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HIDDEN BEGINNINGS



FROM CULT TO CONVERSION

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

—SEAMUS HEANEY, ‘BOGLAND’

IN MANY MYTHOLOGIES the gods issue forth from primordial night; in Ireland, the divinities emerge not from the dark abyss of creation myth, but from an enigmatic and patchy archaeological record.

The earliest *written* evidence for native gods comes from early Christian Ireland, not from the pagan period; this is a pivotal fact which must be emphasized. Christianity did not entirely consign the pagan gods to the scrapheap, but the consequences of its arrival were dramatic and affected Irish society on every level. Pagan cult and ritual were discontinued, and a process was set in motion that eventually saw a small number of former deities reincarnated as literary characters. Christianity—intrinsically a religion of the book—enabled the widespread writing of texts in the Roman alphabet. Some of these have been transmitted to the present, with the paradoxical upshot that we owe our ability to say anything at all about the ‘personalities’ of Ireland’s pre-Christian gods to the island’s conversion.¹

1 On the complex origins of literacy, see E. Johnson, *L&IEMI*, 9–16, and important analyses by A. Harvey, ‘Early Literacy in Ireland’, *CMCS* 14 (Winter, 1987), 1–15, and J. Stevenson, ‘The Beginnings of Literacy in Ireland’, *PRIA* (C) 89 (1989), 137–65. The complexity is partly down to the existence of *ogam*, a system of notches used originally for inscriptions along the edge of a stone; these are almost always of the form ‘[the memorial] of X, son/descendant of Y...’ and appear to be grave and/or boundary markers. Research has shown that *ogam* was developed in the immediately pre- or partially Chris-

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This chapter focuses on the period from the fifth century down to the late seventh, but tighter historical brackets can be put around the conversion process itself. The Christian religion was present in Ireland from at least the early 400s, certainly among British slaves and their descendants, though there may well also have been communities of Irish converts in the areas of the island that had been most exposed to influence from Roman Britain.² It is notoriously difficult to pinpoint when a population group can be decisively said to have exchanged one religion for another, but during the 500s the church hierarchy was legally established as a privileged order, and monasticism, Latin education, and ecclesiastical learning thrived. By the year 600, therefore, we can speak of Irish society as already converted on the level of hierarchy and institution.³ The public worship of pagan gods by high-status individuals had probably come to an end in the mid to late 500s, but occasional, increasingly marginalized manifestations of non-Christian religion seem to have continued until the turn of the eighth century.⁴ It is not until that point that druids—the magico-religious specialists of Irish paganism—finally cease to appear in legal texts as a going concern and can be taken to have disappeared from Irish society.⁵ It is also worth remembering that all such markers are public and collective: the realm of personal conviction—how people behaved in their homes and felt in their hearts—is irrecoverably lost to us.

Around the year 700—roughly three hundred years after the conversion process began—pagan divinities began to appear in a vibrant litera-

tian period, at least as far back as the fourth century, by someone familiar not only with the Roman habit of monumental inscriptions on stone but also (possibly) with Latin grammatical tradition: the alphabet is not, in other words, an inheritance from the immemorial Celtic past. Probably it was also used on wood or bark, but the script's cumbersome nature makes the one-time existence of extended texts in ogam unlikely. Nevertheless, it is clear that at least some members of pre-Christian Irish society were able to write Irish and Latin from an early date.

² See below, 13.

³ *ECI*, 182; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Social Background to Irish *Perigrinatio*', *Celtica* 11 (1976), 43–59.

⁴ *ECI*, 244; Charles-Edwards points out that St Columba, born around 520 into a dynasty in the far north-west, is represented as converting the Picts to Christianity, but never his fellow Irishmen—presumably because they were by then largely converted. Johnston (*L&IEMI*, 14) dates the take-up by aristocratic elites of the 'opportunities presented by the new religion' to the second half of the sixth century.

⁵ See Elva Johnston's comment (*L&IEMI*, 114) that the Irish church had already won the 'long struggle over organised and semi-organised paganism' by the early 700s.

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ture written in Old Irish.⁶ Two questions immediately present themselves. Why should a Christian people be interested in pagan gods at all? And what was the relationship between the gods whom the pagan Irish had once venerated and the literary divinities who thronged the writings of their Christian descendants?⁷

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANALOGY

It is traditional in handbooks of mythology to begin with a family portrait of the divinities, detailing their relationships, powers, and attributes.⁸ This cannot be done for the gods of Ireland. It could be argued—albeit rather austere—that we should not speak of Irish pre-Christian deities at all, because everything we know about them comes down to us in writings composed after the island’s conversion and may therefore have been filtered through a Christian lens. *All* surviving mythological material from Ireland is the product of a pious and intellectually sophisticated Christian culture, and it is important to hold in mind that from their earliest appearances in the textual record the Irish gods are divorced from cult.

Can we retrieve any information from non-textual sources about the nature of the divinities worshipped by the pagan Irish?⁹ The attempt is possible only with caution and if we confine ourselves to general principles. Two tools come to hand: the first is archaeology, and the second is inference drawn from the related societies of Celtic Gaul and Britain.

6 Charles-Edwards (*ECI*, 201) makes an illuminating contrast with the Old English poem *Beowulf*, written, much like early Irish literature, in a Christian and monastic context and similarly set in a pre-Christian past. But where Irish saga teems with former pagan deities, the likes of Thunor and Woden are conspicuously absent in the Anglo-Saxon poem; famously the ‘paganism’ of its characters is a kind of natural monotheism.

7 A recent approach to the change of religions from the perspective of ritual praxis is chapter three of E. Bhreathnach’s *Ireland and the Medieval World, AD 400–1000* (Dublin, 2014).

8 See for instance B. Graziosi’s recent *The Gods of Olympus: A History* (London, 2013), 1–10.

9 A condensed list of standard works would include M.-L. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (London, 1949); P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970); M. (Aldhouse-) Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester, 1986); A. Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (London, 1986 [revised edn.]); and B. Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (London, 1994). Points of detail in all these are worth checking against individual entries in *CCHE* for the current consensus.

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FIG. 1.1. Late Bronze Age yew-wood figure, c.1000 BC, discovered in Ralaghan, Co. Cavan. Photo: Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Museum of Ireland.

By its nature, archaeological evidence is of limited value in reconstructing belief systems or mythological narratives, but it does seem that at least some Irish population groups set up anthropomorphic wooden or stone images that may be of gods. One found in the bog of Ralaghan, Co. Cavan, is roughly a metre long and made from a single round trunk of yew: it has a gouged hole in the genital area, which may once have held a carved phallus (Fig. 1.1). Though its sunken eye hollows anticipate the uncanny stare associated with the (characteristically Iron Age) *La Tène* decorative style, it actually dates to the late Bronze Age, at the beginning of the first millennium BC.¹⁰ Many scholars would place this before the arrival of any form of Celtic speech in Ireland, so there is no guarantee of cultural continuity with the religious practices of over a millennium later.¹¹ That said, similar sculptures have turned up sporadically in Britain in a more explicitly Iron Age context, suggesting that they may once have been widespread: we cannot tell.¹²

10 M. Stanley, 'Anthropomorphic wooden figures: recent Irish discoveries', in J. Barber, *et al.* (eds.), *Archaeology from the Wetlands: Recent Perspectives* [Proceedings of the eleventh WARP conference] (Edinburgh, 2007), 17–30; A. O'Sullivan, 'Exploring past people's interactions with wetland environments in Ireland', *PRIA* (C) 107 (2007), 147–203.

11 The whole question of the arrival of some form of Celtic speech in Ireland is extremely difficult: we do not know when it happened, who brought it—except that the immigrating population must have been substantial—nor with what degree of violence or lack thereof it spread. More than one variety of Celtic may have been spoken, perhaps for centuries, before the ancestral form of Irish came to dominate. Concise referenced discussion in T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Introduction: Prehistoric and Early Ireland', *NHI* i, lxvi–lxix.

