so, it has been steadfastly ignored by nativists, who have countered threats to the 'purity' of early Irish tradition as transmitted in our texts by representing the authorial role of monastic writers in relation to key native genres as little more than scribal. The truly artistic cultivation and transmission of such material was, by contrast, supposedly the preserve of an independent, influential and highly organized learned class of poets or *filid* and judges or *brithemain* stubbornly clinging to inherited oral techniques and determined to resist all but the most superficial concessions to Christian imports. These in turn were seen as heirs of the pagan Celtic druid, whose continuation of an ancient Indo-European priestly function could be

asserted by comparing the Indian brahmans and Roman pontiffs. In this way an impressive human pipeline was created to channel the 'tradition' from its dim and distant Indo-European source through Celtic and Irish oral and pagan prehistory into early medieval Irish literature with a minimum of adulteration from foreign elements such as Christianity.

Dillon, for example, makes the following statement: "it was pointed out by Vendryes that India, Rome, and Celtic Gaul had one notable tradition in common, namely, the recognition of a privileged caste of priests, brahman, pontiff, and druid; and he so explained certain facts of vocabulary to which I shall return. If we examine more closely what is known of druidic practices in Gaul and what can be gleaned from Irish evidence, it appears that the brahman and the druid preserved more than a common ancient vocabulary: they preserved common Indo-European traditions of practice and belief, some of which survived in the Gaelic world down to the eighteenth century and have survived in India to the present day" (1947, 2). Mac Cana has claimed that "much of the traditional teaching and practice of the druids was maintained without interruption by the *filid*" (1971, 86) and in a recent lecture entitled '*Regnum* and *sacerdotium*' has gone so far as to identify a priestly dichotomy in early Christian Ireland between clerics and "a well-organized class of learned men, independent of the Church, who controlled and maintained the structures and ideology of native kingship. In the ninth century this class was known as the *filid*. They were a fellowship of learned poets, but, as the original literal meaning of their name, 'seers', indicates, they were very much more than that ... By the ninth century they were known as *filid*, but if . . . we could somehow translate ourselves to fourth- or fifth-century Ireland, we should probably find them identified primarily as druids" (1979, 445). Moreover, "the fact that the *sacerdotium* was shared by clerics and *filid* since the fifth century adds a complication to Church and State relations which is not paralleled in Europe. There are indeed those – or at least there have been those – who might quarrel with my applying the terms *sacerdos* to the druids, not to mention the *filid*, but this is surely little more than a pedantic quibble. If one accepts that the Indian brahman is a priest, and there are very few who do not, then I fail to see how one can describe the druid otherwise. It is true that as a result of what Dr Eleanor Knott has called 'the protective metamorphosis' of the *filid* the priestly functions which they inherited from the druids were very much attenuated, but so much still remains and so much of their peculiar status and influence is explicable only in terms of their pre-Christian role that they are best seen in the perspective of history as a residual priesthood" (ibid., 455). As "the mediator and the manipulator of the supernatural powers which affected the king and through him his kingdom" the chief poet's relationship with the 'sacral king' in early medieval Ireland earns him a comparison with India: "in the Vedic text *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* (viii. 25) the king's priest, the *purohita*, who has so much else in common with the druid/*fili*, is referred to explicitly as *rāṣṭragopa* 'protector of the realm' because he preserves both the king and his kingdom by means of his spells and rites. In other words, both in India and in Ireland the king was the champion and benefactor of his people, but only so long as he himself was protected by the spiritual expertise of his priest" (ibid., 456). Being later arrivals on the scene, "the clergy were the Christian pendant to the (culturally) pagan *filid* and in many things seem to have adopted them as their model" (ibid., 478) and it is concluded "that the basic configuration of the relations between king and priest had already been

firmly established before the advent of Christianity and that it was never wholly superseded by subsequent change" (ibid., 479). So much so, indeed, that even the court poet of the post-Norman period can be considered "not merely as poet . . . but rather as residual priest and successor to the druids and to as much of their religious and ideological repertoire as survived the transition to Christianity" and "the correspondence here is between the Celtic *sacerdos* (poet/druid) and the Indian brahman and *purohita*" (Mac Cana, 1988, 84).

If only a significant fraction of these and other similar assertions were to be substantiated, it would be a moot point whether, despite a plethora of flourishing, influential and outward looking monasteries, early medieval Ireland could reasonably be termed a predominantly Christian country. Thus Mac Cana himself envisages merely skin-deep penetration "in a society which was now publicly Christian, but which was still strongly attached to traditional beliefs and practices, still had a rich and learned oral tradition running alongside the written vernacular tradition, and still betrayed a certain nostalgia for the less complicated life that existed before Christianity" (1986, 41-2), so much so that even the monastic *literati* supposedly drew "mainly on native tradition, as handed on by the lower orders of poets and storytellers" (ibid., 35). Richter too has boldly ventured where others had feared to tread by suggesting in a section of his book entitled 'Ireland - a Christian Country?' that "the most important evidence for the limited influence of Christianity in Ireland is the continued existence of the pre-Christian group of poets or seers (*filid*). It is difficult to say whether the *filid* and their culture should be regarded as being hostile to Christianity and in competition with it; or whether they were simply upholding among Christians a tradition untouched by Christianity . . . The continued existence of the *filid* and their further activity in the leading social classes shows that Christianity had a vigorous competitor in the cultural area" (1988, 65).

It seems strange indeed that the author of *Félire Óengusso*, writing close to 800 A.D., could have been so mistaken about the contemporary situation when he capped his famous contrast between Ireland's desolate royal forts and bustling monasteries with the following confidently triumphalist generalization: "the old cities of the pagans (*sen-chathraig na ngente*), concerning which prescriptive right has been effected, they are empty without worship like Lugaid's site. The small monastic sites that have been occupied by twos and threes, they are monastic Romes (*rúama*) with assemblies, with hundreds, with thousands. Paganism (*in gentlecht*) has been ruined, although it was illustrious and widespread. The kingdom of God the Father has filled heaven, earth and sea" (*Prol.*, 205-16).

As Patrick Sims-Williams points out in a fascinating recent article, the durable romantic myth of a 'Celtic twilight' was born shortly after the middle of the last century in France and England, where "Renan and Arnold were the first to present a wide European public with a synthetic, generalized picture of the various Celtic-speaking peoples and their literatures. Both were properly modest about their qualifications for the task; but their ignorance was an aid to generalization, and their picture of the Celts appealed at a more fundamental level than that of the niceties of scholarship. Their work, as René Galand, Malcolm Chapman, and others have shown, was founded upon a structural opposition between the Celts and the better-known European 'races'. Renan and Arnold set up the spiritual, impractical, rural, natural, and poetic Celtic peoples as the antithesis to materialism, 'Saxon'

philistinism, utilitarianism, excessive rationalism, artificiality, industrial urbanization, and all the other failings of the modern European world . . . If we are tempted to smile at the crudity of this racial myth, it may be salutary to recall the heady 1960s and the role then played by the Orient, particularly India and Nepal, in the thought-world of Western seekers after 'alternatives', in the days when 'far out' became a term of admiration. In both cases geography was an important part of the myth. The geographical position of the modern Celtic-speaking peoples, on the Western peripheries of Europe, was a historical explanation as well as a symbol for Renan, and all the more powerful for being both: . . . 'Never has a human family lived more apart from the world, and been purer from all alien admixture. Confined by conquest within forgotten islands and peninsulas, it has reared an impassable barrier against external influences; it has drawn all from itself; it has lived solely on its own capital . . . Roman civilization scarcely reached them, and left among them but few traces. The Teutonic invasion drove them back, but did not penetrate them. At the present hour they are still constant in resistance to an invasion dangerous in an altogether different way, - that of modern civilization'." (1986, 72-3).

10. The detailed picture of the interrelated activities of clerics, jurists, poets and the like to emerge from the early Irish sources themselves stands in marked contrast to the romantic nativist dualism illustrated above. Four categories of learned person seem to have chiefly interested the monastic compilers of annalistic obits in the pre-Norman period, namely the scholar in *ecnae* or scripturally based Latin learning, the *brithem* or jurist, the *senchaid* or genealogist-cum-historian, and the *fili* or poet-cum-storyteller. The legal tract *Uraicecht Becc* declares that many professions or *dánae* could be practised in either lay or monastic society without any change in the status or rewards due to them (*CIH* 1616.37f.), and notices in the annals duly bring monastic scholars, lawyers, historians and poets to light (cf. Ó Corráin, 1978, 14-6).

As the highest ranking practitioner of *ecnae* or *léigend* the *suí litre* or top Latin scholar, regularly termed *sapiens* in Hiberno-Latin and later called *fer léigind* in Irish, enjoyed status equal to that of a king, hospitaller, bishop or chief poet, this quintet of top-ranking equals being explicitly mentioned in the so-called 'genuine' prologue to the *Senchus Már* (*CIH* 348.24-349.25). During the two centuries following the obit of Cumméne Fota the *sapiens* in 662 A.D. the annals record the deaths of at least sixty one such top scholars in Latin and Scripture: thirty four are given a specific monastic affiliation and of these twenty one are described as holders of ecclesiastical positions, the high office of abbot in no less than eighteen cases. In a notice of a Viking attack upon Bangor in 823 (*AI*) particular mention is made of the community's scholars and bishops, *a suíd* ⁊ *a hepscoip*, being put to the sword, and the record of a similar attack upon Louth in 840 (*AU*) likewise singles out the bishops, priests and scholars taken prisoner: *episcopos* ⁊ *praespiteros* ⁊ *sapientes captivos duxerunt*. Of the sixteen jurists, termed *brithem* in Irish and *iudex* in Latin, that are awarded annalistic obituaries in the pre-Norman period, no less than eleven are explicitly affiliated to monasteries, nine as holders of high ecclesiastical office, usually that of abbot or *airchinnech*. The profession of *senchaid* or historian rates twenty obits from the eighth to the twelfth century, fourteen with declared monastic affiliations including the odd abbot, *airchinnech* or the like. Of the fifty or so *filid* or poets mentioned in the annals of the pre-Norman period, nine are explicitly attached to monasteries (McCone, 1986b, 12). It must be stressed that absence of a

stated monastic affiliation in this material by no means demonstrates on its own that the individual concerned was not so connected. For example, it can be confidently assumed that most, if not all, of the scholars of Latin and Scripture appearing in the annals held monastic positions, although this is only specified in just over half of the obits in question. The very name of the "Augustin Úa Cuinn, chief judge of the Leinstermen" who died in 1095 according to *AFM*, surely indicates a cleric, and the monastic connections of "Máel Mura, chief poet of Ireland (*ríg-fili Érenn*)" (obit *AU* 887) and the "most excellent poet (*poeta optimus*)" Ruman mac Colmáin (obit *AU* 747) will be considered later.

