Pagan and Christian Dichotomy in Early Irish Literature

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Abstract:

Medieval Irish literature has been the object of much attention since the end of the nineteenth century, particularly the secular genres, due to their supposed origin in the pre-Christian oral tradition. The academic study on the subject has gone through several theories keen on reconstructing the pagan tradition, usually based on the view that it was kept intact in the extant literature. However, studies in the last few decades revealed evidence that Irish medieval society was already deeply connected with Christianity and that a powerful monastic tradition had control over any material used for the writing of the sagas. This study intends to analyze how the monastic literary endeavor dealt with a native tradition with pagan roots in order to fit the Christian present, going from the same logic of transition observed in the Old and New Testament to links between secular and hagiographical texts.

Keywords: Irish, Christian, Pagan.

Resumo:

A literatura irlandesa medieval tem sido objecto de atenção desde o final do séc. XIX, particularmente os géneros seculares, devido à sua suposta origem na tradição oral pré Cristã. O estudo académico do assunto passou por diversas teorias apostadas em reconstruir a tradição pagã, normalmente baseadas na interpretação de que esta se teria mantido intacta na literatura sobrevivente. No entanto, os estudos nas últimas décadas revelaram indícios de que a sociedade medieval irlandesa estava já profundamente ligada ao cristianismo e que uma poderosa tradição monástica tinha controlo sobre qualquer material usado para a escrita das sagas. Este estudo pretende analisar como o esforço literário monástico lidou com uma tradição nativa com raízes pagãs de forma a enquadrar-se no presente cristão, indo desde a mesma lógica de transição observada no Novo e Velho Testamento até ligações entre textos seculares e hagiográficos.

Palavras-Chave: Irlandês, Cristão, Pagão.

Introduction.

Early Christian Ireland produced by far the most extensive corpus of vernacular literature, besides a very substantial collection of Latin literature. A wide variety of genres such as liturgy, hagiography, annals, legal tracts, genealogy, grammar, topography, etymology, gnomic poetry, eulogy, prophecy, voyage narrative, history and saga flourished in the pre-Norman period (McCone, 1990: 1). Notwithstanding, from all these genres, most of the attention has been focused on the sagas[1], due to the fostered idea since the late nineteenth-century that the sagas provided an almost unchanged record of Celtic pagan mythology and pre-Christian society. However, the continuous study of these so-called secular genres of early Irish literature has demonstrated of late that there is more to them than simple preservation of a pagan past.

Up until the early decades of the second half of the twentieth century, the most influential scholarly approach to early Irish literature was the one aptly dubbed "nativist" by James Carney (1955). It was a generalized view based on the notion that early Irish literature was mainly the product of an oral pre-Christian tradition of which the written versions were nothing more than mere records, impoverished in comparison with their oral originals, despite being produced under the auspice of Christianity. The contents of the stories would be almost unchanged in relation to their oral counterparts due to a romantic approach from the clerics who copied them down, keen on preserving their own native traditions. Thus, the pagan nature of the tales was taken for granted, and studies imbued them with pagan meaning and symbolism. From this point of view, the only indicators of clerical influence on the texts would be extra-textual elements such as the colophon in Latin[2] preceding the Book of Leinster recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge[3]* or strategies of euhemerization of ancient pagan deities, as the Tuatha Dé Danann[4] are claimed to be.

The consequence of this approach was that literary criticism of early Irish sagas became mainly focused on attempts to reconstitute oral versions of the tales. An authentic "hunt" for Celtic myth and meaning was generated, in conjunction with the interpretation that the sagas provided a "window on the iron age" of Celtic society[5]. Furthermore, such a search emptied the texts themselves of intentional meaning by disregarding any possible

intellectual aims and literary art that the scribes responsible by the texts might have had and seeing them as hardly more than mindless and clumsy duplicators of an oral original.

James Carney, together with Rudolf Thurneysen (1921), was one of the first (and at the time isolated) critics to nativist theories, due to the realization that Irish sagas, even if they did owe much of their content to an oral tradition rooted in paganism, had a most visible imprint of monastic thought. However, up until thirty years ago nativist theories were still highly influential due to the work of highly regarded scholars such as Proinsias Mac Cana, Myles Dillon, D. A. Binchy or Kenneth Jackson. Nevertheless, criticism to nativist theories gained strength from the 1950s onward, due to a progressive concern with the discrepancy shown by a pre-Christian tradition of which the extant written versions were produced without a doubt in monasteries, under Christian religious and social power. The on-going study of Irish texts eventually provided further insight into Irish post-Patrician and pre-Norman society, literature and law. Scholars such as Donchadh Ó Corráin (1986), Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1977) and Liam Breatnach (1987) came to realize that in early medieval Ireland, monastic institutions were already deeply rooted in Irish society and even political interests were already entwined with a monastic hold over the past, reshaped in accordance to the concerns and context of the present. Moreover, in-depth studies of the sagas revealed that the so-called "secular" literature was in itself a reflection of this state of affairs. Even if it makes use of elements of native tradition, it seems to be aimed at addressing its contemporary context through a careful and thoughtful literary composition. It comes as the result of monastic learning, which manipulates the old tradition into becoming a disguised contemporaneous literary product.

In 1990, and as a result of a significant amount of accumulated piecemeal of articles on the subject, Kim McCone, in his *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* issued what can stand as one of the most notable works rebuking archaic notions around the study of early Irish literature. The work strongly demonstrated the flaws of nativist positions in face of the overwhelming evidence against its arguments, visible in the Irish corpus itself, and testified to the equally sophisticated literary treatment given to "secular" genres, exemplified in the texts themselves rather than in oral reconstructions. McCone also demonstrated that, even if reminiscent of the pagan past, early Irish literature preserved the "secular" genres due to an approach to native tradition

that was not simply liberal or originating from an antiquarian interest, but had monastic, social and political interests behind it. *Pagan Past* showed that the secular genres were highly elaborated literary works which were strongly entwined with the ecclesiastical genres and with contemporaneous early Christian Irish society, and marked a standard for rigorous research in studying early Irish literature and in keeping attention to the details as given in every textual source. Posterior works such as 1997's *Conversing with Angels and Ancients* from Joseph F. Nagy further demonstrated the ideology behind the writing of secular genres by pointing the links between the latter and hagiographical works, and showing that this literary endeavor established a bridge between the pagan past and Christian present which goes into accord with Christian tenets, rather than written records of a dying pagan tradition elaborated by mindless scribes.

The work of McCone, Nagy, Ó Corráin, Ó Cathasaigh and others represent a second generation of scholarly critique, which arose as a reaction to nativist theories based on methodologies used for myth analysis such as the tripartite system of Georges Dumézil or the structural system of Lévi-Strauss. This school of thought does not claim the absence of Indo-European traits necessarily, it just asserts that medieval Irish literature and culture have their own characteristics and functions, which go much farther than simply continuing an Indo-European religious and poetic tradition. Such a conclusion comes as the result of progressively looking more into the texts themselves, not only into the secular ones but into the Irish medieval corpus in its entirety. More in-depth readings revealed that neglecting the reading of the texts for the texts themselves created misconceptions about the nature of oral transmission and the cultural context where the texts originated. In other words, the latest approaches are the result of continuous scholarship around an extensive multi-layered corpus of literature, complemented by a better understanding of what the corpus can offer as well as of its limitations, which progressively lead to a better comprehension of its nature.

Taking advantage of the better knowledge and insight gained in the last decades regarding the study of early Irish literature, the present discussion is concerned with analyzing the strategy the ecclesiastical authors used for dealing with an old pagan tradition which despite the Church's efforts, was probably rooted in Irish culture, and as such, could not simply be eliminated or the Church would risk an atmosphere of antagonism that would not help the spreading of its influence over Irish society. In other

words, the purpose is to inquire how the Church, bent on introducing and maintaining Christian ideology in Irish medieval society, produced a secular literature which portrayed elements of an old oral tradition based in pagan times, while still making it acceptable in a Christianized culture.