12 See *PB*, 221–2 for these figures and their possible date-ranges; also A. Burl, *Rites of the Gods* (London, 1981), 213, 226–7. Other Irish wooden figures have been found at Lagore Crannog in Co. Meath (late Neolithic/early Bronze Age) and

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Similar problems of interpretation attend the stone sculpture known as the ‘Tandragee Idol’, also dated to c.1000 BC. Helmeted and grasping his left arm—in pain or in salute?—the figure could represent a human warrior or a native deity (Fig. 1.2). In an instance of the seductive temptation to read archaeological objects in the light of much later literature—and thus to find a politically soothing continuity in the Irish past—it has been suggested that the Tandragee sculpture depicts Níadu Argatlám (‘of the Silver Hand/Forearm’), a literary character who loses his arm in battle and has it temporarily replaced by one made of metal.¹³ Ellen Ettlinger, who suggested the identification in 1961, felt convinced that the sculptor had depicted the left arm as ‘clearly artificial’—but distinctions of this kind surely lie in the eye of the beholder.¹⁴ Additionally, as the story of Níadu’s silver prosthesis is first attested in a saga composed nearly two millennia after the Tandragee sculpture was created, any link must be considered at best only a possibility; the figure remains inscrutable.

There are also hints that rivers, bogs, and pools were important in the religious beliefs of the pagan Irish, though Iron Age deposits of artifacts are strikingly rarer in Ireland than in parts of Britain, for unknown reasons: an instance of the enigmatic quality of Irish Iron Age archaeology in general.¹⁵ Ireland can nonetheless boast one of the most spectacular of these, the Broighter Hoard, which was discovered in 1896 buried in heavy agricultural land near to Lough Foyle in County Derry. The original deposition was made close to the water’s eastern edge, but the shore of the lake has shifted over the millennia. It includes not only the most splendid torc ever uncovered in Ireland, but also a miniature golden

Corlea, Co. Longford (unambiguously Iron Age in date); see F. Menotti, *Wetland Archaeology and Beyond: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2012), 193.

¹³ Elizabeth Gray has provided a useful clutch of references for most Irish deities in her *CMT*; see 130–1 for Níadu; also F. Le Roux, ‘Le dieu-roi NODONS/NUADA’, *Celticum* 6 (1963), 425–54, which is old but useful.

¹⁴ E. Ettlinger, ‘Contributions to an interpretation of several stone images in the British Isles’, *Ogam* 13 (1961), 286–304. See speculations on the emergence of the motif of Níadu/Nodons’ silver limb, which would ascribe it to the first centuries AD, by S. Zimmer, ‘The making of myth: Old Irish *Airgatlám*, Welsh *Llaw ereint*, Caledonian Ἀργεντοκόξος’, in M. Richter & J.-M. Picard (eds.), *OGMA: Essays in Celtic Studies in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), 295–7.

¹⁵ See *A&CM*, 79–73 for Irish finds; useful survey of Iron Age water hoards in Britain as well as Ireland in R. Hutton, *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991), 184–90.



FIG. 1.2. The Tandragee Idol, carved stone image, c.1000 BC.
Photo: Reproduced by permission of the Dean and Chapter of
St Patrick's Cathedral (Church of Ireland), Armagh.

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boat, complete with tiny oars.¹⁶ The items seem to have been fashioned, and perhaps deposited as well, in the first century BC. Depositions such as this suggest a belief at the time they were made in supernatural beings associated with water, and it should be emphasized that this is all that can be extracted with confidence. In another instance of looking to later literature to explain archaeology, scholars have long speculated that the hoard was a ritual offering to the sea-god Manannán, because Old Irish texts associate Lough Foyle with stories of an inundation and an encounter between the god and a band of human mariners.¹⁷ All this is not to say that connections drawn between medieval written texts and pre-Christian archaeology are of necessity misguided, simply that they must be considered tentative and that it is dismayingly easy to build castles in the air.

Because the archaeological evidence emerges as open to several interpretations we can use it to outline only the most important aspects of how the pre-Christian Irish regarded their divinities. Briefly, there were probably a great number of these, related to specific places, peoples, and to the natural world.¹⁸ They were considered worthy of reverence, and perhaps (as seen) of artistic depiction; some of them seem to have had associations with water—though whether they were supposed to dwell in, under, or through it is unclear. They could be propitiated, and must have been imagined as having uses for the gifts, including animal sacrifice, which human beings offered up to them. Some of this picture can be rounded out by comparison with Gaul and Britain, but one final caveat about the archaeological record should be considered before we move on: it points to the centuries immediately before the conversion began as a period of economic contraction, agricultural decline, and (very likely)

16 Main description in P. F. Wallace & R. Ó Floinn (eds.), *Treasures of the National Museum of Ireland: Irish Antiquities* (Dublin, 2002), 138–9; see Carey, *I&G*, 555–8 for further bibliography.

17 The main personage to meet Manannán is named Bran son of Febal; *Febal* is the source of anglicized *Foyle*. For this story, see below, 56–68. For the Broighter Hoard and the later literature, see Carey, *I&G*, 355–8, and S. Mac Mathúna, *CCHE*, v., 1750–52.

18 Note the suggestive Irish words *bile* ‘sacred tree’ and (even more strikingly) *deífid*, apparently ‘god-tree’ (*día* + *fid*) and sometimes used to mean a tree held in special veneration by the inhabitants of a particular area. The latter however could be used as a synonym for the term *fidnemed*, which seems to have meant a tree growing on church land, so the ‘paganness’ of the concept is unclear. See discussion in *Bechbretha: an Old Irish Law-Tract on Bee-Keeping*, ed. & trans. T. Charles-Edwards & F. Kelly (Dublin, 1983), 108–9.

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some degree of political upheaval.¹⁹ Therefore it is possible that late-Iron Age religious values and beliefs reflected such turbulence, so that far from descending changelessly from an immemorial Celtic past, they may have been in considerable flux.

With the turn from Irish archaeology to Celtic Gaul and Britain, written data enters the picture, largely in the form of inscriptions, though there are also important Roman descriptions of Gaulish religious customs. Once again, useful parallels between the religious cultures of these societies and that of Ireland can only be drawn if we stick to broad outlines. Three features emerge as likely to have been shared. The first is that watercourses seem regularly to have been venerated as divinities—usually goddesses, though there are a few river-gods.²⁰ The second is a welter of local variety, with an enormously large number of named deities attested, though most of these clearly fell into a limited number of overlapping functional types: warrior, trader, hunter, and healer, for instance.²¹ Thirdly, neither Gaul nor Britain provide us with evidence for a native pantheon in the Graeco-Roman sense, and this is clearly related to the localism just mentioned. This last presents a puzzle, for it has to be acknowledged that Old Irish literature—as we shall see—*does* in fact provide a loose family of supernatural beings looking something like a pantheon. A deity named the Dagda, literally meaning the ‘Good God’, forms the centre of gravity within this structure, like the Roman Jupiter; like Jupiter, he has several children and is conspicuously highly sexed.²²

19 Note that Edel Bhreathnach argues the opposite, suggesting ‘relative stability on the island’, in *Ireland and Medieval Europe*, 41. The eve of conversion seems to have seen economic expansion, bolstered by raiding on and trading with Roman Britain; see *ECI*, 149–63. See also T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Nations and kingdoms’, in *After Rome* (Oxford, 2003), 25, for evidence that some kind of powerful but partial authority had emerged among elements of the Irish in the mid-fourth century.

20 On Celtic female river-deities, see M. Green, *Celtic Goddesses* (London, 1995), 89–102; river-gods are few and are attested only in overtly Romanized contexts. Mars Condati (‘of the Confluence’), for example, was associated with confluences into the River Wear (and elsewhere), and was also found in Gaul; the deity of the River Tyne was depicted as a mature, masculine figure. But as Graeco-Roman culture tended to visualize rivers as male, examples such as these may represent the overwriting of native convention, though why this should take place in some cases and not others is hard to say; see Hutton, *PB*, 242.

21 See Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 155–6; raw data in P.-M. Duval, *Les dieux de la Gaule* (Paris, 1993), and N. Jufer & T. Luginbühl, *Les dieux gaulois: répertoire des noms de divinités celtiques connus par l’épigraphie, les textes antiques et la toponymie* (Paris, 2001).

22 The archaeologist Catherine Swift says that ‘... there is no real reason to suggest

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There are a number of ways to resolve this discrepancy. On the one hand, pre-Christian Ireland might have independently developed a pantheon while the Gauls and the Britons did not, though this seems unlikely. Ireland was, and remained after its conversion, a decentralized, rural, and politically fragmented society with a thinly spread population of limited mobility—a situation unlikely to foster the development of a national family of gods.

