E A R L Y I R I S H K I N G S H I P

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13. xii. 60

Submitted for the degree of B.Litt.

Michaelmas Term,
1960

Somerville College,
Oxford

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Preface

This is not a piece of original research. It is merely an attempt to see what an anthropologist, using the discipline of modern social anthropology, can make of the material that has already been published on pre-Conquest Ireland. The earlier of the chapters on Ireland are little more than a rewriting (and not, I hope, a misrepresentation) of recent specialist publications. The later sections (especially those concerned with the virtues of the kings, and the symbolism associated with Irish kingship) involve a certain amount of analysis that has not, so far as I know, been attempted before in quite the same form, though, as I think, all the main points on which it is supported have been made before by others. It arises in particular from the work of Dumézil on Indo-European concepts of sovereignty, of Hocart on kingship, and, in part, from Myles Dillon's consideration of the concept of "Truth" in Irish literature.

This being so, and considering also the purpose for which this is written (i.e. for social anthropologists), it would be both ludicrous and pretentious to include extensive quotations in the little known language of Irish. Many (not all) of the quotations given have been referred to in Irish, but they are

consistently given here in English. I have not, however, been able to prevent several Irish words and phrases from creeping in. A brief glossary of the most constantly used Irish terms is included for ease of reference, though it has not been possible to standardise the spelling throughout.

Brief Glossary of Commonly Used Irish Terms

Aes dána (s. **fer dána**): men of art; men of special gifts. The members of the special "learned class" of Ireland.

Ard rí: High king; the king of all Ireland.

Brithem (Eng. brehon); lawyer, jurist.

Derbfine (**derbfhine**): the 4 generation family group.

Dinnshenchus (**dindshenchas**): the science of place names. A collection of specialised Irish writing on the history etc. of places.

Éire, Ériu: Ireland.

Enech: honor, face. (cf. **eneclann**: honour price)

Fili (pl. **filid**): poet, seer.

Fine: kin, family.

Fír: truth, justice. (Mid. Irish **firinne**).

Geis (pl. **gessa, geasa**): prohibition, interdiction; taboo.

Ollam (**ollamh**; Eng. ollave): a chief poet.

Rí (gen. **ríg**): king.

Tecosc (pl. **tecosca**): instruction; collection of precepts.

Túath (pl. **túatha**): people, tribe; territory, local kingdom.

INTRODUCTORY: AIMS AND METHODS

I. Aims

I intend at the outset to indicate what I consider to be the main aims of modern social anthropology in general, and of this thesis in particular. It is clearly important to make the general approach of social anthropology explicit, especially as this is sometimes misunderstood. Furthermore I would wish my work on Ireland here to be judged in the light of my own aims and standards of relevance - even if only on the principle that "truth emerges more easily from error than from confusion". I hope it will at least become clear what I am <u>not</u> trying to do.

1. Modern social anthropology

There are many different approaches to the study of society, some implicit in the writings of historians, philosophers, literary critics, psychologists, some more explicitly expressed in anthropological and sociological

theory. No definitive discussion of these is of course being attempted here; but it may be helpful to give a brief sketch of those which are regarded as outmoded or even, quite plainly, wrong in social anthropology now, or at any rate not adopted by me in this thesis. The special contribution of social anthropology may often supplement specialist work on a particular area, so that the different theories here discussed are chosen because of their relevance to the problems of Ireland; this relevance will emerge more fully later.

It is tempting in any talk about society to speak metaphorically or in parables. Society is presented as fundamentally like, for example, an organism, a machine, a family, a contract. Again theories or parables about the origin of society have been used to throw light on the nature of society, and vice versa; as in the works of, on the one hand, the contract theorists, and of Frazer or Freud on the other. Now there is of course nothing wrong with metaphor. It may be illuminating in high-lighting some aspect before obscure. But it may also result in the neglecting of other aspects, or a too vivid appreciation of the likeness between society and its metaphorical representation. Society in some ways may be compared to an organism: then, like an organism, does it have a "natural" life span, with stages of growth, maturity, decay? It has some of the qualities of a machine: can we

then describe it in terms of the function it is designed to serve, and of how the different parts work together to perform this function, leaving out any consideration of ideas and symbols within this social context? Obviously, uncritical use of such metaphor is not the fault of the metaphor but of those who take it too literally. What is important then, is to state these similarities as explicitly as possible, so that at least any covert nonsense may become overt.

But in fact I do not find any of these approaches particularly helpful now, although they have their importance in the history of sociological theory. Nor are some of the other approaches to the study of society completely satisfying nowadays in their original form and most of them are, in fact, rejected by many modern social anthropologists. Examples of these are the theoretical forms which result from such a vivid stress on one particular aspect of society to the exclusion of all others - on the economic, the biological, the psychological, class conflict, geographical conditions - that everything in society is represented as ultimately dependent on or reducible to these factors alone. Man then is represented variously as basically homo oeconomicus; or homo geographicus; or homo intelligens whose reasoning proceeds, as it were, in a social vacuum; and so on through the different visions of man as really a product of climate, of language, of instincts, or of race and skull measurement.