1. Poets and Pagans in Early Christian Ireland.

Before we advance towards the main topic, two major factors which are determinative for this question, but are also a motive for some confusion, must be clarified. The first is concerned with the *filid*, the most prestigious class of Irish poets in both pre-Christian and Christian Irish society and with the role they played in oral tradition. The second is related with the bands of warriors that are portrayed in the sagas as figures of the pagan past, but that still existed in the margins of Christian Irish society: the *fían*.

The *filid* were the motive for much speculation up until the last decades, having been considered as the successors of the druids in the maintenance of a priestly pagan function and in having control of pagan lore, which they would spread through oral performance. This class of poets would be the one reaching a compromise with the Church which constrained the latter to produce an almost unchanged written reproduction of the pagan originals. However, the scholarly debate over this question in the last decades lead to the uncovering of evidence from monastic sources that show the *filid* as being far from representing paganism in early Christian Ireland. A myriad of annals and law tracts such as the Old Irish *Míadslechta*[6] tracts, *Annála Uladh*[7], *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann*[8], the *Senchas Már*[9], the *Uraicecht na Ríar*[10] or *Córus Béscnai*[11], to name a few, attest to the proliferation of monasteries and a connection between the *filid* and the Church, probably the product of an early alliance when Christianity first arrived in Ireland. Such connection resulted in a monastically controlled Irish society where the poets were themselves *literati*, or in other words, the product of monastic learning. In fact, from what can be extracted from the aforementioned sources, the *filid* were an extension of monastic hegemony.

The structure of Irish kingdoms was supported in several aspects by other classes of monastic provenance, such as the scholars and the clerics, but by the poets as well. All

these extensions were in conjugation with the king and with the nobility of a kingdom, and these would act as the patrons of the *filid*, who would exert an influence upon culture in accordance with their monastic learning, at least among the courts, and subsequently in the elite of society. In other words, the *filid* became the oral branch of monastic and literate learning, continuing the tradition of oral performance, but now bearing the version of Irish native lore as seen through the lenses of monastic literate learning. Thus, both the written and the oral tradition would be in accordance with the canon established by the Church, whether derivative of pre-Christian tradition or not.

With regard to the *fían*, we must first clarify exactly who they were, and what was the stand of the Church on them. One may associate them with Finn mac Cumhaill and the *fíannaigecht* (the stories of the *fianna* of which the Fenian cycle is composed). The lifestyle of the so-called *fíanna* of Finn mac Cumhaill, as is portrayed on the Fenian cycle, can be reviewed in the massive *Acallam na Senórach*[12], where the dialogue between old *fíanna* members Caílte and Oísin with Saint Patrick, besides the telling of Fenian narratives, also stresses the differences between the pagan lifestyle showcased by the stories of the *fíanna* and the need for society to now integrate the new Christian values which go against many traits that characterized such lifestyle. In the Ulster cycle[13], the descriptions of the way of life of the Ulster warriors also fit with the description of the *fían*, with the early education and growing up of Cú Chulainn providing an excellent example of the initiation one would expect of a *fénnid*.

Despite the probable popularity of their literary counterparts, the contemporary *fían* of early Christian Irish society were seen in a considerably different light. Their status was one of excommunicated by the Church due to their constitution in organized groups which acted in accordance to the old heathen ways. Every young male who arrived at the age where fosterage had ended, but still could not inherit the lands of his father, would most probably enroll in the *fían* until reaching a mature age where landowning and proper military service for the *túath* could be allowed, at which point he would become a proper member of mainstream society (McCone, 1990: 203-211). To summarize, as it is stated in *Tecosca Cormaic*[14]: "fénnid cách co trebad", trans: "everyone is a roving warrior till he takes up husbandry"[15] (Meyer, 1909: 46,47; line 31.1). Being it so, a *fénnid* would often be from a high class of society, such as the son of a king, enrolled in the *fían* until he could fulfill his role in society, inherited from his father along with territory. Although

it is a work of a literary and fictional nature, this seems to be reflected in the *Acallam na Senórach*, when Cáilte makes a list of the members of his current *fían* band (Stokes, 1900: 9-10). Attempts at excluding a group from main society composed by the offspring of Irish upper classes may seem dangerous to what would concern the Church's interests, especially since temporary membership of the *fían* seemed to be a common phase in Irish society's structure. However, we must not forget, that, at least for the time they were among the ranks of the *fían*, these youngsters did not have possession of any territorial property. Moreover, the reason for the (at least temporary) exclusion from society and the excommunication by the Church is due to the *fían* being *díbergaig* (brigands) organized in groups of mostly young men aged roughly 14 to 20 years of age, who engaged in warfare activities, raiding, wild hunting and sexual promiscuity, reflecting the activities of the *fíanna* in their literary versions as presented in the Fenian cycle, reminiscent of a heroic past in pagan times, but now considered disrespectable in the Christian present.

We can observe an example of the despise the Church had for the *fían*, and of the propaganda against them, in ecclesiastical law tracts as the aforementioned *Córus Béscnai*, which differentiates between different types of feasts and mentions *geinti* (pagans) as present in the feasts of the *fían*, considered as "devilish feasts" (Binchy, 1978: lines 524.18-526.19). Moreover, the *fían* had "satellites" composed by other elements in Irish society who were also targets for being considered pagans by the Church, making the *fían* an even more obvious target for ecclesiastical loathing: "Early Irish clerical condemnations frequently associate certain other categories of person, notably the druid (*druí*) and satirist (*cáinte*), with *fían*-members alias *díberga*(*ig*)" (McCone, 1990: 220). Elements as the satirists and druids would most commonly be among the *fían* because the latter would provide the perfect niche for them in Irish society, due to their excommunicated nature. Despite Irish pre-Christian society having its own characteristics (as any), it was still of Indo-European descent and its structure, martial traditions, behavioral patterns and pre-Christian religion can be traced to Indo-European roots as can be evidenced by comparative studies of Indo-European societies. The *fían* in pre-Norman Irish society would have been the most perfectly intact example of Ireland's Indo-European heritage, and being it so, the most obvious sect for including pagan priests. Druids and satirists were obviously marginal groups outside the sphere of Christian influence, and their association with the *fían* was a further argument for the Church to

consider them as a symbol of pagan resistance in Irish society, especially when their wild, raiding and murderous lifestyle, besides reflecting the past pagan way of life, is associated with the former holders of religious and spiritual pagan practices. Nevertheless, even though there is certainty that pagan groups, as evidenced by the existence of the *fían* and druids, had a presence in pre-Norman Ireland, the truth is that it was Christianity which had the upper-hand and major control of its mainstream society, as can be attested by the triumphalist tone in the assertion of Christianity's total victory in Ireland stated in *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé*[16]:

> 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.
>
> (*apud* McCone, 1990: 21)

Being a social stage of development rooted in Irish society's traditional organization meant that the Church had to tolerate the existence of the *fían*, since they constituted a basic social institution in Ireland, necessary for the brought up of young male men and for a convenient removal of their possible juvenile wildness from mainstream society until they would be mature enough for returning to the *túath* as married land-owners. However, it does not mean that the Church had to give them a positive image through their own controlled medium of transmission: the written word. Nevertheless, the secular genres seem to do so, while purely ecclesiastical texts seem to evidence aversion. If the *fían* were excommunicated by the Church, it seems curious that they are frequently portrayed in the sagas as central characters, portrayed in a heroic fashion. This irregularity used to be pointed out as an argument for the supposed conservation of the pagan nature of the sagas, even if the extant versions were written under the wing of Christianity. We are then faced with contradictions leading to several questions, some of which this study proposes to answer. Perhaps the answer lies in the

pagan past the literary images of the *fían* represent and in the way the Christian present evokes them through the written medium.