More persuasive is the second possibility that those members of society who *could* move about thought in terms of a core pantheon. This would mean those who maintained themselves via a professional skill (known as *áes dána*, the ‘people of art/talent’), and perhaps especially druids as the island’s religious elite. It may be that this is what we find reflected at some removes in the later literature, which does have a striking emphasis on figures associated with skill. People tied to the land would probably have focused more on local divinities of fertility.²³ It is possible that a similar situation obtained in Gaul, and this would explain the sharp contrast between Julius Caesar’s famous description of a micro-pantheon of five Gaulish gods—for whom he uses the Roman names Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Apollo, and Minerva—and the clear epigraphic evidence that Gaulish deities numbered in the hundreds.²⁴ We know that Caesar spoke with a druid, and that he had a pressing need to understand the attitudes of the powerful in Gaulish society: his account of the gods of the Gauls may reflect solely the beliefs of the learned, mobile elite.²⁵

a hierarchy along the lines of a classical pantheon among the Irish gods’, but this merely underscores the problem of how and when the literary pantheon originated; see her ‘The Gods of Newgrange in Irish Literature and Romano-Celtic Tradition’, in G. Burenhult & S. Westergaard (eds.), *Stones and Bones* (Oxford, 2003), 53–63, at 55. Note that Eric Hamp has queried the translation ‘Good God’, arguing that *Dagda* may have meant ‘god of the good (i.e. noble) people’; see ‘The Dag(h)d(h)ae and his relatives’, in L. Sawicki & D. Shalev (eds.), *Donum grammaticum: Studies in Latin and Celtic Linguistics in Honour of Hannah Rosén* (Leuven, 2002), 163–169.

23 The possibility of such a scenario is suggested by the maintenance by the elite—a few centuries later, but in a no less decentralized society—of a complex, high-register language, Old Irish, with almost no evidence of dialect. The language of people lower on the social spectrum would have exhibited regional variations, which were perhaps considerable. On this aspect of Old Irish, see P. Russell, ‘“What was best of every language”: the early history of the Irish language’, *NHI* i., 405–50, at 442–3.

24 *Bell. Gall.* 6. 17. 1–2.

25 Compare M. Aldhouse-Green’s maximalist account, *Caesar’s Druids: An Ancient Priesthood* (London & New Haven, 2010), with the comments of R. Hutton, *Blood and*

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A third possibility is that the whole concept of a family of gods under a father-god might have been adopted by the Irish as a result of contact with Roman culture, though this might have happened at two possible stages: pre-conversion and post-conversion. Pre-Christian Ireland was exposed to significant influence from Roman Britain, and the idea of a pantheon might have been adopted in imitation of the culture of the neighbouring island, as was the custom of commemorating the dead with inscriptions on stone.²⁶ Alternatively the concept of a pantheon might never have been part of Irish paganism at any stage. Rather, it could have been imported after the island became Christian, as the learned classes of Irish society developed familiarity with Latin literature—not least the poet Virgil’s baroquely mythological epic, the *Aeneid*. All these options are possible, but at the present state of our knowledge it is hard to gauge which is most likely.²⁷

‘UNCLEAN THINGS’

We know of one individual who encountered pagan Ireland first-hand: St Patrick. Exasperatingly, Patrick tells us next to nothing in his surviving writings about the non-Christian religious beliefs and practices to which he must have been exposed.²⁸

Much about Patrick’s life and mission has been clarified by two generations of brilliant historians, though many obscurities remain.²⁹ What he was famously *not*, however, was an Irishman. He tells us that he was

Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain (London & New Haven, 2009), 2–6; also S. B. Dunham, ‘Caesar’s perception of Gallic social structures’, in B. Arnold & D. Blair Gibson (eds.), *Celtic Chieftdom, Celtic State* (Cambridge, 1995), 110–5.

26 On pre-Christian Ireland as ‘both part of a Roman milieu and other than Roman’, with contacts via ‘trading and raiding, colonisation and slaving’ see Johnston, *L&IEMI*, 10–12; her fn.53 gives references to the most recent material evidence for trade networks between Britain and Ireland (and beyond). Survey of Roman influence in the conversion period in L. Laing, ‘The romanization of Ireland in the fifth century’, *Peritia* 4 (1985), 261–78.

27 See the arguments of V. Di Martino, *Roman Ireland* (Cork, 2003), 135–60, which are interesting but often unsupported or wildly overstated.

28 Useful basic survey in R. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity, 371–1386 AD* (London, 1997), 80–92; great detail in *ECI*, 182–233. My account owes much to Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 155–6, to which I merely add detail here.

29 See *ECI*, 214–32, for a scrupulous weighing of the evidence. For Patrick’s likely dates, see E. A. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge, 1985); influential collec-

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a Briton, born into priestly family which belonged to the local nobility of a Romano-British *civitas*.³⁰ Abducted as a teenager and enslaved in the far west of Ireland, he managed after six years to escape. Later, having been ordained and then consecrated as a bishop, he felt impelled by a vision to return to evangelize the island where he had been in bondage and to succour its beleaguered Christians, though we know he was neither the island's first missionary, nor even its first bishop. The scholarly consensus is that Patrick's mission should be dated to the fifth century, and probably to its second half, though there is a range of opinions on almost every detail of where, when, how, and why.

Patrick is an indispensable source for the 'changing times' of the conversion period, which began with a pagan cult in full swing. British slaves, right at the bottom of society, probably made up the majority of Christians in Ireland—Patrick himself began as one such—though there may already have been settled communities of Irish converts in the 'Greater Leinster', the eastern and south-eastern region of Ireland, the area which had been most exposed to the culture of Roman Britain.³¹ Of Patrick's two surviving writings, the more important for our purposes is the *Confession*, which amounts to a powerful—and powerfully difficult—spiritual autobiography, written in Latin.³² Ireland's social topography, it reveals, consisted of a patchwork of different kingdoms of variably dense

tion of essays in D. N. Dumville & L. Abrams (eds.), *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge, 1999).

30 For suggestions about the status of Patrick's family and the implications for his mission, see R. Flechner, 'Patrick's Reasons for Leaving Britain', in P. Russell & F. L. Edmunds (eds.), *Tome: Studies in Medieval History and Law* (Woodbridge, 2011), 125–34. For archaeological evidence bolstering the impression that contact with Britain was crucial in the formation of a Christian milieu in Ireland, see E. O'Brien, 'Pagan and Christian burial in Ireland in the first millennium', in N. Edwards (ed.), *The Early Church in Wales and the West* (Oxford, 1992), 130–7. Charles-Edwards (*ECI*, 186) makes the intriguing suggestion that British missionaries' work was made easier because the Irish gods were 'often identical' to those whom the Britons had formerly worshipped.

31 See *ECI*, 182 and *W&TB*, 182–3. Slaves in early Ireland, as elsewhere, would have performed hard labour while under the constant threat of violence and sexual exploitation. Patrick's writings, incidentally, are remarkable as the only first-hand account of the experience of slavery to have come down to us from antiquity. For awareness in Rome of Ireland's Christians and the concerns behind the decision to send them a bishop, see Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 158.

32 Amongst other things, this extraordinary text is also a justification of Patrick's behaviour as a missionary in the context of disputes which are opaque to us but were clearly familiar to his intended audience among the Britons; see *ECI*, 214–33, especially 218–19.

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population. There were around a hundred of these *túatha* (singular *túath*).³³ Patrick notes the presence among the Irish of *idola et immunda*, ‘idols and unclean things’.³⁴ Jacqueline Borsje has noted that while the basic meaning of *idolum* in Latin is ‘image’, extended definitions include ‘apparition’ and the like; because a category of supernatural entity appears in the later literature under the native label *scál* (‘phantom’, ‘spectre’), she has suggested that Patrick’s word *idola* refers to this class of being.³⁵ Ingenious as this is, his meaning may have been more prosaic. *Immunda* in particular suggests *objects*, and it is tempting to imagine Patrick’s ‘idols and unclean things’ as carved figures of the Ralaghan type, together with the ritual trappings of their cult.³⁶

After Patrick, nothing in the textual record names or alludes to native deities until the end of the seventh century.³⁷ To bridge this gap in the evidence about the fate of the gods whom the Irish worshipped during the change of religions, we must again look at parallels with similar societies.³⁸ These parallels suggest that the customs of animal sacrifice and the makings of offerings to deities—universal among pre-Christian European peoples—were progressively given up or banned. The loss of these

33 On the character of the conversion-period *túath*, see *ECI*, 12–15, and *After Rome*, ed. T. Charles-Edwards, 12–18; for population, see Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 38–9.