In his recent edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar* Liam Breatnach quotes the following highly illuminating passage from a short Middle Irish legal tract on the ecclesiastical grades: "as for the bishop of Armagh, he has twenty one *cumal*'s, and furthermore his man of ecclesiastical learning and his chief judge and poet (*a fer légind ⁊ a ollam bretheman ⁊ filed*) have the same honour-price as him; and it is thus even for every man of ecclesiastical learning and poet and judge of every other monastery (*do cach fir légind ⁊ filid ⁊ brethema[i]n cacha cathrach remuind*), he has the same honour-price as his bishop" (1987, 91). This is, of course, a clear indication that any monastery of note was expected to have its own leading Latin scholar, professor of *filedacht* and chief judge, and it would be surprising if such pinnacles of their professions were not accompanied by various subordinate grades and pupils, thus constituting monastic schools.

The death of Cenn Fáelad, the *sapiens* or head of a monastic Latin school, in 679 A.D. is recorded in a presumably trustworthy *AU* obit, and a profound interest in the Church and her learning is displayed by a couple of arcane poetic compositions in Old Irish ascribed to him in the legal tracts *Míadslechta* and *Bretha Nemed* (*CIH* 586.14-5 and 2212.3f.), which were hardly compiled more than about half a century after his death. Clearly the tradition that he combined the disciplines of the Latin scholar, the poet and the jurist can be traced much further back than the extant Middle Irish versions of the well known and much discussed story of the destruction of his 'brain of forgetfulness' in the Battle of Mag Raith in 637 A.D. (e.g. *CIH* 250.33f.). According to this Cenn Fáelad was taken for convalescence to Bricín's establishment of Túaim Drecain, where there were three schools for Latin learning, native law and poets respectively (*scol léigind ⁊ scol fénechais ⁊ scol filed*), the teachings of which Cenn Fáelad is supposed to have memorized by day and written up at night in poetic form. Failure to recognise that Túaim Drecain was a monastery (cf. Gwynn and Hadcock, 1970, 407: Tomregan) led Mac Neill (1911) and consequently Mac Cana to posit secular schools of law and poetry here as well as a unique honorific and non-monastic application of the designation *sapiens* to what Mac Cana terms a "cultivated man of the world as Cenn Fáelad is reputed to have been" (1970, 71), while Richter ignores the text itself and fantasizes that "a doctor from the school of the druids operated on him" (1988, 85). Túaim Drecain's obscurity is such that the location of Cenn Fáelad's epoch-making endeavours there instead of in a greater monastery has the ring of historical truth detected by Mac Neill rather than being the mere idealized fiction envisaged by Mac Cana. For present purposes, however, this hardly matters. Whatever the proportion of fact and fiction in this narrative, it was clearly intended as the charter for a literate monastic legal tradition applied to society as a whole and believed to combine poetic teaching and practice with ecclesiastical doctrine and techniques. It is, in fact, an aetiology of the state of

affairs described by *Uraicecht Becc*: "truth is based upon maxims and precedents and true scriptural testimonies (*for roscadaib ⁊ fásaigib ⁊ teistemnaib fíraib*) . . . Any judgement of a cleric that exists is based on the truth and entitlement of Scripture. A poet's judgement, however, is based on maxims. A ruler's judgement, however, is based on them all, on maxims and precedents and scriptural testimonies".

The story about Cenn Fáelad is thus likely to involve the projection of relevant contemporary conditions into the more distant past for authoritative justification, and this suggests that alongside the central *scol léigind* schools of law and *filedacht* or *senchus* were a common enough feature in pre-Norman Irish monasteries. The annalistic evidence just considered is corroborated by the Old Irish Triads, which single out five different monasteries as the main centres in Ireland for Latin learning, history and three branches of native law: Ross Carberry for *léigend*, Emly for *senchus*, Cloyne for *féinechas*, Cork for *bérla Féine* and Slane for *brethemnas* (Meyer, 1906, nos. 17, 15, 12, 16, 21).

11. Far from describing their learning and its transmission in the dualistic terms so beloved of modern nativists, early medieval Irish writers tend to view it as a seamless garment, so to speak. Thus the boundaries between Latin learning and jurisprudence, poetry and history are blurred, to say the least, in the relevant accounts and there is evidence for a great deal of overlap both in theory and in practice.

To begin with, expertise in two or more of these interdependent fields is sometimes ascribed to monastic types in annalistic obits, as when the Annals of Ulster record the deaths of "Ailill mac Cormaic, abbot of Slane, Latin scholar and most excellent judge (*sapiens et iudex optimus*)" in 802, of "Cú Roí mac Aldniad, abbot of Inis Clothrann and Fochlaid Midi, Latin scholar and most expert in Irish histories (*sapiens et peritissimus historiarum Scotticarum*)" in 871, of "Eochaid Úa Flannacáin, erenagh of Lis Oíged and Clúain Fíachna, master of poetry and history (*suí filidechta ⁊ senchusa*)" in 1004, and of "Flann Mainistrech, chief Latin scholar and professor of Irish history (*ardfer léigind ⁊ suí senchusa Érenn*)" in 1056. Indeed, the Annals of Tigernach are still more generous to Flann, calling him "expert of the Gael in Latin learning and history and poetry and versification (*etir léigend ⁊ senchus ⁊ filidecht ⁊ airchetal*)". The earliest historically reliable obits of poets in *AU* are "Ruman mac Colmáin, most excellent poet (*poeta optimus*)" in 747 and "Máel Mura, chief poet of Ireland (*rígfili Érenn*)" in 887. The latter can be identified as the famous Máel Mura Othna and accordingly connected with the monastery of Othain and its patron Mura. He is also called a *senchaid* or historian in a poem appended to his obit, and is accredited in the Book of Leinster with authorship of the pseudohistorical poem entitled *Can a mbunadus na nGáedel?*, 'Whence the origin of the Gael?' (*LL* 15990f.), probably the earliest extant Irish version of the biblically inspired account of the wanderings of Gáedel Glas and his descendants from Pharoah's Egypt to their promised land of Ireland. The admittedly late but often well informed Annals of the Four Masters (742; O'Donovan, 1854) describe Ruman more fully as "an expert in Latin learning, in chronology and in poetry (*saoi in eccna i ccroiṅic ⁊ i filidhecht*)" and saints' genealogies recently edited by Pádraig Ó Riain describe him as the father of two bishops, ancestor of the Síl Rumain in Trim, one of the three greatest poets in the world beside Homer and Vergil, and brother of Cormac or Colmán "bishop in Trim" (cf. Byrne, 1984, xvii-xix; Ó Riain,

1985, 126 and 177). Neither of these gentlemen, to say nothing of Eochaid Ua Flannacáin, Flann Mainistrech and their ilk, give grounds for belief in the so-called '(culturally) pagan *filid*' of pre-Norman Ireland.

Even more significant than such individual examples of the incorporation of the *fili* and his profession into the ecclesiastical network are more general assertions of the Church's input into and control over the mainstream of early medieval Irish culture. A powerful symbol of this was the tradition that the great legal compilation called *Senchus Már* was the joint work of a commission of three bishops, three kings and three poets or judges under St. Patrick's leadership, while Patrick's seventh-century biographer Muirchú deliberately singles out from the generally hostile druids and other members of the *áes dáno* a judge, Erc of Slane, and a poet, Dubthach maccu Lugair with his pupil Fíacc of Sletty, to submit willingly to the apostle's authority and accept Christianity before it was, so to speak, either profitable or popular to do so (see ch. 4, 3). The close relationship between the seven grades of the Church and the seven grades of *filid* has been demonstrated by Breatnach (1987, 81-9), and it is noteworthy that poet and priest alike were forbidden to have more than one spouse in a society otherwise characterized by a marked preference for polygamy, which monastic jurists justified with reference to the Old Testament. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1986) has recently drawn attention to the functional equivalence of saint's curse and poet's satire, and the logical conclusion of this longstanding symbiosis was the freeing of clerics and *filid* from secular courts at the Synod of Cashel in 1101 (Gwynn, 1968, 15). The 'pseudohistorical' prologue to the *Senchus Már* claims that "until Patrick came, then, pronouncement used to be granted to a trio only in Ireland, the historian (*fer comgne*) for narration and storytelling, the poet (*fer cerda*) for praising and satirizing, the judge (*breithem*) for judgement according to maxims and precedents. Since Patrick came, however, each of these pronouncements is subject to the man of the white language, i.e. of Scripture (*do fiur in bérla báin, .i. ina canóine*)" (*CIH* 342.22-5). Beryl Smalley points out that in Western Europe "the Bible was the most studied book of the middle ages. Bible study represented the highest branch of learning . . . Such knowledge was not confined to the specialist: both the language and the content of Scripture permeate medieval thought" (1952, xi). That early Christian Ireland was no exception emerges clearly from the following statement in *Míadslechta*: "so that it is identically that the grades of scriptural Latin learning and the Church (*gráda ecna ⁊ ecalsa*) correspond reciprocally to the grades of poets and landowners (*gráda file[d] ⁊ féne*), but scriptural Latin learning (*ecna*) is the mother of each of these professions so that it is out of her palm that they all drink" (*CIH* 586.27-9).