2. Pagan and Christian Dichotomy.

2.1. The Druid Dichotomy.

The way a pagan lifestyle reflecting the one characteristic of the so much despised *fían* is portrayed in the sagas may seem contradictory. In both the Fenian and Ulster cycles it is depicted as a heroic and noble way of life, guided by a warrior code of honour which awards grand feats of war with prestige, where killing is trifling and sexual promiscuity is common. Still, none of these traits seems to have an explicit ecclesiastical reproach somehow inserted into the main narratives.

An argument could be given that the portrait of heroes in the extant pre-Norman literature is kept unassociated with the Church much disapproved *fían* by referring to them using different terms for classifying a warrior other than *fénnid*: "Because of well documented clerical disapproval of this institution [the *fían*] […] other less socially specific terms for the career warrior such as *láech* "hero", *trén-fer* "strong-man, bodyguard", *cath-míl* "battle champion" are often preferred in the extant pre-Norman literature" (McCone, 1990: 125). However, the use of other terms does not change the characterization of these heroes as being clearly akin to the real *fían*, and being it so, the issue of contradiction can still be raised. The same apparent contradiction is found in the portrayal of druids in these same cycles. In the *Táin bó Cúailgne*, for example (O'Rahilly, 1976: lines 3428-9), druids are described as being advisors to kings and having immense political power and privilege: "The basic issue here can be illustrated by the well known motif that the men of Ulster were forbidden to speak except in reply to their king Conchobar, while Conchobar himself could only speak in reply to one of his three druids" (McCone, 1990: 231). Adding to that, druids are frequently portrayed as being an aid to the heroes and as worthy relevant characters, raising the question on why a monastic written tradition would present them as such: "The unrepentant druid's representation as a devilish anti-Christian reprobate worthy of death from the coming of Patrick onwards inevitably raises the question as to why monastic writers were prepared to represent him

as an awesome figure of great dignity in sagas and other narratives set in the pre-Patrician past." (McCone, 1990: 229). Even if the written vernacular tradition used pre-Christian native sources, it seems strange it would be so tolerant to positive portrayals of pagan classes which, as we have seen, were abhorred and denied by the Church as valid members of society:

> Even if this should be a literary survival of the pagan druid's exalted pre-Christian status as his king's social equal or even slight superior, one must still ask why such a tradition was deliberately perpetuated in writing by the representatives of a monastic interest otherwise demonstrably determined to undermine the position of actual druids.
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> (McCone, 1990: 231).

What could explain such contradiction if there is evidence of the Church's disapproval of the *fían* and druids? And since it is rather clear that the extant literature is of monastic provenance, why not modify the role of druids in the sagas so that it would be in accordance to the bad imagery the Church attributed to them? Mac Cana and followers of a nativist perspective would argue that this is the result of the uncritical preservation of Celtic pagan traditions, reflecting the druids' high status as the priests of the old religion (Mac Cana, 1983: 14). But this would mean that monastic propaganda was going against itself in what the extant secular literature is concerned: "If so, the clerks responsible for propagating this favourable image while inveighing against the surviving druid's diabolical paganism can only have been stupid, schizophrenic or both" (McCone, 1990: 230). Perhaps it is not a contradiction at all, if we pay attention to Christianity's own tradition and the way the Church managed the transition from the old priestly functions held by the druids to the Christian clergy. One example lies in the Bible, specifically on how the Jewish priests portrayed in the Old Testament are seen as the rightful holders of religious priesthood as a pre-figuration of their Christian successors: "*Aaron summum sacerdotem, id est episcopum figurasse, et filios eius prespiterorum figuram praemonstrasse*" (Wasserschleben, 1885: I-4), trans: "Aaron, the high priest, that is, the bishop prefigured, and his sons, foreshadowed the figure of the [Christian] priests". In the New Testament the Jewish priests then fall from grace when they fail to acknowledge Jesus as the messiah, thus paving the way for the representatives of the New Testament, the clergy, to be the new rightful priesthood class:

An extremely obvious precedent for a priesthood lapsing from somewhat patchy virtue into outright villainy through murderous hostility towards the bringer of Christianity is, of course, provided by the climactic Gospel narratives of Jesus' rejection and arraignment by the priests and scribes of Israel, who thus forfeited their privileged status. However, this dramatic transformations did not prevent the Church's exegetes from forging typological and allegorical links that made the Old Testament Jewish priesthood serve as a justificatory model for its Christian successor.

(McCone, 1990: 230)

The situation in Ireland, between the pre-Patrician past and the arriving of Saint Patrick and the druids' denial of the new faith, may have been similarly seen through the biblical-infused lenses of the Church: "Given the druid's apparently continuing, if shrinking, role as a pagan priest in the Christian period, the basis of this dichotomous perception presumably lies in the change of established religion mythologized as Patrick's conversion of Lóegaire and his minions" (McCone, 1990: 230). Belonging to pre-Patrician times, the druids were without a doubt part of Irish history and culture. Since the early Christian literate classes were obviously keen on producing a written record of Ireland's history and peoples, even though dependent of biblical references related to the world's history, the druids had forcefully to be included because their figure would not simply be forgotten: "Since scriptural patterns and current exegetical techniques were undoubtedly exploited in abundance by early Christian Irish *literati* to present the history of their island and people as a microcosm of a world history centered upon the Bible, the druid's incorporation into this scheme would be almost inevitable" (McCone, 1990: 230). Moreover, as the religious sect of the past, they had to be acknowledged as having had great importance and prestige, in order for their replacement by the ranks of Christian priests to be justified. Their power had to be validated, so that the Church would not lose privileges when this same power passed for its hands: "From the Church's standpoint the highly desirable corollary would be that pre-Patrician druidic privileges and endowments could be claimed by clerics, just as the Old Testament priest's mantle had descended upon his New Testament counterpart." (McCone, 1990: 230). Thus, instead of a contradiction, it seems there is a rational and logical explanation for the positive presentation of druids in the sagas set in pre-Patrician times.

This dichotomy between pre-Patrician and post-Patrician druids can be demonstrated by seeing the differences between the secular narratives set in the pre-Patrician times and the hagiographical works set during and after St. Patrick's return to Ireland as the propagator of the Christian faith. The honorable druid of the sagas is seen in the hagiographical works as an evil enemy of the new faith, a diabolic tool for devilish intents. The druids were indeed recognized as the former priesthood class, with the Church replacing them. They had inevitably to be inserted into the written literature if the past was to be recorded, and through their possible comparison with the biblical Jewish priesthood, served as justifying figures for the passage of the *sacerdotium*. Not to mention that such context also discredits theories placing the *filid* as successors of the druids. The *filid* were in no way connected to the *sacerdotium*. As the monastic's own literature attests, the *sacerdotium* was associated with the druids in pre-Patrician times and clergy in post-Patrician times:

> The recalcitrant pagan druid (*druí*) […] invited comparison with the priests (*sacerdotes*) of Israel, who became unredeemly degenerate through rejecting Christ and thus left the way clear for the Christian clergy to become the true successors of their generally admirable Old Testament precursors. It is to be stressed that early medieval Irish ideology treats the *fili* godly prophetic role as a historical constant and accords him no share in a priesthood or *sacerdotium* seen as the exclusive preserve of the pre-Patrician druid and the post-Patrician cleric successively.
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> (McCone, 1990: 232).

2.2. The Pagan Past in a Biblical Worldview.

Following the example of the druids, one probably wanders through thoughts concerning the way on how a pagan warrior-band lifestyle is also portrayed in a positive and heroic light in the extant literature. The answer probably lies in a similar philosophy to the one concerning the treatment of druids in sagas. Similarly, there seems to be a dichotomy between pagan past and Christian present, with the ecclesiastical interests keen on preserving the pagan past, not only for antiquary and entertainment purposes, but also to exalt the role of the Church as the bringers of the "right" and orderly way of life as

opposed to the pagan wild, murderous and promiscuous lifestyle. In the Ulster cycle, warriors such as Cú Chulainn, Fergus mac Róich, Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Búadach or even the king Conchobar mac Nessa engage in a typical warrior-like way of life resembling the much disapproved contemporary *fían* of Christian times. Nevertheless, their adventures and way of life are described seemingly without any critique. On the contrary, a greater part of the stories are displayed as fantastic stories where the valor and heroism of the characters is exalted. Contradiction?