34 *Confessio*, §41, in *The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop*, ed. & trans. D. Howlett (Blackrock, 1994), 80, 81.

35 J. Borsje, ‘Monotheistic to a Certain Extent. The “Good Neighbours” of God in Ireland’, in A.-M. Korte & M. de Haardt (eds.), *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism* (Leiden & Boston, 2009), 56.

36 It is conceivable that by *immunda* Patrick was referring to sacrificial offerings. The question of whether Christians should eat meat from animals sacrificed to idols was of serious concern to the very early Church (see Acts 15:29, where it is forbidden). St Paul believed eating such meat was allowable in itself, but not if it caused a weaker fellow Christian to be troubled in his conscience (1 Corinthians 8:4–13). Surrounded by recent converts, Patrick may have felt that Paul’s concern applied.

37 This is not to imply there is a textual gap in the record between the late fifth and late seventh centuries: a highly complex and significant body of texts survives which sheds light on the growth of monasticism and the codification of ecclesiastical and secular law, much of it notoriously difficult for the non-specialist. Native gods, however, do not feature. A good way in is C. Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland, A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999), along with D. Ó Cróinín’s indispensable *Early Medieval Ireland, 400–1200* (London & New York, 1995).

38 New light will undoubtedly be shed by R. Flechner & M. Ní Mhaonaigh (eds.), *Converting the Isles* (Turnhout, 2015), one outcome of a major three-year research project, which had—alas—not yet been published as this book went to press.

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rituals would inevitably lead to once-important divinities being forgotten—perhaps more rapidly than we would expect, given the dismal life expectancies of the period.³⁹ Ritual sites would have been closed and abandoned. Edel Bhreathnach suggests that wells and springs formerly associated with pagan gods were widely used by missionaries as sites of baptism by affusion, in which water was poured over the convert's head, thus consecrating the sites via the rites of the new religion.⁴⁰ On the social level the vigour of churches and monastic centres would have been reflected in the increased standing of churchmen, even as authority drained from pagan religious functionaries. In Ireland this probably meant the druidic class, and there is good evidence from the law-tracts and penitentials for this process of social demotion, including seventh-century stipulations that druids were no longer to be accorded the privileges owed to members of high-status professions.⁴¹

If Anglo-Saxon England is anything to go by, after the rulers of a population group converted, the public worship of pagan gods probably took forty to fifty years to disappear, following a brief period in which Christianity and paganism coexisted.⁴² In Ireland, this scenario was probably repeated many times in different social groups. As Elva Johnston points out, the island's political diversity meant that conversion must have been an untidy affair, and 'not simply the process of convincing one important dynasty or ruler'.⁴³ She thus aptly describes Ireland's conversion as 'both fast and slow'—fast because once a people began to change their religion the process could take place relatively speedily, but slow because there were so many peoples to convert.

The Venerable Bede provides a (not unproblematic) narrative of the process of Christianization for Anglo-Saxon England, but there is no

39 Observations for a slightly later period, the seventh century, in C. Doherty, 'Kingship in Early Ireland', *K<*, 7–10, who points to a continuing concern among churchmen with the Christianization of the landscape, implying that the symbolic conversion of the landscape—'a redefinition of the physical world'—flowed from and followed the conversion of society and the dismantling of pagan cult.

40 See Bhreathnach, *Ireland and the Medieval World*, 134–5.

41 F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), 60–1, and *The Irish Penitentials*, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1963), 160. A re-assessment of all references to druids in medieval Irish literature—too easily blended with the contradictory accounts of classical writers, and produced in very different cultural circumstances—is strongly to be desired; see comments of Hutton, *PB*, 173.

42 B. Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 600–800* (Harlow, 2006), 128.

43 *L&IEMI*, 13.

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equivalent for Ireland. Indeed, Patrick's writings make plain that he was not at all interested in giving a sequential account of the conversion process. We do not know, for example, which *túatha* were converted first, which lagged behind, nor how this process was bound up with the expansion of alphabetic literacy. If there was any backsliding, it is not mentioned. Nevertheless, the earliest Irish saints' lives, which date from the seventh century, make plain that—as elsewhere in Europe—pagan deities were sometimes rebranded as evil spirits.⁴⁴ Surviving Anglo-Saxon baptismal formulae involve the rejection of pagan deities as demons, and as Irish missionaries played an important role in the conversion of some Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, it is tempting to believe that similar formulae also played a part in the conversion process in Ireland.

TWO DEITIES

With this background in mind, it is worth considering the trajectories in the conversion period of two specific deities, a god and a goddess.

The god Lug is a pivotal figure in a number of medieval sagas, and is one of the most charismatic of medieval Ireland's literary supernaturals—a youthful warrior and ruler 'equally gifted in all the arts', as his sobriquet, *samildánach*, indicates. He was repackaged in the nineteenth century as the Irish god of the sun—a process examined later in this study—and though not a shred of evidence exists for this identification it is still recycled in popular works.⁴⁵ Lug's prominence in the literature has led generations of scholars to see him as an after-image of an important pre-Christian deity intimately connected with kingship.⁴⁶ Old Irish Lug can only derive from earlier Lugus, and a divinity of that name is attested among a number of Celtic-speaking peoples on the continent, as

44 See J. Borsje 'Druids, deer, and "words of power": coming to terms with evil in medieval Ireland', in K. Ritari, *et al.* (eds.), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008), 128–9, for druids invoking demons (i.e. their gods) in Muirchú's late seventh-century 'Life of Patrick'.

45 See below, 265, 337.

46 For Lug's continued prominence into the Christian period, see T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Eponym of Cnogba', originally in *Éigse* 23 (1989), 27–38, and reprt. in M. Boyd (ed.), *Coire Sois: The Cauldron of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN, 2014), 155–64. Foundational observations by O'Rahilly, *EIH&M*, 310–4, to be used with caution; overview of medieval references in *CMT*, 126–7.

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well as more indirectly in Britain.⁴⁷ It has long been thought that Lugus was one of the few Celtic gods with an extensive cult, though Bernhard Maier has recently cast doubt upon his pan-Celtic spread.⁴⁸

In Ireland, it seems accepted that a pre-Christian deity provided the foundation for the medieval Lug. But how do we determine the ways in which this divinity was affected by change of religions—about how, on a more than merely linguistic level, Lugus morphed into Lug? If as before we refer only to what cautious comparison can tell us (supplemented by such securely pre-Christian evidence as there is), then all that can be blandly affirmed is that Lugus was important to at least some groups among the pagan Irish. This much is clear from tribal and personal names, as at least two populations named themselves after him. One was the Luigni, the ‘People of Lugus’, whose territory in historical times was located in Connaught; the other was the Luigni Temro (‘of Tara’), who were associated with Tara in Co. Meath, the symbolic centre of Irish over-kingship.⁴⁹ The two peoples may have been branches of a single kindred. Their name appears a number of times in an earlier form, LU-GUNI, upon stones incised in ogam, the cumbersome alphabet of notches which was developed to write Irish in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁵⁰ This form crops up on ogam stones in a scattered fashion, suggesting that members of the Luigni were either widely dispersed or that the name was relatively common.⁵¹

47 The British evidence consists of a few personal and placenames apparently containing the theonym: Welsh *Llywarch* < **Lugumarkos*, ‘Stallion of Lugus’, for example, and Carlisle < *Castra Luguvalium*, ‘the settlement of *Luguwalos*, “he-who-is-strong-in/like-Lugus”’, though these could admit of other interpretations. Less assailable is the name of the literary figure Llew Llaw Gyffes in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*, as *Llew* can only derive independently from earlier *Lugus* and cannot represent a borrowing from Irish *Lug*. Note Charles-Edwards’ comments on the punning on the name Llew and the place name Lothian (= *Lleuddinion*, ‘Llew’s Fortress’) in one of the *awdlau* of the Old Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* (*W&TB*, 375).

48 See his ‘Is Lug to be identified with Mercury (*Bell. Gall.* vi 17, 1)? New Suggestions on an Old Problem’, *Ériu* 47 (1996), 127–135.