The wealth, manpower and political importance of major Irish monasteries from at least the seventh century emerge clearly and repeatedly from contemporary legal, hagiographical and other sources. This ties in with the fact that early Christian Ireland had a reasonably typical medieval western European social structure in which Church and State were inextricably linked, a typical statement to this effect being provided by the Old Irish law tract *Córus Béscnai*: "everything which did not contradict either the word of God in the Law of the letter or the conscience of Christians was sewn together into the order of judges by the Church and poets (*filid*). All the law of nature was proper, allowing for (the claims of) faith and its propriety, and (there was) sewing together of Church and State (*comúaim n-ecalsa fri túaith*) and the due of both from each other and to each other. For there are claims of

Church upon State and claims of State upon Church. The claims of State upon Church, when it is in its propriety and fair entitlement, (are) the request for rights from the Church, namely baptism, communion, hymns for the soul, mass from every church to everyone according to his proper faith with exposition of the word of God to everyone who should listen to it and fulfil it . . . The entitlement of Church from State: tithes and first-fruits and firstlings (are) the claim of the Church from its members" (*CIH* 529.1f.). The cultural implications of this interdependence are clearly expressed by the following passage from an early tract on poets: "a kingdom (*túath*) shall not be a kingdom without scholar (*ecna*), without cleric (*eclais*), without poet (*filí*), without king (*rí*) who extends contract and treaty for kingdoms. A scholar shall not be a scholar, whom Scripture does not guide aright. A cleric shall not be a cleric without mass. A king shall not be a king without substance. A poet shall not be poet without composition (*fuirmed* 'setting down') if he be of proper foundation, of the offspring of a poet. They are entitled to reward from kings and nobles who are at the head of a kingdom" (Gwynn, 1940, 31.10-7). Unambiguous statements of this kind in "law tracts of the eighth century" that allegedly "only take passing notice of the Christianization of society" (Richter, 1988, 60) surely give the lie to the statement that "an established Church of the kind that had influenced the shaping of Christianity in the Empire since the fourth century did not, therefore, have an equivalent in Ireland" (ibid.).

This and other passages represent kings and aristocrats as important patrons of the *filid*, who could obviously ply their craft either in the monasteries or among the laity in the normal fashion. The crucial question is where the class as a whole received its education, what kind of curriculum was involved and how this was related to that of other disciplines like law, history and Latin learning. Evidence has already been advanced to demonstrate the existence of schools of *ecnae* or *léigend*, of branches of law such as *brithemnas*, *féinechas* and *bélrae féne*, of *senchus* and of *filedacht* in the early Irish monasteries. The existence of secular counterparts in the pre-Norman period remains to be proved but, even if there were such schools also, the monastic provenance of the literary output in each of these fields is hardly open to doubt. Moreover, an examination of the qualifications expected in the upper reaches of these disciplines points to something like a monastic core curriculum in which they were all rooted. Thus the third highest ranking ecclesiastical scholar in *Míadslechta* was expected to be competent in poetry (*filidecht*) and history (*comgne*) as well as Latin learning (*léigend*), and Breatnach (1986, 46-7) has recently made a very strong case for identifying the Banbán responsible for writing the vernacular legal tract *Cáin Fuithirbe* around 680 A.D. with the *sapiens/scriba/fer léigind* (of Kildare?) of that name whose death in 686 A.D. is recorded in various annals and who is probably the same as the Banbannus mentioned in the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin commentary on the Catholic Epistles. Conversely the eighth- or ninth-century *Uraicecht Becc* insists upon the indispensability of poetry and Latin learning as qualifications of the highest ranking judge, the *brithem teora mbreth .i. breth féni ⁊ breth filed ⁊ breth bérla báin bias* "the judge of three judgements, namely a judgement of the *Féni*, a judgement of poets and a judgement of white language that shall be", glossed as native law (*fénechas*), poetry (*filidecht*) and Latin learning (*léigend*) respectively (*CIH* 1612.23-6, cf. 1614.32-3).

Uraicecht na Ríar demands of the *ollam* or chief poet knowledge of three hundred and fifty tales, of history (*coimgne*) and of judgement by native law (*brithemnacht*

fénechais). The first two of these recur in the preface to saga list A, while list B is introduced by a passage in which Urard mac Coise, functioning as the typical *fili*, boasts a knowledge of histories (*coimgneda*), tales (*sceóil*), items of ancient lore (*senchusa*) and the takings of Ireland (*gabála Érenn*) (ed. Mac Cana, 1980, 50). This representation of a poet fully versed in the biblically inspired scheme of invasions chimes in well with the already discussed poem on the origins of the Gael ascribed to the ninth-century *fili* Máel Mura but is less easy to square with Mac Cana's unsubstantiated claim that "until approximately the end of the eleventh century the monastic scholar was distinguished from his *fili* counterpart by his study and promotion of the 'synthetic' history which reached its fullest development in the twelfth-century compilation of *Lebor Gabála*, 'the Book of Conquest'" (1974, 138).

12. Nativist assumptions about the pre-Norman *filid* are all too often based upon the evidence and practices of post-Norman bardic poets or, worse still, upon "the most detailed description of these schools" (Richter, 1988, 183) provided in the 1722 Memoir of the Marquis of Clanricarde by Thomas O'Sullevane, who not only wrote after they had ceased to exist but is now also seriously suspected of having been a fraud and a forger of earlier records (Ó Murchadha, 1983). However, it cannot be safely assumed that the post-Norman poets represent a straightforward continuation of the attitudes and practices of the pre-Norman *filid*, particularly when there is evidence for hostility between poets and churchmen "at least as early as the fourteenth century" (Williams, 1980, 341) but nothing comparable in the pre-Norman period.

It is no surprise that these later poets only occasionally call themselves *bard* and generally prefer the more prestigious title of *file*, but the name used in the annals of the period is, as my wife Katharine Simms informs me, almost invariably *fer dána*. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries are generally recognised as a watershed in which the success of newly established continental monastic orders forced the vernacular learning of the older monasteries into an increasingly secular milieu, and it looks as if the earlier rigid distinctions between the monastically oriented *fili* and the humbler secular *bard* gradually disappeared around that time to bring into being a merged class of *fir dhána* with a major input of previously bardic personnel and practices. Gerard Murphy's (1940, 206) surmise about the 'underground' existence of bardic panegyric in pre-Norman Ireland is corroborated by an actual reference to oral composition in the Old Irish tract on poets in *Ériu* 13: "although knowledge of letters and metrics is not required of the bards, it is required of them to perceive and recognise their proper measure by ear and nature. It is thus that the free bards make their bardic poetry" (Gwynn, 1940, 43-4). Another text states clearly that the study of letters, metrics and inflections set the *fili* apart from the humbler *bard* (Thurneysen, 1891, 6) and that the poet's long course of study included grammar, numerous ogams and texts such as *Bretha Nemed* and *Auraicept na hÉicsine* (ibid., 32,36). The latter was also known as *Auraicept na nÉces* 'The Poets' Primer' and has been aptly described by Mac Cana as "a fairly typical product of Latino-Gaelic learning" (1974, 136). In the likely event that the authors of these poetic texts were *filid*, their occasional use of Latin evinces a familiarity with that language born of a monastic education. If, on the other hand, they were ecclesiastical scholars rather than *filid* proper, their very subject matter proves a deep monastic interest in and acquaintance with the education and usages of poets. Most likely, of course, they

were both. Nevertheless, some scholars have sought to distinguish between "monastic *literati* or *nua-litridi*" and "the learned *filid*" (so Mac Cana, 1971, 117, cf. 106) on the strength of a single passage (Thurneysen, 1891, 23) describing bardic metres also used by *filid* in addition to their own peculiar measures as *núachrotha* or 'new forms' because "it is *núalitridi* who discovered them". However, the other two attestations in the St. Gall glosses (5^b11, 90^b4) on Priscian make it quite clear that *núalitridi* simply meant 'recent authors' as opposed to older writers and so implies no contrast with allegedly oral *filid*.

It seems, then, that literacy was an indispensable attribute of the medieval Irish *filid*, and it should be emphasised that the attested requirement that *filid* be able to recite memorized poems and tales to aristocratic audiences is quite irrelevant to the question of oral versus written composition. There is no good evidence for the loose claim, apparently based upon a well worn passage from the Clanricarde Memoir mentioned above, that in early Christian Ireland "the recitations of genealogies and prescribed stories were learned in darkened rooms" (Richter, 1988, 20). As Oskamp has remarked, "the *fili* of this period is in no way comparable with the *scéalaighe*, the storyteller by the fireside. He is the scholar-layman who is educated in a monastery and fulfils a high position either in a royal court or in a monastic school" (1970, 14). The notion of a clear divide between ecclesiastical scholars on the one hand and high-ranking categories of the so-called 'secular' *áes dáno* such as poets or judges on the other is central to the illusion of a 'native tradition' hermetically, not to say cryogenically, sealed by its practitioners from suspicious foreign elements and innovations imported by the Church, but this purist view is untenable for the simple reason that it is seriously at variance with the evidence of the contemporary texts themselves.

This was already apparent to Rudolf Thurneysen over sixty years ago, when he observed that "very soon after the introduction of Christianity these *filid* entered into a close connection with monastic learning" (1921, 66-7) and that "the first written copies hardly came about through a monastic denizen asking a *fili* for his tales, but we should rather assume that some *filid* acquired the art of reading and writing and themselves wrote down what seemed worthy of recollection to them and presumably also their own compositions" (ibid., 72). Although mostly dismissed as uncongenial by the majority of the postwar generation of Irish scholars, this approach has recently been taken up, further developed and corroborated by Ó Corráin: "one fundamentally important point must be kept in mind in dealing with all Irish literary, legal and historical materials: they are the products of a highly trained, highly self-aware mandarin class. One must note that the worlds of native and ecclesiastical learning had merged long before the bulk of the surviving texts were redacted – a matter which is of very considerable consequence" (1986, 142). Indeed it is, and the following chapters should help to highlight various aspects of a situation radically different from that depicted by the nativist school.