In light of what we have seen regarding the druids and the way the monastic written tradition treated them by preserving the image of an undeniable figure of the past while serving the Church's own interest in justifying the passage of power from a strongly rooted pagan priestly tradition to the new clerical one, we may find that the treatment given to the old pagan heroes of Irish tradition may follow a similar line. The heroes of the Ulster cycle may be assumed to have been a part of the native tradition, as such, they would most possibly be a part of Irish folklore and legend and seen as glorious figures from a pseudo-historical past. Such major symbols of the Irish imaginary could not be simply put away or denied by the ecclesiastical interests and excluded from the written vernacular tradition, or the latter would be running the risk of antagonizing the old tradition, possibly strongly rooted in Irish culture. Instead, there was a more effective way of having a literary re-working: preservation of the imagery of the old pagan lifestyle but at the cost of creating a dichotomy.

In such dichotomy, the Ulster heroes are seen as a noble memory of the pagan past but simultaneously justify the new Christian way of life as the more righteous one, with the latter being condescending of the former: "In practice, this doctrine was a charter for the monastically oriented literary reworking and invention of saga and other *senchus* as required, within the limits imposed by the need to avoid straining credibility by unduly great or sudden divergences from a received tradition increasingly bolstered by writing" (McCone, 1990: 202). The method of the monastic *literati* to achieve this objective may once again have origin in the same parameters used for the druids: the use of biblical material to link the pagan past with the Christian present, just as in the Bible, the Old testament is linked to the New. One way to achieve this is a quite obvious resource used for example in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, the insertion of a more than probable native tradition within a biblical worldview, which is a consequence of a literate monastic class

dealing with a pagan tradition with roots in Indo-European patterns. Such class had its learning with basis on the Bible and Latin texts, and would hardly have the notion of a pagan worldview, therefore placing the ancient tradition into a cosmological Christian view as well as biblical history and geography:

> Especially for the literate classes of early medieval Ireland, the Bible and other sorts of Latin book learning provided a complete and completely un-Celtic world-view, including world geography, a history of the world from creation, and the descent of peoples from Noah. The fullest Irish literary response to the adoption of a Christian view of world history is seen in the eleventh-century *Lebor Gabála Érenn*.
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> (Koch, 2000: 21)

Being it so, the written vernacular tradition is a result not only of the ecclesiastical classes' aim to link the pagan past with the Christian present, therefore strengthening the Church hold in Irish society, but also the consequence of a biblical worldview the monastic men of letters would invariably have, thus filling with biblical references what they would consider as "holes" in the old tradition lacking the link with history and cosmology as is transmitted by the Bible. Furthermore, many of the narratives would most possibly be interpreted in accordance to the same principles. The framing of an old tradition and stories within the cosmological and pseudo-historical world as depicted in the Bible is thus echoed through the other cycles as well, including the Ulster cycle: "the death of Cú Chulainn was to be placed at 2 A.D. The choice of that date – like 33 A.D. for the death of Conchobar – was clearly to associate these heroes with Christ." (Kelleher, 1971: 121). Thus, the Ulster cycle, its main character Cú Chulainn, and the representation of kingship in the form of king Conchobar mac Nessa, fall inside the chronological world history accordingly to biblical tenets and with Christ's dates of birth and death as milestones. Being it so, the original story of probable pagan nature gains a link to the biblical lore, making it connected with the biblical tradition. The purpose of inserting the Ulster cycle into a biblical frame is further demonstrated by the circumstances in which Conchobar dies in *Aided Chonchobuir*[17] (Meyer, 1906: 4-11, 16-17). It demonstrates how the death of Christ is used as a mile-stone which provides an intersection between the Ulster cycle and the Bible by showing that the repercussions of such an event were also felt in the pagan past, therefore linking both pagan and Christian worlds:

In this Conchobar is all but killed by a calcified brain lodged in his skull, but has his life artificially prolonged by seven years of almost complete inactivity, a living death finally brought to an end when he is briefly revived into an angry outburst at the news of Christ's crucifixion, killed by the excitement and rewarded with salvation. The immobilized monarch thus spends seven years in a state of limbo between his effective death to his own world and a resurrection to eternal life eventually made possible by Christ's redemptive sacrifice. (McCone, 1990: 198)

Furthermore, current scholarship finds more links in the Ulster cycle connecting it to biblical themes, specifically in its main hero: Cú Chulainn. Therefore, even though the Ulaid are depicted as pagan warriors, they are so because they represent a pre-Christian past where Christianity has yet to spread its word, but are nonetheless inserted into a Christian world and even serve to foresee the imminent coming of Saint Patrick and the word of Christ. In one of the versions of Cú Chulainn's death, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*[18] (Best et al, 1956: lines 13763-14295), Cú Chulainn returns after his death in a prophetic appearance resembling the biblical resurrected Jesus Christ, and makes an appearance over Emain Macha where he expresses belief in the Christian God and foretells the coming of Saint Patrick, the foundation of the monastery of Armagh, and the ultimate salvation of mankind by Christ (Best *et al*, 1956: lines 14179-14197; McCone, 1990: 197). By showing the great pagan hero as aceptant of the Christian "truth" after his death, and in a obvious allusion to, and possible inspiration from Christ's own resurrection, the prophetic words of the dead Cú Chulainn establish a strong bridge between the pagan past he represents and the Christian faith to which he wields and acknowledges upon death, in order for the latter to gain an image of being inevitable. Just as in the druids' case, the link is established through a similar dichotomy as the one used for the Old/New Testament conjugation: "In this way the standard biblical device of prophecy linking the Old and New Testaments places Cú Chulainn's demise on the threshold looking forward from his own marginally pre-Christian era to Christ's imminent world mission and Patrick's future conversion of Ireland, more specifically of Emain into Ard Machae." (McCone, 1990: 197).

2.3. The Pagan Warrior Summoned by the Christian Saint.

The work done by the monasteries in treating the early Irish literary tradition in order for such refined arrangement between native tradition and the new Christian order to form a cohesive body of literature relied not only in the interpretation and insertion of elements in accordance to the Old/New Testament logic in "secular" literature, but also the other way around in hagiographical works. By introducing figures of the pagan past into contact with Irish saints, there was a rather sophisticated attempt at creating a diachronic mythical and pseudo-historical corpus where the pagan past also appears in the Christian present:

> An elaborate nexus of related patterns emerges from the foregoing [regarding the treatment of the Ulster cycle as inserted in the same world chronology of the Bible]. These not only interlocked the heroes of pre-Patrician and the saints of post-Patrician Ireland typologically, thus providing a further means of harmonizing the pagan past with the Christian present […], but also linked Irish with biblical heroic paradigms from both the Old and the New Testament. In this way a biographical structure concerned with liminality could itself provide essential mediation between the different historical phases that medieval Irish *senchus* sought to integrate and reconcile. A highly effective means to this end was, of course, the introduction of contacts between representatives of the different epochs…
>
> (McCone, 1990: 199)

Not to mention that this contact of figures from the pagan past with saints, usually with the former in a subservient position in relation to the latter and to the Christian God, served the purpose of providing a testimony for the validity of the Church's claims as the revealers of religious truth and subsequently their authority in dictating society's way of life: "Through such interchanges between hero and saint on the boundary between the two, knowledge of the dead or dormant pagan past could be authoritatively channeled by the Church's allies and representatives into the Christian present" (McCone, 1990: 202). An example can be given by the summoning of Cú Chulainn by Saint Patrick in *Síarburcharpat Con Culainn*[19]. The tale is concerned with the conversion of King Lóegaire mac Néill by Saint Patrick, and the latter uses the summoning of Cú Chulainn from hell to provide a proof of the wrongly ways of paganism. As an embodiment of the

pagan past and one of its greatest champions, Cú Chulainn is the perfect vehicle for showing that Christianity is the right path by having his speech demonstrate a broken pride, and all his marvelous and glorious feats as having been futile in face of the torments of Hell. Just as him, the Ulster warriors are damned in Hell, demonstrating the error of the pagan ways, with exception of Conchobar, due to his allegiance to Christ:

> An ro chesusa d'imned
> a TLoegairi
> for muir 7 tir.
> bá ansa damsa óenadaig
> la demon co n-ir
>
> Mo chorpan ba crethnaigthe
> la Lugaid a búaid.
> roucsat demna m'anmain
> isin richis rúaid
>
> Immárubartsa in clétine
> gai bolgae do léir.
> ro bása i comchétbúaid
> fri demon hi péin
>
> Bá comnart mo gaiscedsa
> mo chlaideb ba crúaid.
> domrimartsa in demon co n-óenmeór
> isin richis rúaid
>
> Ind rig consniat a rríge
> cía beit co mméit a mbrigi.
> ní cumcat ni la mac nDé
> acht a cubatt i ndire.
>
> Slúaig Ulad im Chonchobar
> calma in coraid.
> nadasraiglet in demnae

i n-iffur[n]d at brónaig.