49 I use *Connaught* to refer to the province, to distinguish it from the *Connachta*, its medieval inhabitants.

50 See D. McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 108, and J. Carey, ‘Tara and the Supernatural’, *K<*, 42–3, fn. 50. It is conventional to transcribe ogam with upper-case letters.

51 Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World*, 43–4, notes the Dál Luigne—*dál* is another term for a kin-group—who are listed as a subject people in the eighth-century ‘Expulsion of the Déssi’.

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By their nature, ogam stones commemorate high-status individuals. A significant number of stones point to a widespread fondness among Irish elites for personal names containing an allusion to the god. One example is LUGUDEC(C)AS—corresponding to Old Irish *Lugdech*, genitive case of the common male name *Lugaid*—which perhaps means ‘he who venerates Lugus’.⁵² Even more suggestive is LUGUQRIT- (Old Irish *Luccreth*), ‘he whose form is like that of Lugus’.⁵³ That these names continued to be popular in the Christian period in no way implies that the worship of Lugus was maintained, in the same way that those named Apollonius or Dionysius in late antiquity did not continue to worship the gods Apollo or Dionysus. Rather, these were simply names hallowed by tradition, inheritance, and elite usage.

While the above is relatively secure, it is not much to go on. However, as soon as we turn to early medieval depictions of the literary Lug for hints about the pagan Lugus, we are immediately confronted with a mass of aggravating ambiguities. It must be emphasized that although very little can be known for sure about pre-Christian Irish religion, it

52 There are several others. LUGUVEC(C)- is twice attested (= Old Irish *Lugech*, *Lugach*), perhaps meaning ‘Lugus-like’ or ‘fighter of Lugus’, while another stone apparently commemorates a poet named *Luguttis*, perhaps ‘devoted to Lugus’; for these see McManus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 88, 96, 103–4, 108, 125. Note that the group-name *moccu Lugd(a)i*, attested in Old Irish, points to an older **Luguadii*, also probably meaning ‘Lugus-like’. On the etymologies, see references in J. T. Koch, ‘A Swallowed Onomastic Tale in *Cath Maige Mucrama?*’, in J. Carey, et al. (eds.), *Ildánach, Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana* (Llandysul, 1999), 69–71.

53 These names are vulnerable to one of the criticisms made by Maier of continental and British evidence for a cult of Lugus, which is that a homonym, **lugus*, meant ‘lynx’, figuratively ‘warrior’ or ‘hero’ in Celtic, and so words containing the *lugu-* element do not have to refer to the god: the Luigni might have been the ‘Heroic Ones’, and LUGUQRIT- might have meant ‘having the look of a warrior’. On the other hand, no one doubts there was a pre-Christian Lugus in Ireland, and confusion between the theonym and the noun for ‘warrior’ must have been widespread and conducive to deliberate double meanings—especially as heroism is the god’s most obvious quality. Scholars have never agreed on the meaning of the theonym; a link to a root meaning ‘light’ is often suggested but is philologically difficult. (See E. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford, 1967), 218–21). On the other hand, John Carey has recently shed doubt on the very existence of the ‘lynx’ word, and I do not see why the meaning ‘warrior, hero’ might not have been a dead metaphor derived from the theonym; *DIL* is not clear that the later forms of these words, *lug* and *Lug*, are separate words at all. For these semantic complexities, see S. Ziegler, *Die Sprache der altirischen Ogam-Inschriften* (Göttingen, 1994), 197–200, and J. Carey, ‘Celtic **lugus* ‘lynx’: A phantom Big Cat?’, in F. Josephson (ed.), *Celtic Language, Law and Letters: Proceedings of the Tenth Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica* (Gothenburg, 2008), 151–68.

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does not follow that *all* conjecture on the subject is retrograde and irresponsible. One may reasonably speculate, but it is important not to use the resulting suggestions to anchor larger arguments.⁵⁴

One plausible scenario is that there were multiple Luguses, or versions of him. Surviving texts make clear that the medieval Lug was strongly bound up with ideas and ideals of rulership, and in an island of many *túatha* his divine precursor might well have had any number of local manifestations—hardly an uncommon phenomenon in the pagan religions of ancient Europe.⁵⁵ As such, he might have been regarded as an ancestor-deity connected with the legitimization of political authority in many different population groups: the Luigni may have been far from unique.

If different groups in pre-Christian Ireland did indeed have distinctively local takes on Lugus, this may explain a puzzling feature of the written record: that numerous literary figures—often heroes or legendary ancestors, and definitely intended to be mortal—look like alter egos of the god. Scholars have suggested quite a number of these, their names usually containing the *Lug-* root. Luigne Fer Trí, legendary ancestor of the Luigni of Connaught and fosterer of the wise king Cormac mac Airt, is a likely candidate. So is Lugaid Mac Con, a pseudohistorical king of Tara associated with the Érainn people of Munster, whom Cormac, according to legend, displaced as king.⁵⁶ Though Mac Con (as he is also known) has a rather villainous role in the later saga literature, early accounts treat him sympathetically, suggesting that he was once a more heroic figure.⁵⁷ He in turn may have a doublet in Lugaid Loígde, an important ancestor-

54 On the question of how legitimate it is to comb medieval Irish texts for evidence of pagan belief, it cannot yet be said that a consensus has emerged. While discussion looks set to continue, one (influential) view sees the whole exercise as a hiding to nothing; see for instance Elizabeth Boyle's uncompromising review of Bhreathnach's *Ireland in the Medieval World*, in which she condemns 'the ongoing production of speculative prose in the face of the inescapable truth that we have no reliable historical evidence which can attest to the nature of the pre-Christian religion of Ireland' (*Early Medieval Europe* [forthcoming, 2016/7]).

55 See for example R. Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca & London, 2011), 70–3; it is striking that multiple Luguses (if this is what the 'Lugoves' mentioned in dedications across a wide span of western Europe actually were), are attested outside Ireland, for which see A. Tovar, 'The God Lugus in Spain', *BBCS* 29.4 (1982), 591–9.

56 *ECI*, 144.

57 See comments of Ralph O'Connor, *DDD*, 315; also *Duanairé Fhinn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, ed. E. MacNeill & G. Murphy (London, 1953) [ITS 43], iii., 205–6.

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figure for the Érainn.⁵⁸ A fourth is Lugaid Riab nDerg ('the red-striped'), who like Mac Con was remembered as a legendary king of Tara.⁵⁹

But Lug's most famous possible avatar is an ally of Mac Con (and in some traditions, his cousin), Finn mac Cumail. The legendary Finn was the leader of a *fíán*—a band of young, aristocratic warrior-hunters—and he became the focus of a lush body of later medieval and modern Gaelic tradition. Scholars have long pointed out structural similarities between the stories associated with Lug and those connected to Finn. The latter's name goes back to *Vindos, the 'Fair One', which may have been a local form of Lugus, perhaps even the form of the god whom members of a *fíán* took as their patron deity, since *fíán*-bands were a genuine social institution in early Ireland.⁶⁰ This list of reflexes could be extended: it has even been argued, less convincingly, that the saints Lachtin and Mo Lua might also be humanized versions of Lugus in origin.⁶¹

One further special case may be significant, albeit problematic: the crucial bond between Lug and the Ulstermen's greatest hero, Cú Chulainn.⁶² According to the great epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'), Cú Chulainn is Lug's son. But according to the much shorter tale *Compert Con Culainn* ('Cú Chulainn's Conception'), he is also in some sense his mortal incarnation. There is no way to gauge the age

58 A. Mac Shamhráin & P. Byrne, 'Prosopography I: Kings named in *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* and *The Airgíalla Charter Poem*', *K<*, 164–5.

59 Carey, 'Tara and the Supernatural', *K<*, 41–4, esp. fn.49; see classic statements from T. F. O'Rahilly on euhemerized reflexes of Lug in *EIH&M*, 202, 284.