CHAPTER TWO

Literary genre and narrative techniques

1. Robert Alter has recently remarked of the Old Testament that "the generic variety of this anthology is altogether remarkable, encompassing as it does historiography, fictional narratives, and much that is a mixture of the two, lists of laws, prophecy in both poetry and prose, aphoristic and reflective works, cultic and devotional poems, laments and victory hymns, love poems, genealogical tables, etiological tales, and much more" (Alter and Kermode, 1987, 12). A casual comparison of this list with the one at the beginning of the first chapter indicates considerable generic affinities between the corpus of early medieval Irish literature and the contents of the Bible. Regardless of how they arose, these and more detailed similarities to be discussed later can hardly have escaped the attention of early Irish monastic writers whose public worship and private study revolved around Scripture.

Inevitable doubts about the precise biblical text involved in many individual instances will rarely be of much moment in what follows. That being so, practical considerations, the apparent availability of Jerome's version in Ireland as early as the sixth century (cf. Loewe in Lampe, 1975, 132-3) and the early eighth-century Irish Canons' habit of quoting it (*Can. Hib.*, xv) make the Vulgate the obvious text upon which to base scriptural citations and comparisons in the present work. English translations have generally been kept as close to the Authorised Version as the Vulgate wording would allow.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, certain types of early Irish literature, notably many 'secular' sagas, are commonly regarded as virtually direct, if often clumsy, records of oral originals with a thoroughly pagan ethos, the implication being that the monastic men of letters responsible for their preservation deliberately, but not entirely successfully, sought to stifle inevitable moral disapproval of some or most of their contents in the interests of antiquarian objectivity coupled with touching romanticism. Such anachronistic altruism is a highly improbable and, given the biblical dimension, unnecessary postulate. The sweeping Old Testament narrative from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Kings, from creation to captivity, is full of gruesome and apparently unedifying happenings by any standards, but this has not prevented its assiduous cultivation by Christian seekers after deeper meanings. Tales of greed, disobedience, deceit, fratricide, incest, rape, plunder, slaughter and so forth have all been made to yield their moral message, and there

is no reason why a monastic scholar thoroughly familiar, unlike many a modern critic, with this savagely sacred material should have had any ethical or aesthetic qualms about the more ferocious and forthright features of 'native' saga and related genres.

To take a trivial enough case, the early Irish heroes' notorious habit of decapitating enemies and then keeping their heads, calcified brains or tongues as trophies for display at dinner and other gatherings almost certainly continues pagan Celtic usage as described by various classical authors (McCone, 1983, 31-2). However, the medieval Irish cannot have been affected by this consideration since they were quite unaware of their Celtic antecedents (Byrne, 1974, 144), and mere conservative inertia hardly accounts for the vigorous survival and propagation of this motif in monastic literature. Evidence that the decapitation of enemies continued to be practised in early Christian Ireland seems more to the point (McCone, 1983, 33), and there was little reason for clerics and their literary associates to be squeamish about this when, for instance, the regal paragon David had deliberately severed Goliath's head for display (1 Sam./Kgs. 17:51f.). Moreover, David presented his prospective father-in-law Saul with a bride-price of two hundred Philistine foreskins, double the number asked for (ibid. 18:25f.), while the zealous Jehu had Ahab's seventy sons murdered and their severed heads put on public show (2/4 Kgs. 10:6f.). The beheading of enemies for display would hardly, then, have struck a medieval Irish churchman as an intrinsically pagan or, as he would have put it, 'gentile' practice.

2. It has long been realized that the early history of Ireland as recounted in sources going back at least as far as the seventh and eighth centuries (Luccraid's laconic accentual poem tracing the Éoganacht genealogy back from Cú-cen-máthair in *Corp. Gen.* 199-202; a similar Leinster genealogical poem at *Corp. Gen.* 6; Nennius 13-5) fits squarely into a narrative framework derived from the central events of Genesis and Exodus (e.g. Macalister, 1938, xxvii-viii). This will be discussed in the next chapter, where it will further be argued that certain key features of the last two traditional invasions of Ireland, by the Túatha Dé Danann and sons of Míl respectively, mirror basic situations in the biblical books of Joshua and Judges. Early Christian Ireland's vast genealogical record was, of course, anchored in this scheme of invasions and through it connected to elaborate biblical genealogies such as 1 Chronicles 1-8 going back to Noah and Adam (Ó Corráin, 1985, 67-8). A comparison between this or other Old Testament genealogies and medieval Irish family trees like that of the Éoganacht in Rawl. B. 502 (*Corp. Gen.* 195-7) reveals similar political preoccupations (cf. Byrne, 1974, 144-5), the occasional insertion of brief narratives at appropriate points, and a common descending arrangement, following one branch down before returning to the main stock to pick up a collateral one and steadily narrowing the focus to the group or groups of greatest interest to the compiler. In the medieval Irish genealogies this approach alternates with the more straightforward reverse procedure of tracing a given individual's pedigree back by a simple 'A son of B son of C son of D etc.' formula (e.g. *Corp. Gen.* 197-9) comparable with Christ's ascending lineage in Luke 3:23-38. Another shared feature is a kind of testament whereby a father assigns their various destinies to his sons and their descendants: the best known biblical example is Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49, while the elaborate *Timna Chathaír Máir* (Dillon, 1962, 148f.) or the more succinct

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. The bulk of extant Old and Middle Irish verse is based on syllabic rhythms typically generated by sequences, often stanzas, of lines with a regular syllable count overall and a specific syllabic configuration for the final word, a particularly common type consisting of quatrains of heptasyllabic lines with a disyllabic cadence ($7^2\ 7^2\ 7^2\ 7^2$) or an arrangement whereby the end of the second line regularly has one or rarely two syllables more than that of the previous line ($7^x\ 7^{x+1}\ 7^x\ 7^{x+1}$). The main ornament of such poetry is rhyme between a given pair or pairs of final words, whether in contiguous lines (first with second, third with fourth) or alternate ones (second with fourth, sometimes also first with third). A rougher end-rhyme known

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

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

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

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

Do:beir dig/ con:oí ríg He brings a drink that saves a king.
Do:gní ***écht*** He performs a feat."

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

Because of a comparative shortage of monosyllables and the accentuation of polysyllables on the antepenultimate or penultimate syllable later Latin accentual poetry tended strongly towards a di- or trisyllabic cadence. This is the obvious model for Irish stress metres with a preference for such cadences, a good example being the hymn to Patrick analysed by Murphy (1961b, 4; *Thes. II* 322; but see Breatnach, 1981, for an alternative analysis). This seems to be based on two- and three-stress units ending, with two probable exceptions (*mór gein* and *Día lem*), on a di- or trisyllable, and contains plenty of linking alliterations. One might compare the short alliterative poem in *Compert Con Culainn* (par. 7) with two- and three-stress lines of 6^3 6^3 7^{1+2} 7^3 8^3 and 7^3 syllables. Intensification of two prominent features of such comparatively free structures seems to have produced the well attested regularization of a three-stress line with trisyllabic cadence. A good heavily alliterative example is provided by *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* par. 93 (*LU* 7270-80, cf. the much longer but less regular poem of this type in par. 100, *LU* 7370-7428):

Trechenn tri fothucht/ Fomórach (8^3)
nad- ndelb duine/ nduinegein (7^3)
fora ndreich duaichni/ -díulathar (8^3)
roda- ler lond/ -láthrastar. (7^3)
Lánchenn tri lorg/ línfiaclach (7^3)
ó urbél co úae/ rechtaire. (8^3)
Múad muinter cech/ cétglonnaig (8^3)
claid[b]ib tri slúag/ selgatar (7^3)
ro:selt ar borg/ mbúiredach (7^3)
bruidne Da Derga/ turchomruc. (8^3)

"Triple head, three abdomens of the Fomorians, from whom neither human form (nor) human birth may be removed on their strange countenance which the raging sea has arranged for them. A full head of three full-toothed rows from front lip to ear (as) steward [i.e. carver of food?]. Fine the following of each (man) of a hundred exploits, with swords they shall hack [modal pret., or "swords shall hack" without emendation] through the host that has descended on the noisy stronghold in the gathering of Da Derga's hostel." The apparent insistence upon a first half-line at least as long as and preferably longer than the second, while avoiding words of three or more syllables, made for a line at least six or, usually, seven syllables long and unlikely to exceed eight or nine. From this it would have been but a small step to regularization of the heptasyllabic type (7^3) and a concomitant reduction in alliteration on occasion.

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

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

As Murphy remarks, "in Irish syllabic verse, and also often in the older poetry, the last word or syllable of the *íarcomarc* ('final stanza') echoes the first word or syllable of the first line of the poem. A poem in which this echo does not occur is said to lack a *dúnad* ('conclusion')" (1961b, 43). The three stressed or otherwise rhetorically structured poetic utterances of the three red horsemen cited above and below exemplify a still more extensive correspondence, the same line (*én a meic*) being repeated both at the beginning and the end of each passage, as can also happen sometimes in rhyming syllabic verse (e.g. *Scéla Cano* ll. 73-84). Alter refers to "the general fondness of ancient Hebrew writers in all genres for so-called envelope structures (in which the conclusion somehow echoes terms or whole phrases from the beginning)" (Alter and Kermode, 1987, 621), and this is a feature able to survive translation. A particularly obvious instance is provided by the identical first and last verses of Psalm 8, and the significance of this was well appreciated by an Old Irish glossator: "as it is with praise and admiration of the Lord that this psalm begins, it is likewise, moreover, that it is concluded, even as the poets (*filid*) do among us" (Ml. 26^{b}10, cf. Murphy, 1961b, 43-4). It thus seems more than likely that this important feature of much medieval Irish poetry from at least the eighth century onwards is rooted in a tendency of biblical poetry often still apparent in the Latin version.