Acht in rí mac Nessa

arbáge ar mac Maire.

atát i pein iffrind

formna na lath ngaile.

(Best *et al*, 1929: lines 9438-9466).

Trans:

What I have suffered of tribulations on sea and land, more difficult for me was

a single night with an angry demon. My body was wounded, the victory was

Lugaid's; demons have taken my soul into the red flame. I have plied the javelin,

the *gáe bolgae* assiduously; I was in the company of a demon in torment. Most

powerful was my valour, my sword was hard; he pushed me with a single finger

into the red flame. The kings who strive for dominion with all their might, they

have no power with the son of God, an equal length their punishment. The hosts

of the Ulstermen around Conchobar, brave the heroes, the demons lash them, in

hell they are sorrowful. Apart from the king, the son of Nes, who fought for the

son of Mary, the pick of the warriors are in hell's torment.

(McCone, 1990: 200)

Just as in the tale of his death, Cú Chulainn repents from his pagan ways and
claims that the true god is the Christian one and at the same time uses the authority his
legendary name grants him to assert the authority of St. Patrick: "Creit do Dia 7 do
náemPatraic a Loegairi ná túadaig tond talman torut ar ní síabrae rodatánic is Cú Chulaind
mac Sóalta" (Best *et al*, 1929: 9301-9302) trans: "believe in God and holy Patrick,
Lóegaire, lest the surface of the earth come over you, for it is not a spectre that has come
to you, it is Cú Chulainn son of Súaldaim" (McCone, 1990: 200). The difference is that
in this instance, it is not a resurrected vision of Cú Chulainn who speaks such words, but
Cú Chulainn summoned by Saint Patrick from the depths of Hell. Used as a symbol of
the pagan past, and a very powerful one at that: "few revenants carry the narratological
and ideological weight of the celebrated Cú Chulainn" (Nagy, 1997: 266), the glorious
and heroic Cú Chulainn is now summoned by a symbol of the Christian present in the

form of Saint Patrick. His speech is a clear example of the way the new Christian order manipulated and used the old pagan tradition in order to justify its authority. The heroes of the old tradition are humbled by Christianity and thus the past has its glory retained as native lore that is preserved but shown to be second to the glory of the Christian God represented by a saint. Moreover, only Patrick, as the representative of Christianity, can rescue Cú Chulainn from hell (as he does), in exchange for testimony before Lóegaire of his experience in the afterlife. The meaning between the lines of the text is that only conversion to the new order can save pagans, even if they are champions such as Cú Chulainn. In other words, Cú Chulainn, the pagan warrior *par excellence* and the major symbol of the greatness of the pagan past, is in here a subservient and passive pawn in Patrick's hands and it is only the Saint's power that can summon and allow him to be rescued from Hell:

> The pathetic dependence of the once invincible main hero of the Ulster tales upon St. Patrick in order to escape the torments of hell is unremittingly hammered home in this powerful narrative: his greatness is in the past, and only the cleric's power can recreate any semblance of it in the present or secure him a bearable future. […] The very embodiment of the pre-Christian heroic tradition, Cú Chulainn can only be saved by entering the service of the Church and submitting to clerical manipulation.
> (McCone, 1990: 201)

This interplay between pagan past and Christian present, with the calling upon pagan figures to appear in hagiographical works bowing to the saints' power, made it perfectly legitimate for poets and scribes to compose and write narratives based in the pagan times, even when probably originating from the pre-Christian oral tradition. Since small pieces of Christian doctrine were included in such "secular" works (as in Cú Chulainn's prophetic appearance following his death), and pagan heroes featured in hagiographical works as attesting to Christian saints' power and rightful ideology, the pagan past had its way opened to be fostered by the ecclesiastical written tradition. Even elements which could be more prone to be seen as residues of pagan belief are well-inserted into the written tradition and possibly interpreted as analogous of biblical elements (and used as such) rather than simply as a transcription from pre-Christian tales. One such element is the Otherworld[20], constantly appearing in Ulster and Fenian tales,

and populated by figures/deities from the mythological cycle. This more than probable reminiscence of a pagan belief is also subverted by the dichotomy between pagan past and Christian present, and more specifically by the encounter between a saint and representatives of the old tradition: "in both the *Síaburcharpat* and the *Acallam* the focus of attention – that of the sympathetic saint as well as that of the audience of the tale – is on a pagan otherworld as revealed by a remarkable traveler in that world who is summoned by or attracted to the Christian holy man" (Nagy, 1983: 135). To be more exact, travelers of the Otherworld such as Oísin are called by a holy man from the new order such as St. Patrick in the *Acallam na Senórach* and it is the Saint who calls upon the Otherworld pagan traveler to tell the tales of this Otherworld. The same pattern is observable in *Síarburcharpat Con Culainn*, when Cú Chulainn mentions his stay in Scáthach's overseas kingdom[21], here apparently seen with otherworldy contours. Such narration is sponsored by Saint Patrick as well. It is the Saint who creates the possibility for tales of that Otherworld to be narrated, and who becomes the intermediary between the native lore and the audience:

> …it is important to appreciate the fact that the revealing of the otherworld through the tale of the otherworldly traveler is made possible by the presence and power of a sacerdotal figure (here, specifically, the Christian saint Patrick), who is himself the translating medium between the bearer of that revelation and the audience of the narrative tradition through which the tale is known.
> (Nagy, 1983: 135).

Furthermore, just as the "secular" tales were inserted into the chronological scheme of the bible, so too does the bridge between the secular narrative tradition and the hagiographical tradition provides an insertion of pagan elements such as the Otherworld into the biblical cosmogonic scheme, with the Otherworld gaining implicit connections with the notions of heaven and hell. To the monastically learned, the several forms of the Otherworld in native tradition would easily be seen as earthly analogues of the biblical paradisiacal and infernal dimensions: "…in these stories about amicable confrontations between ancient hero and saint, the otherworlds which form the dramatic background of the pre-Christian heroic and mythological traditions are in fact being related to the Christian cosmogonic scheme of things, even if only as foils to the Christian heaven and hell" (Nagy, 1983: 135). We find examples of this association in tales such as *Immram*

Brain[22] and *Echtrae Chonnlai*[23], where the Otherworld is depicted as an earthly paradise strongly reminiscent of the Christian Heaven, in contrast to the description of Scáthach's island as an hellish Otherworld as given by Cú Chulainn in *Síarburcharpat* (Best *et al*, 1929: 9378-437). However, despite the analogy with heaven and hell providing a more adequate view of a pagan belief in a Christian context, these Otherworlds are still earthly and outmatched by the true realms of Christian belief. The saint has the double-function of being the summoning agent of narratives concerning the Otherworld and also of controlling the pagan heroes' speech, thus exemplifying that even though these pagan heroes roamed through allegories of Heaven or Hell on Earth, entering and escaping them, they are powerless in the Christian true Otherworlds:

> Patrick thus proves to have virtually complete control over the hero's image and message, which invites the reader to consider Scáth's nasty transmarine kingdom as a rather pale allegorical reflection of hell, just as the blissful land overseas functions as an allegory of the Christian paradise in *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai*. Cú Chulainn may have escaped from Scáth's clutches under his own steam, but the real hell is a different matter.
> (McCone, 1990: 201)

These accounts of hagiographical works containing the presence of figures from the native tradition not only seem to serve the purpose of asserting the absolute power of Christianity and its saints over the pagan past, but also seem to depict the Church (represented by the saints) as the agent who makes it possible to have access to such a past. This seems to be clearly exemplified in some of the versions of the story of the revealing of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*: *Do faillsigud Tána bó Cúailnge* and its late medieval version *Tromdám Gúaire*[24], specifically, the versions where it is the actions of saints, through fasting against God, which provide the resurrection of Fergus mac Róich in order for him to tell the story of the *Táin*, creating a parallel with the resurrection of Cú Chulainn in *Síarburcharpat Con Culainn* due to a saint's action. As in the latter, this action is directed to God himself, not the resurrected figure: "The poets' saintly allies are never said to fast against Fergus himself, only against God, to force God to bring Fergus back to life" (Nagy, 1997: 313). In this specific example, the ecclesiastical author also managed to include further connections between pagan past and Christian present in order to legitimize the Christian hold over native tradition, since the saints themselves are said to

be descended from Fergus: "The ones affected [the saints involved in the search for the *Táin*] are said to descend from the seed of Fergus, an ancestor from whom, at the goading of Senchán, they are trying to recover their past, and with whom they are thus reaffirming their family connection" (Nagy, 1997: 312).

These versions of the tale of the finding of the *Táin* are quite complex, containing several of the exemplary elements of the way the Church dealt with piecing together native and Christian paradigms, and exemplify the masterful way on how this junction was operated. Besides the motif of resurrection of a past figure through permission of the Christian God, the tale also manages to deal with the image of poets (*filid*) in Ireland and how they should act in contrast with their former wrong-doings (satire for blackmailing purposes and forgetfulness of the native traditions). With the advent of Christianity, the *filid* became connected with monastic learning and the story seems to reflect a possible concern among the contemporary society that native tradition was being lost, since the poets did not know the *Táin* anymore. This concern seems to find echo in certain key-characters of the story, such as the leper-saint type of character who helps the company of poets in the voyage to Scotland and who also fills the function of "an expression of the uncertainty of the literary tradition concerning the relationship between its past and present and how the present can successfully make use of and incorporate the traditions of the past" (Nagy, 1997: 312). Such figure further expresses other indications of Irish society regarding the relationship between the past, represented in the form of the marginal Márban, the contemporary poets and the Church, or possibly helps to convene the Christian ideal of harmony between all three parties. It is due to the leper-saint's actions that Márban and Senchán forge a cooperating relationship, signifying the safekeeping of native lore by the *fílid*. This effort also finds expression in the saints, who carry on the quest of resurrecting Fergus and are the key agents for its accomplishment: "Thanks to the leper-saint's efforts, the enemies Senchán and Márban learn to cooperate, actually reflecting each other in their goal of ascertaining the *Táin*, and the company of poets is succeeded by and mirrored in the company of saints in a relationship both metaphoric and metonymic as it develops in the story" (Nagy, 1997: 311).

In earlier versions of the story, it is mentioned that the poets did not simply forget the *Táin*, but exchanged a written version of it for Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*[25], possibly accentuating the concern that the newest Christian traditions were placing native

tradition into jeopardy. As such, the story of the finding of the *Táin* also helps to restore the faith in poets, by presenting a search for their own roots: "The challenge to recollect the *Táin*, then, is not a contemporary questioning of the authority of traditional poets and other men of art corrupted by their status but an attempt to get them back to their roots, unwritten and based in the living context of performance" (Nagy, 1997: 309). By the end of the story, it is the search of the poets which leads to the saints being summoned in order to resurrect Fergus. Therefore, the poets have a key role in recovering an important piece of native tradition. Furthermore, Márban's challenge is a punishment for their threat of satire against the king, possibly as a means of demonstrating that satire is not a dignified conduct for a poet, in accordance with the Church's banishment of satirists to the ranks of the marginal *fían*. Thus, the story fulfills the function of restoring the image of the poets in society, by punishing their conduct as bad guests who use the ill-seen satire as a threat in order to abuse of the hospitality given by kings and patrons, and by presenting their redemption through their quest for retrieving the past tradition:

> Far from being a distracting supplement to an unrelated story, this account of the revival of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* refurbishes some of the poetic reputation that grows so tarnished in the story of hospitality abused in Gúaire's court. With the revalorization of that reputation, poets are transformed from the pests they have become back into the pillars of the community.
> (Nagy, 1997: 315)

On the other hand, the *fían* themselves, or the marginal figures, are also called into the tale, if we interpret the figure of Márban as an outsider from society as akin to the figure of a *fénnid*: "In a different narrative milieu, we can imagine this marginal figure as a fénnid instead of a hermit. Even in his eremitical incarnation he reminds us of fénnidi, exiles "dead" to the world" (Nagy, 1997: 316). It is the hermit whom initiates the whole affair, a reflection of the pagan way of living, who calls upon the new bearers of tradition to carry on the past: "When he finally obtains the chance to demand that the poets procure something for him, a story hidden in or lost from their repertoire, he demonstrates how unfamiliar they have become with the lay of *their* land. He forces them to relearn the means of accessing the information stored, or that should be stored, in poetic tradition." (Nagy, 1997: 316). All these elements seem to enter into re-conciliation in the end, providing for an image of completeness and harmony among them and under the wing of

the ecclesiastical order: "All previously polarized or unaccounted-for sectors have "talked out" their differences and are working together harmoniously toward the restitution of the past in a modern, written form. Everyone and everything, including past and present, prove ultimately compatible, and so the prize, the *Táin*, is won complete." (Nagy, 1997: 311). The *Táin* is recovered due to a request of a representative of the old ways, by the new order of poets, who themselves request the help of the new faith, whose representatives in the form of the saints are the only agents which can call upon God to give permission to have access to a legendary figure of the past:

> Marbán advises the poets to summon all the saints of Ireland together to fast against God and ask that Fergus be brought back to life for a short while, so he can tell the lost story. The assembly of the saints is arranged, God relents, and Fergus, whose size is notable and who must sit down in order to be heard by this postheroic audience, rehearses the story of the *Táin* for them.
> (Nagy, 1997: 310)

As in other examples, it is once again Christianity who allows for the recovery of the native lore, this way making sure they are not seen as enemies of native tradition, but on the contrary, as its saviors: "Thus the *Táin* is recaptured, fixed in a written form, which, this time, will presumably not be given away, and even symbolically "saved" and translated into heavenly terms, not unlike Cú Chulainn, the hero of the cattle raid in his Patrician chariot [in *Síarburcharpat*]" (Nagy, 1997: 310).

Conclusion

The intricate connections between native tradition, Christianized *filid* and the new ecclesiastical tradition thus seem to have been carefully put together in a collective effort by the monasteries and their *literati* and by the monastically connected *filid*. This collective effort managed to create a new literary tradition which involved the native tradition but carefully brought it into a Christian fold, establishing links between secular and hagiographical texts in a way that permits the native tradition to be seen as legitimate, since it belongs to a pagan past that must itself be seen in a good light in order to justify the shift of paradigm from pagan to the new Christian "truth". The pagan past is inserted

into the cosmogonic and pseudo-historical scheme of the Bible, and its contents are often seen in light of biblical interpretations, even though they often present stories with elements that more than probably arose from pagan tradition. With the native tradition reshaped to fit the Christian world-view and chronology, representatives of the pagan past such as druids and the wild *fían* could be safely represented in the literary written tradition without becoming symbols of paganism. They are seen as figures of the pagan past, legit before the dawn of Christianity in Ireland, but with their power and roles in society now in the hands of the bringers of Christian ideology.