Some of these emphases - not all - still have point. Thus, in Marxist terms, it may be important to recognise the element of conflict in a society, and not speak as if the interests and aspirations of <u>all</u> groups were ultimately the same; similarly an appreciation of the geographical background to social life is often an essential part of a sociological study - what differences are made, for example, by the mode of livelihood? the density of people per square mile? of the relative ease of communications? Such factors are important, and their importance is in no way denied by modern social anthropologists who reject, for example, economic, geographical or psychological determinism.

One even more common version of reductionism, especially in discussion of African or Pacific peoples, is very noticeable among non-anthropologists still. That is an explanation of some foreign people or institution in terms of their "primitiveness" or "barbarity". This of course has a long history, but received a special stimulus with the evolutionist approach in the 19th century, when human society was described as gradually growing through different stages, defined virtually in terms of "higher" and "lower", so that societies regarded as lower or with less technical development, could be explained as being at an earlier stage and more primitive (in the literal meaning of the word), and apparently "low"

or unattractive customs or institutions were "survivals" of an earlier and more primitive stage. This uncritical assumption of unilinear development from lower to higher was further confused by the misuse of the findings of the comparative philologists and mythologists in the last century; for oddities, or what appeared unfamiliar to the inexperienced observer, could always be explained away as survivals of a pre-Aryan, pre-Celtic, or "primitive" stage. Race, language and social organisation were thus often inextricably (and unjustifiably) confused in the writings of the earlier anthropologists, and this is - alas - still sometimes followed by specialists in other spheres who have not fully caught up with the present distinction in anthropology between the study of archaeology, of the <u>physical</u> make-up of man, and of <u>social</u> anthropology. These distinctions must be insisted on in any analysis of a society in the terms of modern social anthropology. "Race" is no explanation. Nor is the doctrine of "survivals" from a postulated lower stage now considered a helpful approach. In sum, "primitive" is no longer regarded as an explanatory concept.

Against this background I now want to outline what is to be the theoretical approach lying behind this thesis; some of it is merely a truism that would be accepted by any historian or any student of social organisation, some, on the other hand,

represents a particular view of society that may not be accepted at all.

There are two main strands in this approach, both simple enough at the outset. We are concerned first with a theory which assumes that we cannot understand a society from the outside, so to speak, without taking into consideration a people's own thinking, potentially explicit at least, about their own institutions and about their own institutions and about the world; and secondly with a search for the rationale behind both their thinking and their doing which helps to make this intelligible to us, but of which they may themselves not be fully aware.

First, then, in an anthropological study of a people we must take into account their own concepts and thinking.

This recalls what Collingwood[1] says of the "inner nature" of actions, as an essential object of historical understanding, and as such this is of course accepted or assumed by most historians. For of course a good historian of, say, the Roman Empire, Greek city-state, or Mediaeval society requires to be "steeped" in his subject, so that he does not try to interpret it in terms peculiar to our own way of thinking and living; he will not, for example, assume that he can describe Greek political allegiances wholly in terms of the modern British party system.

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1. Collingwood, 1946.

Now in the study of primitive society this sensitivity to the concepts of others, allied to an awareness that our ideas are not the only possible ones, is all the more essential, and yet, paradoxically, in some ways less obvious. It is the more essential because of the nature of primitive societies. We can see from empirical investigation that some societies seem to be less differentiated than others: it is hard to see how to separate, say, the religious from the political, the ceremonial aspects of gift-giving from the economic - and this very quality of lack of differentiation is indeed taken to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of a "primitive" society. So while it is not impossible to treat modern European societies in a "fragmented" way, i.e. giving a separate analysis of the economic, political, religious or domestic elements, such a procedure would give rise to a more serious distortion in a primitive society. Further the ideas and institutions of our own and even classical and mediaeval societies are more or less familiar to us and we can assume, without necessarily stating, the implicit links and clusters of associations which make them intelligible and reasonable to us. These need not, therefore, be made explicit by the historian. But with an unfamiliar society, as are, almost by definition, those of primitive peoples, the case is quite different. Here to fragment the society according to

our categories is often to make some of the concepts and institutions appear nonsensical or obviously self-contradictory, for a general knowledge of the whole background which makes them reasonable is lacking. Thus in the study of unfamiliar peoples we are consciously aware of the need to show the "fittingness" of certain central concepts in the whole. So the method that was more or less assumed by historians in the past when they spoke of more familiar and obviously "reasonable" societies, has now been erected into a conscious principle of procedure in the newer subject of social anthropology.