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

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

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

The various possibilities can be illustrated from the famous episode of the three red horsemen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. As remarked above, the third of these utters three *laíd* 'lays' of this kind, each beginning *én a meic, mór a scél* and duly marked *.r.* in the margin of *LU*. The first has already been analysed as a regular two-stress structure with binding alliteration broken only once. The second, however, seems not to go beyond a few random alliterating pairs: *én a **m**eic, **m**ór a scél, **g**erthiut **g**orthiut **r**obruth **r**íg **e**slabrae **t**ri **d**oilbthiu **f**er **f**orsaid for **d**áim, **d**ám nónbair, én a meic* "lo, o lad, great the tale, there sears you, there scorches you the great ardour of a generous king through figments of wise men on retinue, a retinue of nine, lo, o lad" (par. 34, *LU* 6879-80). The first part of the third passage is hardly marked by alliteration and seems rather to depend on a modified chiastic repetition (attribute [adj.] - head noun - verb, verb - head noun - attribute [gen.] + preposition phrase) plus a simple semantic contrast ('alive - dead'), but the conclusion is a perfectly regular two-stress poem with linking alliteration: *én a **m**eic, **m**ór a **s**cél, **s**cítha eich ima:ríadam, im:ríadam eochu Duind Tetscoraig a sídaib; ciammin bí ammin **m**airb/ **m**óra **a**irdi/ **a**irdbi sáegail/ sásad **f**íach/ **f**othad (m)**b**ran/ **b**resal **a**irlig/ **a**irlachtad **f**áebuir/ **f**erna[ib] **t**ul-bochtaib/ **t**ráthaib íar fuin,/ én a meic* "lo, o lad, great the tale, tired the horses which we ride about on, we ride about on the horses of Dond Tetscorach from the *síd*-mounds. Though we are alive, we are dead. Great (the) signs, cutting off of life, satisfying of ravens, sustenance of crows, strife of slaughter, sharpening (?) of cutting edge on shields with broken bosses in (the) hours after sunset" (par. 35, *LU* 6806-9). In this particular instance, then, the overall structure resembles a sandwich with a somewhat non-descript filling symmetrically framed by regular blocks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It can similarly be argued that the prophecies of the three red horsemen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* mesh fully with the imminent destruction to be unleashed by warlike *fían*-bands and with the view ascribing king Conaire's doom to revenge for his maternal grandsire Eochaid's devastation of the *síd*-mound of *Brí Léith* while attempting to recover his wife Étaín alias Bé-find 'white-woman' (cf. *LU* 8010-9, 6741-4). This might seem unfair but is hardly unbiblical: "visiting the inquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7, cf. Deut. 5:9). The Bible, of course, contains some famous apocalyptic equestrians with strikingly coloured mounts. Thus Zechariah "saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse (*vir ascendens super equum rufum*) . . . and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white (*equi rufi varii et albi*)" (1:8, cf. 6:2-4), but the second of the four horsemen of the apocalypse on their different coloured steeds in Revelation 6:4 seems particularly germane: "and there went out another horse that was red (*alius equus rufus*): and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another". Since this is precisely what the three reds (*tri deirg*) presage in this tale of the destruction of the appropriately named Da Derga's hostel, it seems unlikely that its monastic moulders were uninfluenced by the biblical symbolism. Indeed, the recalcitrant red horsemen are arguably a trio in prefiguration of Conaire's death at the hands of the three sons of Dond Désa otherwise known as "the three red hounds" (*tri rúad-choin*, cf. Knott, 1936, 72-4). Here too, then, *roscad* or *retoiric* appears as part and parcel of an Old Irish prose narrative in an episode probably coloured by and perhaps even partially created from scriptural imagery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

'Pagan' myth and Christian 'history'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dation of misfortune . . . This type of development is termed by us a move . . . Each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move. One tale may have several moves . . . One move may directly follow another, but they may also interweave . . . Special devices of parallelism, repetitions, etc., lead to the fact that one tale may be composed of several moves" (Propp, 1958, 92).

Some features of Propp's method have been adopted or adapted by various brands of structuralism. For instance, his notion of functions and moves has been considered applicable to a wide range of oral and literary discourse and was incorporated with some modification by Roland Barthes into his 'Introduction to the structural analysis of narratives' (1984, 79-124). Here the famous medieval Irish tale *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* will serve to illustrate some possibilities of analysis by moves (T_x = initiatory dilemma, * = resolution, a/b = bifurcation of an initiatory dilemma into two resolutions, . . . = suspension of disjunctive move until later). After a brief prologue (P) setting the scene, the initial lack in this tale (T_1) consists (a) of the simultaneous requests of the rulers of Ulster and Connacht for Mac Da Thó's peerless hound and (b) of its owner's dilemma. This is temporarily resolved by his wife's advice to offer it to both sides separately and invite them to his home on the same day to receive it. When the enemies from Ulster and Connacht arrive for a feast centring upon a magnificent pig (T_2), the question arises as to (a) who will win the hound and (b) who will carve the pig. After a series of verbal contests the Ulster hero Conall Cernach earns the privilege of carving. However, he gives the Connachtmen an insultingly small portion (T_3). In the battle begun to avenge this insult the Ulstermen are eventually victorious but the dog is slain (* for T_1a, T_2a, T_3). The dog's slayer, Fer Loga, seeks adventure (T_4) before returning home with gifts at the end of the tale. In formal terms we have:

P. T_1(a) . . . . . *
(b) . . . . . * T_2(a) . . . . . *
(b) . . . . . * T_3 . . . . . * T_4 . . . . . *

This analysis shows that the generally acknowledged excellence of this tale is due in no small measure to its structure. By resolving no less than three issues at once the great battle marks a fitting climax, while the narrative up to that point combines satisfaction at the periodic resolution of various difficulties with suspense concerning the postponed outcome of others (cf. Barthes, 1984, 117-21 on this property of disjunction). Coming as it does after a great watershed in the narrative, the Fer Loga episode appears as something of an anticlimax winding the story up but this too may have a deliberate purpose (see 12 below). That said, it must be admitted that these formalist insights have little direct bearing upon determination of meaning.

Proppian ascription of an identical underlying structure to two or more narratives with rather different surface features appears to be possible in the case of some Irish narratives, a notable application being Daniel Melia's treatment of the core of various Ulster death-tales (1978). To give a further instance, the divergent descriptions of Conaire's acquisition of the kingship in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, pars. 11-5, and the short saga *De Síl Chonairi Móir* can both be reduced to the following common set of what may for convenience be termed functions, bearing in mind the 'portmanteau' principle whereby a given function can sometimes open up into a series of subordinate functions (cf. Barthes, 1984, 102-4) : (a) death of old king,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A similar argument has recently been made regarding *Aided Con na Cerda* (*Táin*[1] ll. 540-607), the end of *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* and *Aided Cheltchair Meic Uithechair* (McCone, 1984c). Each of these narratives involves the slaying of a ferocious hound taken to embody the martial spirit. In the first the precociously warlike child Sétantae kills the hound of Culann the smith in fair combat and earns his adult identity as Cú Chulainn or 'hound of Culann', the warrior hero *par excellence*, by temporarily replacing the dead hound as protector of Culann's

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The old canonical section of *Auraicept na nÉces* describes Fénius Farsaid (clearly an eponym of the variety of Irish termed *Bélrae Féni*) in Egypt as the inventor of the Irish language (*Góedelc*) and his pupil Góedel son of Aingen son of Glúnfind son of Lámfind son of Agnoman as its eponymous first user (Ahlqvist, 1982, 47; ch. 2, 4). Allowing for an extra generation between Glúnfind and Lámfind represented by Feithiar/Etheoir (an alternative name for Góedel's father according to *Auraicept* 1,12) and for trivial fluctuation in the form of a couple of names, this is the genealogy of Glas or Góedel Glas in the Munster (115b47-9) and the first Leinster (148b47-9) poem mentioned above. This regrettably laconic verse thus makes it possible to trace Góedel's role as eponymous ancestor of the Irish (*Góedil*) and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks (*saccos veteres*) upon their asses, and wine bottles, rent and bound up (*utres vinarios scissos atque consutos*)" (Josh. 9:4). Having promised to spare the Gibeonites, the Israelites could not go back on their word after discovering their deceit, but Joshua pronounced "now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God" (9:23). Whatever its 'real' antecedents and etymology, the term Fir Bolg was undoubtedly understood by *literati* as 'men of bags/wineskins' (note *bolg* glossing Latin *uter* at Ml. 132^{c}7) and may well have been generated from this striking Old Testament episode as a means of endowing it with appropriately servile Canaanite connotations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Echtrae Chonlai is between paganism and Christianity, embodied by the druid and woman respectively, and Conlae's dilemma about giving up his world, family and friends for the promise of everlasting life is highly germane to monastic ideals.

In his famous *Expositio in canticum canticorum* (Verbraken, 1963) Gregory the Great indulges in remarkable flights of fancy to squeeze spiritual edification from the exuberantly erotic Song of Songs, and begins the following exposition of his basic approach with remarks highly germane to the notion of *immram* or *echtrae*: "after the human race was expelled from the joys of paradise, coming into that wandering of the present life it has a heart blind to spiritual understanding. If this blind heart were to be told by the divine voice 'follow God' or 'love God', as it is told in the Law, once sent abroad and cold through the torpor of unbelief it would not grasp what it heard. Therefore, the divine discourse talks to the torpid and cold soul through certain figures about things that it knows and thus secretly recommends to it a love that it does not know (par. 1) For divine sentiments are clothed in known things, by which allegories are made, and, when we recognise the outer words, we arrive at the inner meaning (par. 2). For hence it is that in this book, which is written in the Song of Songs, are set words as if of carnal love, so that the soul, freshened by familiar discourse, may wax hot and through words about lower love may be stirred to higher love. For in this book kisses are mentioned, breasts are mentioned, cheeks are mentioned, thighs are mentioned, and in these words the holy description is not to be mocked but the greater mercy of God is to be contemplated (par. 3) . . . And one should know that in this book four speaking persons are introduced, namely the groom, the bride, young women with the bride and groups of companions with the groom. For the bride is the perfect Church, the groom is the Lord, the young women with the bride are initiate souls reaching maturity through new study. Moreover, the companions of the groom are either angels, who have often come from Him to appear to men, or indeed certain perfect men in the Church, who know how to announce the truth to men. But those who are individually young women or companions, are all together the bride because they are all together the Church" (par. 10).