The message transmitted by stories such as *Síarburcharpat* and the finding of the *Táin* is that it is due to saintly efforts that the native tradition is recovered. The latter also points to this process happening in coalition with the new poetic order of monastically-oriented *filid*. It is due to this coordination of elements that it is highly unlikely that pagan notions could have influenced the writing of the native stories. Pagan elements are indeed there, since they would hardly disappear completely when the root of the stories was undeniably pagan. However, such elements were seen by the *literati* who wrote them down under Christian-influenced lenses, and as such, have a different weight and significance than their original (unknown) oral versions could have had. It is under this scheme of things that the major Irish secular sagas were also produced and in order to analyze them, the notion of how medieval Irish literature came to be and the ideology behind it must be taken into account. It is important to keep in mind that the written texts were not created out of a pagan cradle intent on spreading pagan myth and religion, even though pagan elements might exist in them.

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Notas

[1] Early Irish so called secular literature is commonly organized in four cycles of saga: Mythological, Ulster, Fenian and Historical (also called the Cycle of the Kings), together with other genres such as the *Immram* (voyage) or the *Echtrae* (adventure). However, certain tales of the Cycle of the Kings and most of the *Immrama* have a strong ecclesiastical nature, being controversial if these genres should be considered ecclesiastical instead of secular, despite the presence of "native" elements.

[2] The colophon is written not in Irish but in Latin (possibly reflecting a way of asserting the higher authority of the Church, being its official language) and states the following: "Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut uerius fabulam quibusdam fidem in had historia aut fibula non accomodo. Quaedam enim ibi sunt praestrigia [*sic*] demonum, quaedam autem figment poetica, quaedam similia uero, quaedam non, quaedam ad delectationem stultorum" (O' Rahilly, 1967: lines 4921-25), trans: "But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men." (Idem, 272). Such colophon devalues the legitimacy of the *Táin* by claiming that its contents are the product of fiction, of a "fable" undeserving of being given "credence", composed of "poetic figments", with its purpose being for entertainment "for the delectation of foolish men". Especially relevant is the classification of some parts of the text as being the "deceptions of demons", most probably making sure that possible descriptions of the pagan lifestyle and customs, hardly possible of being overlooked in such a monolithic work with native roots, are seen as demonic.

[3] Possibly written as early as in the 8th century, the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* is the center-piece of the Ulster cycle and is commonly considered the greatest Irish epic. It survives in two known main recensions, the first one contained in the 11th/12th century *Lebor na hUidre* and in the 14th century *Yellow Book of Lecan* (another version of the first recension), and the second recension in the 12th century *Book of Leinster*. The main text narrates the war of the Connacht army (reinforced by forces from all of Ireland), leaded by Aillil and Medb, against the teenager Cú Chulainn, who single-handedly defends the Ulster territory until the warriors from the court of Conchobar mac Nessa recuperate from a debility caused by a curse. The contention is due to Donn Cuailnge, a bull from the Ulster territory which Medb intends to steal to make her wealth equal to her husband's, since Aillil has in his possession another extraordinary bull, Finnbhennach. Eventually, the Ulster army comes in aid of Cú Chulainn and the Connacht army is defeated. However, Donn Cuailnge does go to Connacht, but enters a fatal duel with Finnbhennach, and eventually both bulls die. The main tale is preceded by other tales called *remscéla,* providing explanations for events in the main text. Although found in other manuscripts, these tales are frequently considered as part of the *Táin* itself. See the diplomatic editions and translations of both the first and second recensions in O'Rahilly, 1876 and 1967, respectively. See also Ann Dooley's *Playing the Hero* (2006), for a modern analysis of the text.

[4] The *Tuatha Dé Danann* are immortals who may have been pre-Christian pagan gods, euhemerized and characterized in Irish medieval texts such as the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* as the previous people who occupied Ireland previously to the invasion of the Milesians, and in the *Cath Maige Tuired* as the opposing force to the Fomorians. They make their appearance in the other cycles in sporadic yet usually important appearances where they are portrayed as the immortal dwellers of the *Sidh* (the Otherworld). See Macalister (1938-1956) for the diplomatic edition of *Lebor Gabála Érenn* and Gray (1982) for a modern edition of *Cath Maige Tuired*.

[5] Early Irish literature has been repeatedly seen as a literary gateway to the iron-age society of the Celts rather than to the contemporary context where it was in fact written. This vision of early Irish literature was first hinted at by the early scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the beginning of the second half of the 20th century it became highly influential due to a lecture by Kenneth Jackson in 1964 (University of Cambridge, May 14, subsequently published as *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*) where he coined the expression "Window on the Iron Age" to classify and interpret some Irish texts.

[6] The *Míadslechta* tracts are an Old Irish law document concerned with passages of rank. See Binchy (1978: lines 582.32-589.32, 676.17-677.27 and 1567.1-1567.35) for a transcription of its contents.

[7] The Annals of Ulster are a collection of annals of Medieval Ireland with the entries spanning from the year 431 AD to 1540 AD. Diplomatic edition and translation in Mac Airt *et al*, 1983.

[8] The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland or Annals of the Four Masters are an important compilation of annals and documents which provide an authentic chronicle of medieval history: "The Annals of the Four Masters represent the immense attempt of the Irish Franciscans and their fellowworkers, in the short space of three years, to gather together and then publish all the extant Irish annals they could find, as a record of Irish civilization. [..]. The text runs from Noah's Flood to 1616. It contains a vast range of historical and historicist materials and is by far the most copious Irish annalistic collection. For large areas of Irish history, early and late, these annals are the only authority" (Ó Corráin, 2006: 74). Edition and translation by O'Donovan (1856).

[9] The *Senchas Már* is an extensive compilation of Irish legal texts composed of 47 tracts organized into a single group. The compilation was probably arranged sometime in the 8th century and the tracts were probably written by diverse authors. This pervasive work is complemented by the adding of several glosses and commentaries in later manuscripts, including one of the few glosses in Old Irish. Its prologue attributes authorship of the work to a retinue of nine learned men: three bishops, three kings, and three scholars of literature, poetry and law, including the Dubthach of Patrician hagiography. A discussion of its contents is found in Breatnach (2005).

[10] The "Primer of Stipulations" is an Old Irish legal tract on the seven poetic grades from the second half of the 8th century (from top to bottom, *ollam*, *anrúth*, *clí*, *cano*, *dos*, *macfhuirmid* and *fochloc*). Edition and translation in Breatnach (1987).

[11] "The Ordering of Discipline" or "The Regulation of Proper Behavior" is one of the tracts included in the *Senchas Már*. This specific tract describes the relationship between the Church and the people in the form of a contract. Common folk would have to donate goods, while the Church was obliged to provide religious service, such as baptism or marriage, and to make sure that its members were honest, devout, and qualified. It is an example of the Church's influence on Brehon law and also demonstrates certain aspects that canon lawyers would disapprove of.

[12] Translated as the "Colloquy of the Ancients" or "Tales from the Elders of Ireland", the *Acallam na Senórach* is one of the most important pieces of the Fenian cycle. It is a compilation of Fenian narratives framed in a dialogue (*acallam*) between St. Patrick and the surviving Oisín and Caílte mac Rónáin from the *fianna* of Finn mac Cumhaill. Edition by Whitley Stokes (1900) and modern translation by Ann Dooley (1999).

[13] The Red Branch of King Conchobar is not as explicitly characterized as a band of *fían* as Finn Mac Cumhaill's *fianna*. However, the Ulster cycle does portrait a pastoral and pagan society ruled by an elite warrior class, as is perfectly exemplified by Cú Chulainn and the other Ulster warriors. The behavior, conduct and lifestyle of these warriors, even though they are more accurately seen as the military branch of a kingdom rather than a rogue band of youngsters, is in accordance to the same characteristics attributed to the *fían* in the ecclesiastical sources, despite being represented in a more glorious and noble picture.