60 On Lug and the 'divine' Finn, see J. Carey, 'Nodons, Lugus, Windos', in C.-M. Ternès, *et al.* (eds.), *Dieux des Celtes/Goetter der Kelten/Gods of the Celts* (Luxembourg, 2002), 99–126, plus T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'Cath Maige Tuired as Exemplary Myth', in Boyd (ed.), *Coire Sois*, 135–54, at 152–3 (originally published in P. de Brún, *et al.* (eds.), *Folia Gadelica: Essays presented by former students to R. A. Breatnach* (Cork, 1983), 1–19). Also P. Mac Cana, 'Fianaigecht in the pre-Norman period', in B. Almqvist, *et al.* (eds.), *The Heroic Process: Essays on the Fenian Tradition of Ireland and Scotland* (Dublin, 1987), 75–99, and see lengthier discussion below, 197–8.

61 See P. Ó Riain, 'Traces of Lug in early Irish hagiographical tradition', *ZCP* 36 (1977), 138–156; cf. D. Blair Gibson on a connection between the obscure Airgíalla saint Luchtigern mac Lugdach and the hilltop ritual site of Mooghaun, Co. Clare (*From Chieftdom to State in Early Ireland* (Cambridge, 2012), 43). Suggestive, but too speculative to be persuasive, is B. Lacey, *Lug's forgotten Donegal kingdom: the archaeology, history, and folklore of the Sil Lugdach of Cloghaneely* (Dublin, 2012), which argues for traces of an ongoing connection to the god Lug(us) in the hagiography and historical record of a small and remote early medieval kingdom in Donegal.

62 A theme explored by E. A. Gray, 'Lug and Cú Chulainn: King and Warrior, God and Man', *SC* 24/5 (1989/90), 38–52.

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of this tradition; both the texts which attest to it are sophisticated works from a Christian and monastic milieu, and quite basic aspects of Lug's role in them are unclear. In the *Táin* Lug appears to his son Cú Chulainn, who lies gravely injured. Not only does the god heal him—leaving him in a recuperative coma for three days—but he also takes on his son's appearance and fights in his stead on the battlefield.⁶³ This interlude might be an old theme, but the *Táin*'s Christian shapers went to great lengths to imbue the text with a plausibly 'pagan' atmosphere. Lug's healing of Cú Chulainn resembles episodes from classical epic so closely that medieval literary imitation is a distinct possibility.⁶⁴

In the story of Cú Chulainn's conception, things get still murkier, and it is possible that the saga's author is sending up pagan gods.⁶⁵ Lug—supposedly *samildánach*, 'multitalented'—requires no fewer than three attempts to father a son, a son who is also (apparently) himself.⁶⁶ The first child dies in childhood, while the second—fathered sexlessly—is promptly aborted by his mother, who is embarrassed to be a visibly pregnant bride. The third is Cú Chulainn, who is conceived via an act of ordinary sexual intercourse between human beings and is thus Lug's son only in a rather rarified sense. Historically, Irish scholars have been prepared to see this as a 'triple birth', an archaic mythic theme marking the hero out as someone special. It may instead be that persistent echoes of the Gospel infancy narratives are being enlisted here to underscore that the pagan Lug can barely manage what the Christian God had done with

63 *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, ed. & trans. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1976), ll.2073–2184. Note that Lug says that he will fight in Cú Chulainn's stead, at least: but in Recensions I and II of the *Táin*, when the hero wakes up, Lug tells him the boys of Emain Macha have actually done the job.

64 Ann Dooley has gone so far as to suggest the whole episode may have been inspired by an uncanny incident in Patrick's *Confession*; see her *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga "Táin Bó Cúailnge"* (Toronto, 2006), 128–35 (where the Recension I version of the episode is quoted and translated), also 145–55.

65 The saga might well be early; it depends when one thinks a crucial lost manuscript, the *Cín Dromma Snechtai* ('The Book of Drumsnat'), was written. There is long-running debate on the matter, but a date of c.700 is not impossible; see T. Ó Concheanainn, 'The Textual Tradition of *Compert Con Culainn*', *Celtica* 21 (1990), 441–55. Text itself in *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, ed. A. G. Van Hamel (Dublin, 1933 [reprinted 1978]), 1–8, and translation in *EIM&S*, 131–3. On tone see *PPCP*, 198–9.

66 On the possible influence of the Gospel infancy narratives here, and how we should read the implied parallel between Christ and Cú Chulainn, see *DDDH*, 245, and T. Ó Cathasaigh, 'Mythology in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*' in H. L. Tristram (ed.), *Studien zur Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Tübingen, 1993), 114–32, at 126–8, reprt. in Boyd (ed.), *Coire Sois*, 201–18, at 213–4.

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ease—that is, become incarnate and be born of a virgin as a child both divine and human.⁶⁷ Neatly, the life of Cú Chulainn was thought by the medieval Irish to have overlapped with that of Christ and, like his, to have lasted thirty-three years.⁶⁸

And yet the possibility remains that behind Lug's relationship to Cú Chulainn there lies a genuinely old tradition of Lugus the divine ancestor, who might embody himself in heroes and rulers. To name a noble boy-child *Luccreth* was to hope for him to be 'like-Lugus-in-form' in the future. Here we may further speculate: if Christianization removed the mobile religious elite—the druids—who had bound the religious traditions of different population groups together, it may have prompted the divine Lugus to disintegrate. The way then opened for local versions of the god to go their separate ways and to develop into a range of different and mortal ancestor figures with distinct regional and genealogical significances.

If our speculation is correct, this splintering into legendary personages was only one of the trajectories of Lugus. The conversion period also brought with it his reincarnation as Lug the literary character, who retained the clearly supernatural status which the likes of Luigne Fer Trí and Lugaid Mac Con had lost. The dynamo driving the crystallization of the literary Lug was probably the rise of the Uí Néill, the multi-branched royal kindred who achieved predominance as a distinct lineage in the northern half of Ireland in the first half of the sixth century, at much the same time that Christianity was becoming firmly established among the island's elites. They were to dominate the high-kingship of Tara for half a millennium.⁶⁹ The supernatural Lug of the medieval literature is in many ways *their* Lug; as such he was no cultural fossil, but a figure filtered through a veil of political propaganda in order to underwrite the Uí Néill's claim to the kingship of Tara.⁷⁰

67 Note Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's elegant observation (in Boyd (ed.), *Coire Sois*, 8) that in the first conception 'the parents are both divine; in the third they are both human. In the second conception the father is divine and the mother human. We see in this sequence how the hero mediates the opposition between god and man.'

68 'The Conception of Cú Chulainn' would repay greater examination than can be given here; note that Marion Deane's recent retro-mythological reading does not mention its possible satirical subtext ('From sacred marriage to clientship: a mythical account of the establishment of kingship as an institution', in R. Schot, *et al.* (eds.), *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship* (Dublin, 2011), 1–21).

69 *DDDH*, 314.

70 Lugaid Riab nDerg whom we met above was thought of as a key ancestor of the

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But why should this require the retrofitting of an ex-god? It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the institution of kingship in early Irish culture: the king was represented as the axis around which secular society revolved, and the high-kingship of Tara was the supreme example, in ideology if not always in political fact.⁷¹ Bart Jaski writes that kings were ‘the protagonists in the early Irish annals, the main characters in narrative literature, the focus of praise-poems, the *raison d’être* of the genealogists, the target of praise or curse in hagiography, and the centre of secular power in the legal tracts.’⁷² In literature at least, the king was often represented as a ‘sacral’ figure, whose rule was licensed by a contract with the supernatural realm and who mediated between society and nature.⁷³ A core of originally pagan concepts continued to attach to the institution, not least the idea of the ‘prince’s truth’ (*fír flathemon*), a just equilibrium in which the ruler’s righteousness is reflected in the success of his reign. This success in turn depended on the ruler avoiding a personal checklist of ‘prohibited acts’ (*gessi*)—another originally pre-Christian idea. But the church also had trenchant views of its own about the nature of monarchy, with the result that in the documentary period the early Irish ideology of kingship encompassed both indigenous and ecclesiastical elements.⁷⁴

Philip O’Leary comments that Irish saga teaches that ‘perfect kingship is beyond human scope.’⁷⁵ The purpose of the literary Lug may have been to personify the potent native dimension of ideal kingship, just as the Old Testament King David personified the Christian aspect. Lug may have remained imaginatively available during the conversion period because of a strong association with the great annual *óenach* or ‘fair’, which was held at Tailtiu, now Teltown in Co. Meath. (This was the most famous of such assemblies; there were a number of others.) In the his-

Dál Cuinn, the progenitors of the Uí Néill dynasty; see *DDDH*, 314. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh points out that Lug ‘is presented as the legitimator of the Dál Cuinn (and hence also the Uí Néill) kings of Tara’ (‘The Eponym of Cnogba’, *Éigse* 23 (1989), 31 [= Boyd (ed.), *Coire Sois*, 158]).