Thus Gregory derives a spiritual message from ostensibly unedifying externals and introduces us to a central tenet of medieval allegory and typology, namely that important women in the Bible can usually be taken to symbolize or prefigure the Church. Moreover, it appears that "the Canticle of Canticles was held in particular esteem in early Ireland among the Céli Dé. In the *Teaching of Mael Ruain* we read that 'when a person was at the point of death, or immediately after the soul had left him, the *Canticum Salomonis* was sung over him. The reason for this practice was that in that canticle is signified the union of the Church and every Christian soul - *ceangal na heaglaise agus gacha hanma Críostuidhe*'" (McNamara, 1987, 105). A nice example of this allegorical approach to women is provided by Isidore in the case of the book of Esther, "in which it is written that the same queen in the image of the Church of God snatched the people from servitude and death, and by the death of Aman, who is interpreted as iniquity, the fame of that day is transmitted to posterity (*in quo eadem regina sub figura ecclesiae Dei populum a servitute et morte eripuisse scribitur, atque interfecto Aman, qui interpretatur iniquitas, diei celebritas in posteros mittitur*)" (*Etym.* VI ii 29).

Given the Christian flavour of her message and prophecy, it can hardly be doubted that the otherworld woman in *Echtrae Chonlai* symbolizes the Church in

accordance with an allegoristic principle undoubtedly familiar to early Irish monastic men of letters. The tale revolving round Conlae is thus an allegory of the global and individual conflict between pagan iniquity and Christian virtue (druid vs. woman), the claims of this world and those of the life everlasting (Conn vs. woman). Given the ease with which Gregory and others could allegorize the most blatant erotic details concerning the women in the Song of Songs, the whiff of sex surrounding the paradise of *Immram Brain, Echtrae Chonlai* and similar texts would obviously present no problems to a medieval Irish monk familiar with the idea of using discourse about carnal love to promote its spiritual counterpart. Consequently this feature is not good evidence for a fundamentally pagan view of the otherworld rather than an allegoristically Christian one.

Furthermore, the mainspring of this narrative can be regarded as biblical through and through by virtue of constituting a deliberate inversion of the narrative of the fall in Genesis. There, of course, the serpent is the agent of sin who induces the woman to eat the forbidden fruit and tempt Adam to do likewise, the result being mortality and damnation for the human race. In *Echtrae Chonlai* by contrast the woman successfully tempts Conlae to redemption and everlasting life with the apple of immortality despite the serpentine druid's efforts to thwart her. In essence, then, *Echtrae Chonlai* is an early Irish 'paradise regained', a thoroughly Christian composition inspired by the Bible. Far from calling for the hypothesis of a significant pagan native core, this tale is a prime example of an allegorical myth or, if one prefers, a mythical allegory firmly rooted in Christian ideology. Moreover, as a narrative pertaining to the pre-Patrician 'Old Testament' it has an obvious prophetic and typological significance in relation to the coming of Christianity, as do the two great parallel poems in *Immram Brain*. In this respect it is worth noting that the idea of pre-Christian revelation beyond the confines of Israel was by no means confined to the Irish. Thus Isidore remarks of the Sybils of ancient Greece and Rome that 'of all these are brought forth poems in which they are most clearly shown to have written many things for the gentiles too concerning God and Christ (*quarum omnium carmina efferuntur in quibus de Deo et de Christo et gentibus multa scripsisse manifestissime conprobantur*)' (*Etym.* VIII viii 7).

It thus transpires that mythological, historicising, allegoristic and typological factors could be combined freely and often inextricably together in varying proportions by early Christian Irish *literati* to modify preexisting narratives and generate new ones. This overall control of an authoritative but adaptable *senchus* enabled the Church and her allies to monitor and modulate the values and institutions of the governing class as a whole, while giving scope for various political groupings, both lay and ecclesiastical, to articulate and press their own particular claims (see ch. 10). Native mythological modes of thought and expression might resonate happily with those of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and prove no less amenable to the pervasive influence of historical typology and allegory so crucial to the medieval Christian world-view. All in all, the upshot of these syncretistic trends in Ireland seems to have been a coherent ideological framework thoroughly in tune with the various spiritual and secular interests of a monastically oriented learned class whose socio-political concerns and connections extended well beyond the confines of the cloister.

That being so, the search for constituent values pertinent to the decoding of extant early Irish mytho-historical narratives will need to cover current ecclesiastical

learning and thought, including allegory and historical typology, as well as the so-called 'native' milieu of the secular norms and ideals discernible in roughly contemporaneous lay society. This dichotomy, of course, was very far from absolute. Indeed, it can only be assumed that early medieval Irish mythology and tradition, like those of other peoples (cf. 3 above and ch. 1, 3), were essentially shaped or reshaped by the social system of the time, and it has already emerged that that was basically characterised by *comúaim n-ecalsa fri túaith* or the "sewing together of Church with State" (ch. 1, 11).

CHAPTER FOUR

The law and the prophets

1. The very extent of the surviving corpus of early Irish canon and civil legal tracts in Latin and the vernacular bears ample testimony to the preoccupation of medieval Ireland's men of letters with the law, and a number of considerations suggest that at least some aspects of this legal theory and practice have roots in the pagan Celtic or even Indo-European past.

Various classical authors, mostly drawing upon the lost Celtic ethnography of the first-century B.C. Greek philosopher-cum-historian Posidonius of Apamea (Tierney, 1960), provide snippets of information about pagan Gaulish legal practice. Thus the first-century Greek geographer Strabo remarks of the druids that "it is chiefly entrusted to these to try cases of homicide . . . and when there is an abundance of these they consider that there is also abundance of the land" (IV iv 4). Furthermore, Julius Caesar claims that "they decide about almost all public and private disputes and, if any crime has been committed, a murder perpetrated, or a dispute about inheritance or boundaries exists, these judge and determine the penalties" and speaks of a national judicial assembly of Gaul's druids held annually in the central territory of the Carnutes (*de Bello Gallico* VI 13, 5-10).

From this it would appear that the pagan Celts had well developed legal institutions and already held the belief so prominent in medieval Irish sources that good judgements promote natural abundance while bad judgements lead to corresponding scarcity (see McLeod, 1982, and ch. 5,1). Accordingly it is no surprise that the early Irish law tracts have been treated as a fruitful source of comparisons with the medieval Welsh and other more ancient Indo-European legal material aimed at recovering key pagan Celtic and Indo-European legal terms, concepts and processes. Valid and valuable though such comparative studies geared to prehistory are, if conducted with the necessary rigour, they should not be used to evade the crucial issue of how the early medieval Irish jurists themselves viewed the foundations and workings of their legal system as represented in texts compiled well after the triumph of Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries. Dismissive claims that "though the Irish laws - like the Roman - have a Christian facade, their basic structure is pagan" (Binchy, 1954, 53) notwithstanding, attention to more or less contemporary conditioning factors seems worthwhile not only as an end in itself but also as a necessary prerequisite for effective research into pre-Christian antecedents.

Early Irish law recognized polygamy and several different types of wedlock with arguable Indian or other parallels suggesting pagan Celtic and Indo-European roots (e.g. Binchy, 1936, vi; Dillon, 1973, 13), and this has been seen as a symptom of juristic conservatism and independence of the Church. However, a recent study by Ó Corráin (1985b) points out that many such practices could not only be found in the Old Testament but were also less out of step than is commonly thought with the standards of an early medieval western Church still relatively indulgent towards marital practices that fell short of the Christian ideal. Whatever their ultimate origins, some of these customs betray signs of ecclesiastical influence. Moreover, although monogamy was only insisted upon for clerics and poets (e.g. *CIH* 588.26-38; Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 400-3), the Church's further aspirations could be expressed by juristic use of the unflattering Latin borrowing *adaltrach* 'adulteress' for an additional wife (cf. Power in Binchy, 1936, 84-8).

Needless to say, early Christian Irish lawyers preferred Old Testament parallels to the notion of pagan survival as a means of justifying the more questionable types of liaison. Thus the author of *Bretha Crólige* notes that "there is a dispute in Irish law as to which is more proper, whether it is a plurality of congress or one. For the chosen ones of God were in plurality of unions, so that it is not easier to condemn it than to praise it" (Binchy, 1938, 44-5). Furthermore, the right of a daughter in Irish law to inherit from her father in the absence of male descendants and keep this inheritance in the direct line by marrying a parallel cousin ultimately heir to her estate conforms to Moses' dispensation prompted by the case of Zelophehad's daughters: "if a man die, and have no son, then ye shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter" (Num. 27:8) and "every daughter, that possesseth an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy every man the inheritance of his fathers" (Num. 36:8). This and other scriptural precedents were duly recognised by Irish canon law (*Can. Hib.* XXXII, 19, cf. Ó Corráin, 1985b, 10-2).

According to Binchy the pivotal role ascribed to the king's judgements in early Irish ideology was at best a memory of the distant past: "it is clear that the king has no lawmaking powers as far as the traditional 'sacred' law is concerned. The task of 'finding', interpreting, and applying this devolved first on the Druids (again like the Brahmins in India), later on the *filid*, lit. 'seers', a learned caste who preserved and transmitted all the native lore in verse, later still on a more specialized caste (doubtless an offshoot from the *filid*) of professional jurists, the 'brehons' (Ir. *brithemain*, lit. 'makers of judgements'). In the period with which we are concerned here, these are the custodians and interpreters of the law, which, once it has been 'found', is regarded as the permanent and immutable formulation of ancestral wisdom" (1970, 16).

It will be argued later (ch. 5, 8) that the evidence for the king's judicial functions in early Christian Ireland is too extensive to be so lightly dismissed, but this contention is, of course, quite compatible with the simultaneous existence of a class of professional jurists capable of giving the king expert advice in suits brought before him and of trying others themselves. Druids may have performed such a function among the early Celts, but their judicial supremacy in first-century B.C. Gaul could presumably be an innovation connected with the recent decline of monarchy there (e.g. Caesar, *B.G.* I, 2-4 and 16(5); VI, 20; cf. de Vries, 1961, 234-5). There is no

good evidence that druids acted as judges in pre-Christian Ireland, and references in medieval Irish sources to an erstwhile poets' monopoly of legal utterance are more likely to be aetiologies of the role of the so-called "poet's judgement (*breth filed*)" consisting of *roscad* (see chs. 1,10 and 2, 6-8) in legal composition than even a dim recollection of historical fact (McCone, 1986c, 13).