[14] Translated as *The Instructions of King Cormac mac Airt*, the text is considered by Kuno Meyer, basing himself on the use of Old Irish in the text, to be no older than the first half of the ninth century (cf. Meyer, 1909: xi). It is an Old Irish gnomic text which falls on the category of medieval Irish wisdom literature and contains an extensive dialogue between the High-King of Ireland Cormac mac Airt and his son Coirpre Lifechair. The contents of the dialogue are based on commentaries about Irish medieval society and its laws and customs, described by Cormac.

[15] As is pointed out by Kim McCone, a more accurate translation of "fénnid cách co trebad" is "everyone is a *fían*-member until landowning" (1990: 125).

[16] *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé*, translated as "The Martyrology of Óengus" is a martyrology written in Old Irish, a record of the several saints and their corresponding feast days. Its authorship is attributed to Óengus

mac Óengobann, an Irish bishop who flourished in the beginning of the 9th century as a reformer and a writer. An edition and translation was published in 1905 by Whitley Stokes.

[17] One of the death tales in the Ulster cycle, *Aided Chonchobuir* depicts the story of how Conchobar is killed due to an injury received while in battle against the Connacht warrior Cet mac Mágach. The conflict was due to Cet having stolen the petrified brain of a Leinster king which was in possession of the Ulaid. Cet uses this same petrified brain to sling it at Conchobar, and it gets inserted into Conchobar's own brain without chance of removal by Conchobar's druids and physicians. However, it is sewed, and Conchobar is told he will live if he does not get overly excited. But seven years later, on knowing about the death of Christ, Conchobar gets angry and the brain bursts out of his head, killing him in the process. Be that as it may, the blood from the wound baptizes Conchobar, and he goes to Heaven, even though he lived a pagan life.

[18] Roughly translated as "The Great Defeat on the Plain of Muirthemne", *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne* is one of the earlier extant versions of *Aided Con Culainn*, possibly from the mid-8th century, and preserved in the Book of Leinster.

[19] Translated as "The Phantom Chariot of Cú Chulainn", the original text was possibly written in the 9th or 10th century and is preserved in the *Lebor na hUidre* as well as in the Egerton 88 manuscripts. It tells the tale of how St. Patrick summoned Cú Chulainn from hell, so that he could testify to the yet pagan king Lóegaire mac Néill the horrors of hell for punishment of paganism, and the assertion of the Christian God as the true one. Editions of the tale are available in the diplomatic edition of the *Lebor na hUidre* by R. I. Best and O. Bergin (1929) and Kuno Meyer's rendition based on the Egerton 88 version with additions from the Additional 33992 manuscript (1910).

[20] The Otherworld is a common supernatural plane which abounds in early Irish Literature. It is usually described as an alternative plane of existence for the Sidhe (the immortals from Irish saga previously known as the Tuatha Dé Danann in the mythological cycle), where there is no death, sickness or aging and where food and drink are in ever-lasting abundance. Its inhabitants live surrounded by the arts and in a permanent feeling of bliss. The usual gateway to the Otherworld is through mounds and valleys in most of the Irish medieval literary cycles, although its location is portrayed as being over-seas in the *Immrama* (voyages). In the several tales concerning the Otherworld in the early Irish literary cycles, it has several names, such as *Mag Mell* (Delightful Plain), *Tír na nÓg* (Land of the Young) or *Tír na mBeo* (Land of the Living). (Carey, 2006: 1403-1406).

[21] Scáthach was Cú Chulainn's martial (and possibly sexual) trainer. Cú Chulainn's training under Scáthach and related events are described in *Tochmarc Emire* ("The Wooing of Emer"), possibly first written in the 8th century and with recensions in both the *Lebor na hUidre* and in the Book of Leinster, as well as other manuscripts as Rawlinson B512. An edition and translation by Kuno Meyer was published in *Revue Celtique* (1890: 433-457). The story is a *remscéla* (fore-tale) for the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Her kingdom is related to Scotland and specifically to the Island of Skye, to where Cú Chulainn goes to face ordeals and receive martial skills from Scáthach. Although related to the Island of Skye and Scotland, and consequently, not explicitly associated with the Otherworld in the text, readings in that direction can be made: "For the study of mythology, it [*Tochmarc Emire*] provides a particularly vivid example of Alba (Scotland or Britain) able to function as a virtual Otherworld in the early Irish literary imagination" (Koch, 2006). The tale of Cú Chulainn's summoning by St. Patrick seems to have its reference of Scáth's kingdom based in such function.

[22] In *Immram Brain*, Brain mac Febul and his retinue go in search of a paradisiacal island overseas called *Emhain Abhlach*, the Land of Women. This land is described as a marvelous and beautiful place, filled with music, joy, games and abundant with the best food and wine. But what really sets it apart from the mortal realm is the statement in the poem that the island is devoid of death, disease or even feelings of grief and sorrow. It stands then as one of the many forms of the Otherworld, located overseas instead of the more common parallel plane located through mounds, hills or fountains. For edition and translation see Meyer, 1895. Most of the *Immram* seem to have a strong ecclesiastical nature, being controversial if they should be considered monastic instead of secular, although they also present "native" elements. (McCone, 1990: 79).

[23] Similarly to *Immram Brain*, *Echtrae Chonnlai* tells the story of Chonlae being invited by a woman to a form of the Otherworld of the *sidh* in an over-seas version with underlines similar to the Otherworld in *Immram Brain*. Chonlae eventually goes by boat to the Otherworld (McCone, 2000).

[24] The stories of the finding of the *Táin* are told in different versions of *Do faillsigud Tána bó Cúailnge* ("How *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was found"), along with an abbreviated version in the Book of Leinster (Best *et al* 1967: lines 32879-900), and in the late medieval text *Tromdám Gúaire* ("The Heavy Hosting of Guaire"). In general, it tells the story of the challenge to poets issued by Marbán, brother of the king of Connacht, who desires revenge for the threat of satire against his brother by the poets, who demand his own (Marbán's) pet pig as exchange for not satirizing the king. Marbán demonstrates extensive knowledge, poetry included, and demands of the poets incredible performances, criticizing at the same time the state of verbal art, and ultimately, demanding for the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to be told. The poets, with the *ollam* or chief-poet Senchán Torpéist included, confess that the story is lost and there is no knowledge of it, and in face of such scandal pertaining their profession, Márban orders them on a quest throughout Ireland and Scotland to recover the tale, with help being provided in the voyage to Scotland by a leper who is revealed to be a poet as well. Ultimately they are lead back to Ireland and to where Fergus mac Róich is buried. Earlier versions have a significant difference at this point of the story, since in some, Fergus mac Róich is resurrected thanks to the actions of Muirgein, the son of Senchán, who either addresses a poem/eulogy to Fergus in some versions or, in other versions, marks Fergus tombstone directly with the eulogy. In latter versions, including *Tromdám Gúaire*, Fergus is resurrected thanks to the fasting of the saints of Ireland against God in order to bring him to life. Fergus recounts the story of the *Táin* and it is written down. The latter versions probably reflect a readjustment by ecclesiastical authorities to better illustrate the connections between Church and Christianized native performers (the poets), and to avoid interpretations of the resurrected Fergus as *praestigia demonum,* conjured up by what could be otherwise seen as a pagan reminiscence in the poets' conduct (Nagy, 1997: 19). Several versions are found in manuscripts such as Egerton 1782, Stowe D IV 2 or in the Book of Leinster. Diplomatic editions from the Egerton and Stowe versions are available by Kuno Meyer (1907) and Book of Leinster version by Kevin Murray (2001). Edition of *Tromdám Gúaire* by Joynt Maud (1931).

[25] Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) was an arch-bishop of Seville regarded as one of the most important scholars of the early years of Christian hegemony in Europe. His work *Etymologiae* is an encyclopedia containing several sections of many books from classic antiquity which would most possibly be lost without his anthological record.