71 Essential one-volume discussion is B. Jaski, *Early Irish Kingship and Succession* (Dublin, 2000), especially 25–88. See also N. B. Aitchison, ‘Kingship, society and sacral-ity: rank, power, and ideology in early medieval Ireland’, *Traditio* 49 (1994), 45–75.

72 Jaski, *Kingship and Succession*, 25.

73 Jaski, *Kingship and Succession*, 57–88.

74 Seminal discussion by McCone, *PPCP*, 155–8; see also *DDDH*, 278.

75 P. O’Leary, ‘A Foreseeing Driver of an Old Chariot: Regal Moderation in Early Irish Literature’, *CMCS* 11 (Summer, 1986), 16, quoted *DDDH*, 308.

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torical period, the *óenach* itself involved not only serious political, ecclesiastical, and judicial business, but also horse and chariot racing, and other games and forms of entertainment, along with trade.⁷⁶ Tailtiu had become a politically crucial royal site and the Uí Néill's pre-eminent place of assembly by c.700, but it seems clear that its roots—especially the link to Lug—went back to the pagan period. Later tradition made Tailtiu the name of Lug's foster-mother, and also asserted that Lug had instituted the games there as part of her funeral rites.⁷⁷ The antiquity of that particular idea is debatable, but the *óenach* at Tailtiu was certainly held each year at *Lugnasad* (probably meaning 'the Festival of Lug') at the beginning of August.⁷⁸ The very name underscores its relationship to Lug, though the original meaning of the *nasad* element is no longer clear.⁷⁹ The custom of holding tribal assemblies at Lugnasad is very likely to be old: it is amongst other things the most obvious and convenient time in the cycle of the seasons for travel.

It must be emphasized that in the historical period the Lugnasad assembly at Tailtiu was not—in any sense at all—a 'pagan' festival; indeed, Tailtiu had a church and was at one point the site of an ecclesiastical synod, probably held at the time of the *óenach* itself.⁸⁰ But it is striking that Lug continued to be openly associated with the festival after it ceased to involve his worship as a god. It suggests the Irish had the capacity during the sixth and seventh centuries for a very precise kind of

⁷⁶ *L&IEMI*, 77.

⁷⁷ See for example the poem by Cúán ua Lothcáin (who died in 1024) on Tailtiu which makes the etymology clear by calling the festival 'Lug's Lugnasad' (*Loga Lugnasad*); *Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. & trans. E. J. Gwynn (5 vols., Dublin, 1903–35), iv. 150.46.

⁷⁸ See M. MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Feast of the Beginning of Harvest* (London, 1962), 311–38.

⁷⁹ See *DIL* s.v. In 'Cormac's Glossary' (c.900) it is understood as *násad*, a word apparently interpreted to mean 'a commemorative gathering', though that might simply represent the glossator's guess based on the word *Lugnasad* itself; see F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 2000), 459. That the festival originated in Tailtiu's funeral-games might itself have been inspired by a homonym (*nás* in *DIL*) meaning 'death, putting to death', the story being concocted when the festival originally in the god's honour was rebranded and historicized. It is tempting to see, with *DIL*, a connection to the verb *nascid*, 'to bind', as in an oath or legal contract; the original Lugnasad might have involved the brokering of political and social contracts under the auspices of Lugus, whose own name—scholars have suggested—may derive from **lugiom*, 'oath', making him not only a god of kingship but also of ties and sureties. But here again the siren song of mere speculation is heard. On Lugus and oaths, see J. T. Koch, 'Further to *tongu do dia toinges mo thuath* etc.', *ÉC* 29 (1992), 249–61.

⁸⁰ *ECI*, 278–9.

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imaginative discrimination, and also that there can have been remarkably little fear of backsliding into paganism.

Memory of Lug may have been preserved thanks to a strategy already visible in the writings of learned Irishmen in the middle of the seventh century. This was to re-imagine the island's pre-Christian past as a local version of the Old Testament, full of scenarios and personages mirroring those of scripture. The point was to emphasize that the Irish had been uniquely ready to receive the truth of Christianity, being already long prepared for it. Part and parcel of this was to reconfigure former deities as people who had lived long ago, and Lug may have been re-constituted as the culture hero of the *óenach*: the invention of ball games, horse-racing and the assembly itself were all ascribed to him.⁸¹ Equally important, he could function as an idealized self-projection of those competing for, and visibly asserting, royal power—most importantly the Uí Néill over-king, who was there to see and be publicly seen, surrounded by his vassals.⁸² Catherine Swift tellingly points out that successfully holding the festival of Tailtiu was in itself a display of power, one 'that could bolster a new king or one weakened by defeats elsewhere', because an over-king had to have the political clout to demand the attendance of his more powerful subordinates.⁸³ Accomplished and aristocratic masculinity, mature but ideally still charged with the potency of youth, continued to be a crucial dimension of social identity among those aspiring to power; thus Lug as 'divine' hero could retain a function in the culture in direct proportion to the extent that he functioned as a role model without flaws.⁸⁴

81 J. Carey, 'Tara and the Supernatural', *K<*, 43–4; a gloss on the tenth-century 'Colloquy of the Two Sages' reads *is e Lug ar-ránic oenach ocus liathróit ocus echlaim*, 'it was Lug who invented the assembly and the ball and the horse-rod', in which the last two presumably stand metonymically for the sports played during the first. See *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad*, ed. W. Stokes, *RC* 26 (1905), §120. These may well have been old traditions—one is reminded of Caesar's statement (*Bell. Gall.* 6.17), that the Gaulish 'Mercury' (which may have meant Lugus) was considered 'the inventor of all the arts'—but the point is they were just as relevant under the new dispensation.

82 The classic historical account is D. A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *Ériu* 18 (1958), 113–38.

83 C. Swift, 'Óenach Tailten, the Blackwater valley, and the Uí Néill kings of Tara', in A. P. Smith, (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History, and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), 109–20, at 119.

84 *Óenach Tailten* may have been a very masculine affair, its events reserved for men; a high medieval poem on another Lugnasad *óenach*, the triennial fair at Carman, considers it worth mentioning (and by implication finds it unexpected) that women as well as men attended, though they did not mix. See Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 459.

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Earlier I mentioned King David; if Lug functioned as a native parallel for any scriptural figure, it was this most charismatic of Old Testament kings. Kim McCone noted two decades ago that aspects of the medieval Lug echo the life story of David: both are represented as handsome youths, acclaimed warriors, righteous kings, poets, and harpists. Lug's most famous deed in Irish saga—killing the giant Balor with a sling-shot—exactly parallels David's killing of the Philistine giant Goliath.⁸⁵ McCone's observation had the effect of making it alarmingly clear just how likely it is that Irish mythology as transmitted to us has been remodelled along biblical lines. The suggestion here is that King David might be even more important than has been realized; the process of typological remodelling might be pushed back into the 600s, if not earlier. By doing so, the literary Lug could be seen as the reanimation of a pagan figure—remembered because of the *óenach* and an association with the pivotal institution of kingship—with an infusion of Davidic tropes that were important because the New Testament emphasized that the line of David ultimately produced Christ himself. Lug's emergence as a 'national' figure may therefore owe at least as much to the Old Testament David as to the Lugus of Irish paganism. A pagan god has been reconfigured as—in part—a native analogue to the most famous of Christ's ancestors. Uí Néill propagandists may well have constructed (or appropriated) a figure savouring of the ancient past but whose face was turned to a new era and who foreshadowed the coming of the new religion. This would be an absolutely typical early-Irish mixture of conservatism and creativity.⁸⁶ Even in a Christian Ireland, the ideology of kingship was clearly felt to benefit from the energizing touch of the apparently archaic.

The Uí Néill Lug makes his classic appearance in the tale *Baile in Scáil* ('The Phantom's Frenzy'), written in the ninth century but revised in the eleventh. Lug lures King Conn of the Hundred Battles into a splendid otherworldly feasting hall and, in the form of a tall, handsome, enthroned man, he enumerates to Conn the names and regnal periods of the future kings of Tara.⁸⁷ It is strongly implied that all Irish over-kings

85 *PPCP*, 158–9; K. McCone, 'A Tale of Two Ditties', in L. Breatnach, K. McCone, & D. Ó Corráin (eds.), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), 137–9.