All that can be usefully said on this topic is that Saint Patrick himself admits to facilitating his mission by means of payments made to kings (*regibus*) and to those "who used to judge among all the regions (*illis qui iudicabant per omnes regiones*)" in sections 53-4 of his fifth-century Confession (Hood, 1978, 33). While this might conceivably refer to druids, poets or the like in a putative judicial capacity, it seems a good deal more probable that specialised practitioners of law are intended. This evidence and the linguistically old ogam form *velitas* = Old Irish *filed* "of a poet" (cf. Thurneysen, 1946, 58) suggest that both the *brithemain* and the *filid* had already emerged as distinct professional categories prior to the advent of Christianity, when the pagan druid presumably still ruled the roost. That being so, it is hard to see how they can usefully be regarded as his more or less direct heirs (cf. ch. 1, 9), particularly when contemporary seventh- and eighth-century sources rigidly distinguish them from the still surviving, if marginalized, pagan druid (ch. 9, 12-4). The details of their institutional and cultural assimilation to the increasingly ascendant Church by the seventh century (ch. 1, 10-12) cannot now be recovered, but this contemporary symbiosis was a major concern of early Christian Irish *literati*, who devised appropriate aetiological narratives and ideological models to account for it. Regardless of what proportion of historical fact or fiction, pagan or Christian elements may have gone into them, modern scholars would do well to take these efforts and their implications seriously.

2. The eighth- or ninth-century legal tract *Uraicecht Becc* distinguishes between an upper *sóer-nemed* and lower *dóer-nemed* category of immune persons (cf. McCone, 1984d, 48-50). In addition to the landowning lords (*flaithi*) and freemen (*féini*) the former comprises clerics (*ecalsa*) and poets (*filid*), while the latter consists of "the people of every art besides (*áes cacha dána olchenae*)" (*CIH* 1593.4-10). The text goes on to enumerate those *dóer-nemid* with independent status as follows: "wrights (*saír*), blacksmiths (*gobainn*), braziers (*umaidi*), workers of precious metals (*cerda*), leeches (*legi*), judges (*brithemain*), druids (*druid*) and the people of every art besides" (ibid., 1612.4-9). The more detailed subsequent exposition introduces the "judge of three judgements" whose qualifications include Latin (1612.23-6, see ch. 1, 11), the master wright (*ollam suad sáer*) whose omnicompetence must include an ability to build churches according to the accompanying glosses (1612.27-35), the head of a monastic school (*suí litre*) with status equal to that of a petty king (1615.4-5), and his various subordinates in ecclesiastical Latin learning (*léigend*) with lower but still appreciable rank (1615.6-19). On the other hand, even a master (*ollam*) of metalwork or leechcraft does not exceed the status of a middle-ranking Latin scholar, poet, judge or wright (1613.9-16). Wrights specializing in making oratories, different types of boat, mills or artefacts of yew enjoy middle rank but combinations of two, three or all four of these can increase their status by up to double (1615.22-1616.16). Low ranking wrights include chariot-makers, house-builders, decorators, engravers and shield-coverers (1616.17-21), but two of these crafts may be combined to obtain a modest increase to the same status

as a master harpist (1616.22-4 and 31-6). Finally, the lowest independent rank of all is reserved for ring-makers, leather-workers, fullers and fishermen (1616.24-6).

This list reveals a thoroughly composite Irish *áes dáno* dominated by professions essential, although mostly by no means exclusive, to the Church. Indeed, it is followed in the *Uraicecht Becc* by a statement that most of the professions in question might be practised by clerics or their dependents as well as by laymen without prejudice to their existing status: "any profession (*dán*), then, that we have said merits independent status [lacuna?] and does not impair the free status that he has without a profession (*dán*), if he should maintain (one), whether he be in lay society (*i túaith*) or the Church (*in eclais*)" (*CIH* 1616.37-1617.4 = 2333.23-9).

Reference has already been made to patronage of poets by kings and nobles of the *túath* (end of ch. 1, 11, and Breatnach, 1987, 89-94), and the legal tract *Críth Gablach*, for example, refers to a secular kindred's dealings with king, Church and *óes cerdd* (ll. 280-2, here = *áes dáno*) as well as to poets, harpers and a judge (*éccis, cruitti* at l. 591, *brithem* at l. 595) in a king's house on the occasion of a feast.

As early medieval Ireland's largest concentrations of population, the monasteries were major centres for crafts and trades as well as scholarship, as is amply demonstrated by the impressive ecclesiastical buildings, metal artefacts and manuscripts still surviving. Thus the valuable vignettes of life in an important monastery like Kildare to be found in Cogitosus' seventh-century Latin Life of Saint Brigit include the abbot's supervision of workers and stonemasons in the provision of a millstone for the community's mill (pars. 34-6; Bollandus, 1658, 135-41) and the efforts of wrights (*artifices*) under the supreme *ollam* of their craft in Ireland (*doctor et omnium praevius artificum Hibernensium*) to repair a great door in the magnificent church with its lavish decorations of gold, silver, gems, painting and fabrics (pars. 37-8). A similar contemporary reality is reflected in a probably late ninth-century coda to the Tripartite Life of Patrick (Mulchrone, 1939, 155), which includes a judge (*brithem*), a bodyguard (*trénfer*), a singer of psalms (*salmchétlaid*), a doorkeeper (*astire*), a cook, a brewer, a charioteer, a woodcutter, three blacksmiths (*gobainn*), three metalworkers (*cerda*) and three seamstresses in the household of the saint and his successors in the Armagh abbacy.

Evidence for monastic schools of law, history and poetry as well as Latin learning has already been given (ch. 1, 10-11), and there is no shortage in hagiographical material of prototypes for the practice of medicine and metalwork in a monastic context. Typical figures of this ilk are bishop Assicus alias Tassach, Patrick's bronzesmith (*faber aereus*) responsible for making various ecclesiastical items, in Tírechán 22(1) (Bieler, 1979, 140, cf. 252 and 211), Saint Brigit's chief smith (*prímcherd*) bishop Conláed (Stokes, 1905, 128), the saintly leech (*lieig*) Áed mac Bricc (e.g. *Bethu Brigte* ll. 270-1) and that gifted healer, metalworker and scribe Saint Daig of Inishkeen (see ch. 7, 2). Indeed, glosses on *Félire Óengusso* Aug. 18 mention "the three chief smiths of Ireland (*tri prímcherda Hérenn*), namely Tassach with Patrick and Conláed with Brigit and Daig with Cíarán, three bishops they" and further claim that Saint Cíarán of Saigir's chief smith (*prímcherd*) Daig was a blacksmith (*goba*), metalworker (*cerd*), and scribe (*scríbnid*) who "made three hundred bells and three hundred croziers and three hundred gospels" (Stokes, 1905, 186). Also worth noting is the *AU* obit for the year 1110 of "Ferdomnach Dall, *fer léiginn* of Kildare", whom an interlinear gloss further describes as a "master harpist (*suí cruitirechta*)".

As relatively compact and privileged religious communities of clerics, scholars, lawyers, poets, artisans, musicians and so on within various larger territories under secular control, early Ireland's monasteries could readily be compared with and modelled upon the levitical cities and cities of refuge (*urbes fugitivorum*), the setting aside of which amidst the different tribes of Israel is described in the Pentateuch (e.g. Num. 35) and Joshua (20 and 21). As Ó Corráin has recently demonstrated at length (1987, 296-307), the concept of the monastic *civitas refugii* or *cathair attaig* "city of refuge" with levitical connotations drawn from the Old Testament is not only well developed in early Irish canon and vernacular law but is also applied as early as the seventh century by Cogitosus and the Book of the Angel to the great churches of Kildare and Armagh.

In a slightly earlier article a cogent general argument has been made in support of the revolutionary contention "that a large party in the Irish church in the seventh and eighth centuries consciously conceived of the mandarin caste of churchmen, scholars, jurists, canon lawyers, historians and poets, to which they belonged, as priests and levites in the strict Old Testament sense of these terms" (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 394). As the discussion there makes clear by means of appropriate references (ibid., 394-6), in the Bible this is represented as a hereditary class tracing descent from Levi, the priesthood being reserved specifically for Aaron's lineage amongst them. Consecrated to the service of God, the tribe of Levi did not share in the general division of the land among the other twelve tribes, being allocated special cities and their environs along with tithes, firstlings, first fruits and sacrificial offerings from which to live instead. These sources of ecclesiastical income are duly stressed in the early Irish legal tracts (ibid., 406-12; cf. ch. 1, 11), and in his edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar* Breatnach has discussed the importance of inheritance from father to son to certain professions, especially that of poet or *fili* (1987, 94-8). Thus, according to par. 4 of the text, "if he be not the son of a poet, however, or a grandson (*manip mac filed, immurgu, nó aue*) only half honour-price goes to him, as Irish law says: only half honour-price goes to sages if it is not to a family (of sages) that they are born (*ní tét acht lethdíre do suídib, manip do chlaind genatar*)" (ibid., 104), while a *Bretha Nemed* tract states "for he who is not the child of a noble, or a poet, or a learned churchman (*ar nadbi clann airech, nó filed, nó ecnaí*) sues only for half honour-price until he serve learning doubly" (ibid., 46).

1 Chronicles is especially rich in details about the various levitical functions in the royal period. Thus we find particular families of them designated doorkeepers (*ianitores*, 9:17f.), storekeepers and cooks (9:28f.), singers and musicians (*cantores*, 15:16f.), recorders and glorifiers of God's deeds (16:4), superintendents and judges (*praepositorum autem et iudicum*, 23:4), scribes (24:6), treasurers (26:20f.), as well as individuals charged with prophecy in song or to the accompaniment of a harp (15:22, 25:3). 2 Chronicles describes the adornment of the temple by carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, braziers and workers in gold and silver (24:12-4) as well as restoration work by carpenters and masons (*artificibus et cementariis*) under the supervision of Levites (34:10f.). Moreover, we are told that king Jehosaphat revived the fear of God in his subjects by sending out princes, Levites and priests who "taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord, and went about through all the cities of Judah and taught the people" (*docebantque in Iuda habentes librum legis Domini et circuibant cunctas urbes Iuda atque erudiebant populum*, 17:9).