86 *DDDH*, 280.

87 *Baile in Scáil: The Phantom's Frenzy*, ed. & trans. K. Murray (Dublin, 2004) [ITS 58], 16–7 for a summary of Lug's significance in the tale. The English title has become con-

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are stand-ins for Lug himself. The tale draws attention to the constructed nature of its Lug by thematizing his contradictory and blurred order of being: looking palpably and impressively divine, he not only denies that he is a supernatural being but asserts that he is of the race of Adam—and dead, to boot. It is also telling that after the earliest period, hints of Lug’s association with the claims to kingship of groups other than the Uí Néill are muted. A very early praise-poem (c.600) identifies a dynastic ancestor of the Leinstermen directly with the god as a ‘protective Lug’ (*Lug scéith*, literally ‘a Lug of a shield’).⁸⁸ The Leinstermen were the principal enemies of the Uí Néill, and after this they do not seem to have claimed Lug for themselves again.

This account, if at all correct, emphasizes just how tricky the category of the ‘native’ is when talking about the supernatural beings of Irish myth, and is as much about conjecture regarding the nature and traces of pre-Christian Irish religion as I indulge in this book. I have speculated at length on Lug’s trajectory during the change of religions to demonstrate precisely why such efforts are self-limiting, and have done so in a way that also showcases the themes of this chapter. In summary, very little survives to shed light on the gods of the Irish Iron Age. Conversion to Christianity represented an extreme cultural transformation, and while attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian ideology are fascinating, the results are relentlessly indeterminate. Tales often only survive in manuscripts copied centuries after a given text was actually composed, and such texts are indefinitely subject to problematic variations of tonal weight and weave. All of these are major stumbling blocks to our understanding.

Above I said that a male and a female deity would be compared. While Lug is one of the best-known figures in Celtic mythology, not so the goddess, whose very identity can only be retrieved via historical linguistics. Her name is embedded in that of an early medieval people from south-west Munster called the Corcu Loígde, meaning the ‘Seed of the Calf-Goddess’.⁸⁹ Old Irish Loígde (in the genitive) points back to an ear-

ventional: ‘the ecstatic prophecy of the supernatural being’ might be a more accurate rendering of the Irish.

88 For this poem and its context, see J. Carey, ‘From David to Labraid: sacral kingship and the emergence of monotheism in Israel and Ireland’, in K. Ritari, *et al.* (eds.), *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies* (Newcastle, 2008), 2–27. It may have influenced *Baile in Scáil*; see *Baile in Scáil*, ed. & trans. Murray, 16–7.

89 *ECl*, 186; precisely what kind of kin-group is implied by the word *corcu* is a matter of dispute. In Hiberno-Latin it is usually translated by *gens*, ‘people’ (see discussion in

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lier deity called, in Primitive Irish, *Loigodēvā, who would be utterly lost to history were it not for the preservation of the old theonym in the name of the kindred.⁹⁰ The etymology makes it reasonably certain that the goddess did exist: *Loíge* was the name given in Irish to the river Bandon which flows through the same territory and was probably seen as the embodiment of the goddess.⁹¹ Indeed, the bovine element in the name is echoed by other divine ‘cow-rivers’ in Celtic-speaking areas, not least the Boyne, the ‘cow-white’ one, who appears in the literature as the divine woman *Bóand*.⁹² But no supernatural female named ‘Loíge’ (or *Loigdae) appears in the surviving literature, even though the name itself was preserved both in the name of the people and the river. This may be due to the fact that the political clout of the Corcu Loíge came to an end during the 600s, though they had once been dominant; had they increased in power instead, such a figure might well have emerged in subsequent centuries in texts written within their sphere of influence.⁹³ The goddess was so forgotten that a Middle Irish treatise on the meaning of names traces that of the Corcu Loíge back to an eponymous ancestor, *Lugaid Loíge*, who had hunted a fawn (*loíg allaid*)—evidently a new story.⁹⁴

ECI, 96–100), but the concept seems to have become increasingly obsolete by the 700s. There is in fact a link back to *Lug* here, as the legendary king of Tara *Lugaid Mac Con*—potentially one of those humanized versions of *Lug*—was in early texts identified as *Mac Con moccu Loíge*, from this dynasty; see *K<*, 164–5.

90 Preserved in an intermediary Primitive Irish form, *LOGIDDEAS*, on an ogam stone at Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, for which see *L&IEMI*, 81; on this name see comments of T. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), 155.

91 *EIH&M*, 3; McManus, *Guide to Ogam*, 75.

92 *Bóand* derives regularly from **bou-vindā* (‘Cow-white’, ‘White-like-a-cow’), which name is attested in the form *Bououinda* by the Greek geographer Ptolemy, reflecting the situation c.150. Another example, this time from Britain, is the river Wharfe, from (Latinized) British *Verbeia*—if the latter is cognate, as seems likely, with Old Irish *ferb*, a relatively unusual word meaning ‘cow’; see *EIH&M*, 3, and G. Isaac, *Place-names in Ptolemy’s Geography: an electronic data base with etymological analysis of the Celtic name-elements* [CD-ROM] (Aberystwyth, 2004). For the later association between the mound of Knowth, a few hundred yards from the Boyne, and a supernatural female, *Buí*, whose name may have meant ‘cowlike’ (from **bouvjā*), see *A&CM*, 24, and H. Wagner, ‘Origins of pagan Irish religion’, *ZCP* 38 (1981), 6.

93 For the early prominence and then decline of the Corcu Loíge, see D. Ó Cróinín in *NHI* i., 227.

94 *Cóir Anman: A Late Middle Irish Treatise on Personal Names*, i., ed. & trans. S. Arbuthnot [ITS 59] (Dublin, 2005), 102–3, trans. 140; I have turned Middle Irish form *laeg* back into Old Irish *loig* to make the etymological connection clear.

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A comparison of the fates of Lugus and Loigodēvā makes clear that there was a vast difference between the continuation of idolatrous worship and the retention of significance. When this material has been presented to various audiences, modern Pagans have sometimes suggested to me that the reason particular deities were remembered into medieval times is because they had been particularly beloved. I suspect instead that an Irish deity had to be charged with some ingrained political, ideological, or geographical importance—preferably in combination—in order to survive, in some form, after their cult had been discontinued. By its very nature, conversion siphoned specifically religious significance from the pagan gods, but it is clear that the converting Irish could in some cases sift the cultural cachet of a deity—an association with the ideology of kingship, or with native systems of knowledge, for example—from pagan worship, thus retaining after-images of the god for the secular sphere. These different kinds of association might make former gods gyre off in different directions, explaining something of the sheer complexity of Ireland’s literary supernaturals. Tellingly, several divinities—such as the goddess Macha—have evidently related but incompatible forms: a single deity could clearly splinter into several medieval characters.⁹⁵

All this adds up to a melancholy conclusion. Given the likelihood of extreme localization we encountered earlier, it is probable that the vast majority of deities once worshipped by the pagan Irish failed—like Loigodēvā—to be re-embodied as medieval literary characters, and so never crossed over into history.⁹⁶ Very local deities and those associated with peoples whose importance dwindled during the conversion period would have been especially vulnerable; they differed from Loigodēvā only in that their names passed into oblivion along with their divinity.

95 There are four (or five) female figures all called *Macha*, three of whom are explicitly associated with the Iron Age site of Emain Macha (Navan Fort, Co. Armagh); see J. Carey, ‘Notes on the Irish war-goddess’, *Éigse* 19 (1983), 263–75.

96 Note discussion by Charles-Edwards of Eoin Mac Neill’s suggestion that in ‘gentilic’ names with the form *moccu* ‘X’, the X sometimes referred to a given people’s ancestor-deity; another example beyond the *Corcu* (*moccu*) *Loigde* might be the *Corcu Duibne*, the people of the modern Barony of Corcaguiney, as ogam stones with the phrase MUCCOI DOVVINIAS suggest (but do not prove) the existence of a lost goddess *Doviniā*, Old Irish Duiben/Duibne (*Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 150, 155). See Blair Gibson, *From Chieftdom to State*, 28, 56, which somewhat overstates Charles-Edwards’ position.