There was, then, no lack of Old Testament analogues for a wide ranging and meticulously subdivided bipartite class of clergy and 'paraclerics', so to speak, capable of functioning either in their own separate communities or in society at large under its king as occasion demanded. Old Irish legal glosses seeking to justify a particular practice display a clear awareness of the levitical status of judges by claiming that "the People of God had ten judges in the ten principal cities of refuge (*bátar .x. mbreithemain la túaith nDé isna .x. prímchathrachaib ataig*)" (Ó Corráin, 1987, 300), and a good deal of evidence has been adduced to show that "in laying down the rules governing the priesthood, the Irish canonists follow the rules of the Pentateuch very closely" (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 396-9). Poets, clerics and, apparently, monastic tenants were distinguished from the laity in general by a requirement of monogamy and sexual abstinence at appropriate points in the Church calendar (ibid., 400-4). Thus a well known short Old Irish narrative from the early ninth-century Book of Armagh has Patrick seeking to implement the prescription of 1 Timothy 3:2 that "a bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife (*oportet ergo episcopum inreprehensibilem ese unius uxoris virum*)" by appointing a "free man of good family without defect, without blemish . . . a man of one wife to whom has been born only one child" as first bishop of Leinster and finding a poet to fit the bill (Bieler, 1979, 176). This brief tale clearly implies a close relationship between the two orders, as do the close parallelism between poetic and ecclesiastical grades, poet's satire and saint's curse discussed earlier (ch. 1, 11). Moreover, Leviticus (21:17f.) explicitly forbids physical blemish (*macula*) in the case of a priest, and "it is evident that the legal prescriptions which govern the poet's married life derive directly from canonistic thinking and if one may judge by the terminology used, from the Apostolic Canons read in the light of Leviticus" (Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen, 1984, 403).

Such considerations point to the following conclusion: "there was, it seems, a 'tribe of the church' with differing orders, grades and functions; it was consciously modelled on the tribe of Levi, it formed a network of interlocking jurisdictions within and among the local kingdoms of early Ireland - and these kingdoms could be seen now as the tribes of Israel, now as the kingdom of David and Solomon" (ibid., 405). If so, this background should be reflected in aetiological narratives about the establishment of the law and learned class or *áes dáno* appropriate to early Christian Ireland.

3. Tírechán represents Patrick as fasting for forty days and forty nights after the fashion of Moses, Elijah and Christ (*Moysaicam tenens disciplinam et Heliacam et Christianam*, 38(1)). Muirchú too likens certain of the saint's actions explicitly to those of Christ (I 19, 2) or Moses (II 5, 1) and implicitly to those of Elijah (I 20, 9-13, cf. ch. 2, 3), with whom he shares a penchant for self-fulfilling predictions about the demise of recalcitrant monarchs' dynasties (e.g. I 21, 2 and 1/3 Kgs. 21:21). Further striking similarities to Moses are alleged by the Supplementary Notes to Tírechán (Bieler, 1979, 165). The national apostle thus merits comparison not only with the greatest lawgiver and prophet of the Old Testament but also, as instrument of the Irish people's salvation, with the Saviour of mankind himself, whose own status as supreme teacher and prophet in the New Testament was given due typological emphasis through association with Moses and Elijah (e.g. Matth. 17:3f., Heb. 3:1f.). Indeed the Irish Canons make the commonplace allegorical and

typological claim that "Aaron represented the supreme priest, namely the bishop, and his sons presaged the figure of priests (*prespiterorum*), but Moses intimated the figure of Christ" (*Can. Hib.* I, 3).

In Muirchú's account the pagan nobility and men of art surrounding king Lóegaire of Tara are generally hostile to Patrick's mission, and reluctant conversion of the monarch and many of his followers (I 21) is only brought about after considerable displays of strength by the saint. However, there are two notable exceptions to this pattern of resistance, namely Erc mac Dego (I 17, 3) and Dubthach maccu Lugair accompanied by his young pupil Fíacc (I 19, 3-4), each of whom on separate occasions alone of a large company rose as a mark of respect before Patrick to accept the faith and the saint's blessing.

Erc, "whose remains are now adored in that monastery which is called Slane", is identified as the founder of that famous centre for *brethemnas* 'judgement' in the early period (see end of ch.1, 10), and it comes as no surprise that he himself was accordingly regarded as Patrick's judge. Thus the catalogue of members of Patrick's household at the end of the Tripartite Life includes "bishop Erc, his judge (*a breithem*)", and there seems no reason to doubt that this tradition was already current in the seventh century, when Muirchú wrote, as can be proved with reference to Patrick's smith Tassach in the same list (see 2 above). Dubthach maccu Lugair, on the other hand, was a famous *fili* traditionally associated with the Uí Cheinnselaig of South Leinster (McCone, 1986b, 29-31) and is explicitly called a "most excellent poet (*poetam optimum*)" by Muirchú.

It has already been demonstrated that among those professions of the *áes dáno* regarded as having pre-Christian roots particular importance attached to the *fili* (whose functions could subsume those of the *senchaid*) and the *brithem* in the monastic literature (ch. 1, 10-11). That being so, as Thurneysen saw in Dubthach's case (1921, 67), Muirchú's account is to be seen as an aetiology ascribing the privileged status of these two callings to their particularly close and early association with the Church. As has been pointed out by Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen (1984, 389-90), Muirchú's statement "and he believed first on that day in God and it was reckoned to him for justice (*crediditque primus in illa die Deo et repputatum est ei ad iustitiam*)" regarding Dubthach is a close echo of Genesis 15:6 about Abraham (*credidit Domino et reputatum est ei ad iustitiam*), which is cited by Saint Paul (Rom. 4:3) as part of an argument for justification by faith rather than the law. Indeed, this quotation may well be a cue drawing attention to a context containing the famous Pauline dictum echoed in the title of this chapter: "but now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested being witnessed by the law and the prophets (*nunc autem sine lege iustitia Dei manifestata est testificata a lege et prophetis*)" (Rom. 3:21 - cf. the role of Moses and Elijah as witnesses of Christ's transfiguration in Matth. 17:2-3). It is probably, then, in accordance with this scheme that Muirchú represents a lawyer, Erc, and a prophet, Dubthach, as the first witnesses to the new faith brought by Patrick, the implication surely being that pre-Patrician law and poetry were related to the Christian dispensation in Ireland in much the same way as the law and the prophets of the Old Testament were to the New Testament in the Bible.

Moreover, this pattern of faithful individuals standing out from a larger company of non-believers might be compared with Christ's call of a disciple like Matthew (Matth. 9:9-10) alias Levi (Mark 2:14-5, Luke 6:27-9) or, indeed, with the

inauguration of the Levites as a tribe devoted to God's service by responding to Moses' plea "if anyone is of the Lord let him be joined to me" (Ex. 32:26) and helping God's agent to suppress the worship of the golden calf.

Since the trio of Patrick, Dubthach and Lóegaire is at the heart of further evolved juristic accounts of the establishment of the current system of Irish law under the saint's auspices, it seems desirable to offer a brief summary and some elaboration of points made in greater detail elsewhere regarding the early genesis of this potent syncretistic myth (McCone, 1982, 143-4; 1984, 321-3; 1984b, 54-5).

It is tolerably clear from Muirchú's prologue that his Life of Saint Patrick was written at Áed of Sletty's prompting in order to provide Armagh with a counter to the claims recently made by Cogitosus for Kildare. Indeed, the expansionist aspirations of his Kildare neighbours obviously alarmed Áed sufficiently for him to seek protection by submitting his monastery to Armagh during the abbacy of Ségéne, i.e. between 661 and 688 A.D. Since Tírechán and Muirchú both deliberately bring Sletty's founder Fíacc into contact with Patrick, it seems that they wrote after Áed's action. Indeed, the otherwise strange appearance of a poet like Dubthach associated with the bitterly hostile Laigin at the court of an Uí Néill king of Tara was presumably an invention of Muirchú's in order to give the newly allied Áed's monastery a plug in the person of Dubthach's alleged pupil, the young Fíacc, whose subsequent foundation of Sletty is duly emphasised by the hagiographer.

Tírechán's reference to "most recent plagues (*mortalitates novissimas*)" (25,2) suggests that he wrote within a few years of the recurrent plague known as *Buide Conaill* that afflicted Ireland from 664-8 A.D. (e.g. *AU*). Since he has king Lóegaire remain a pagan (12) rather than becoming a reluctant convert to Christianity as in Muirchú's dramatic version, which rapidly became the standard account, Tírechán seems likely to have written either before or at about the same time as Muirchú. The most probable explanation for the tradition of Lóegaire's conversion not yet being in circulation when Tírechán wrote would be that the imaginative Muirchú invented it as part of a representation of the king that owed a good deal to those biblical despots Nebuchadnezzar, Darius and Herod (cf. ch. 2, 3).

As Liam Breatnach has shown in an important recent study (1986), the fragmentarily preserved legal tract *Cáin Fuithirbe*, the composition of which can be confidently dated within a couple of years or so of 680 on the strength of various fairly minor figures named in connection with its promulgation, contained references to the high king's conflict with Patrick and ultimate conversion that are presumably derived from Muirchú. That being so, we may assume that Sletty's submission to Armagh took place relatively early in Ségéne's long abbacy and that Muirchú and Tírechán produced their broadly complementary works in the Armagh interest in the 670s.

The main historical axis of Muirchú's work is provided by Patrick and Lóegaire at Tara, whose roles are explicitly and allusively likened to those of Christ and Herod in Jerusalem in the Gospels but given typological depth by additional comparisons with Old Testament figures. This scheme is obviously conditioned by the synthetic historical approach to Irish history as a microcosm of Christian world history centred on the coming of the faith (ch. 3, 9). The roles of Erc and Dubthach as representatives of the pre-Christian law and prophets bearing witness to the new dispensation are as yet relatively minor, but that of Dubthach in particular soon underwent major expansion in legal circles.