But, paradoxically, just because the subject matter of social anthropology was new and unfamiliar and therefore needing all the more, one would have thought, some attempt at an overall presentation, it sometimes seemed tempting to those who studied primitive societies to abandon the assumption about the potential reasonableness of their subject matter made by traditional historians. For if some or all elements in a society can be labelled as "primitive" or "barbarous", with the connotation of "unreasonable" and basically unlike ours, then no further search for understanding of them is necessary: they are already sufficiently classified. If <u>this</u> were the method of modern social anthropology, with the corresponding picture this suggests of "primitive society" as <u>radically</u> different from ours, more like an ant-heap, perhaps,

than an association of conscious human beings - then social anthropology would indeed be out of the main tradition of the "humanities" as a branch of academic study. In fact, of course, this is <u>not</u> the method of social anthropology now, although academics in other subjects sometimes, alas, assume so. And the very fact that it has sometimes been thus wrongly regarded has led, naturally, to a more conscious awareness of the importance of treating even foreign peoples as potentially reasonable, and, correspondingly, of the place of anthropology, with history, among the traditional humanities.

There are then these two reasons for the special emphasis in social anthropology on what is really a very old method of understanding peoples different from ourselves: both because the old method becomes more explicit when applied to new and unfamiliar subject-matter; and because the possibility of using this method has sometimes been denied. Further the idea of comparison between many different societies has also led to a more generalised hence more conscious approach to the problems of method.

Now insofar as this approach is an old and acceptable one it may hardly seem worth stating at all. For one thing, it is only a method for study, like the assumption found even in the physical sciences: that the data "make sense". We <u>could</u> point out that by adopting a method like this to be

potentially applicable to <u>all</u> human society, we are making an <u>assumption</u> about the nature of human society (all human society), an assumption that could never be <u>proved</u> - but even this generalised assumption is scarcely a questionable one.

But there is a further and more pertinent point to notice here. Most historians, we may say, have worked on the principle of trying to group their subject-matter according to the categories of the people studied, but they have in practice varied in how seriously they have been prepared to take the people's own concepts and ideas about, for example, their own political institutions. This is a matter of degree, but the differences in stress here are sometimes very great.

Now some historians and most recent social anthropologists take ideas very seriously indeed. Hocart is perhaps the most outspoken exponent of this approach. He describes his point of view as

> "largely the result of a long and intimate intercourse with various peoples of the South Seas, and the consequent habit of taking all beliefs seriously ..... esteeming as I did that they are probably best acquainted with their own thought."

"Historians" he says later, "are mostly drawn from the ranks of the rationalists, men who have an inborn aversion to the supernatural and prefer to trace all things to natural causes.... (this) has given rise to a fallacy which is one of the greatest obstacles to the discovery of those laws that govern human society. Historians have confounded miracles with belief in miracles; from their opinion that miracles do not affect the course of natural events they have slid

unconsciously into the error that a belief in miracles can have no influence to speak of on the course of human affairs.....we need only glance at the wide distribution of this belief (in power to work miracles) and its persistence through the ages to feel convinced that it must have played a very much greater part in the fortunes of kings and states than our conventional histories suggest." [1]

In other words, ideas and concepts are of crucial importance in society; and to interpret it primarily in, for example, economic or geographical terms is to miss this vital point. Clearly this involves a certain picture of social life: man in society is not, so to speak, <u>face to face</u> with brute fact, with the determining and sufficient power of economics, biology, utility. Always ideas intervene; even in what would have seemed basic and irreducible human needs - "ideas continually intervene to control man's food."[2]

Hocart was writing in the preface to his study of kingship. And certainly it is in the analysis of any kind of <u>authority</u> that an emphasis on ideas is most important. This is obvious. For, as has often been pointed out, the concept of "authority" involves not only the idea of power, but that of rightful, justifiable power; so that it is essential for us to grasp the <u>ideas</u> associated with any kind of authority if we are to understand its basis, its ultimate justification in a given society, the controls against its abuse, the limits of its

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1. Hocart, 1927, p. vi and 32.
2. Febre, 1932, p. 164; cf. Cassirer 1944, p. 25 etc.

exercise, its attributed origin in history or myth - in short, its nature.

Many references to the exercise of authority in foreign societies have been misleading through neglect of the crucial importance of ideas in this sense. It is not enough, for example, when speaking of, say, some native ruler in Africa, to label his power as "arbitrary" without any further consideration of by <u>whose</u> standards it is arbitrary, what are the people's ideas of authority, what are the indigenous checks against the arbitrary abuse of authority - and so on. And perhaps where anthropologists have made their greatest contributions towards understanding native institutions in Africa, or the Pacific islands, or Asia, it has been precisely through this emphasis on the importance of the native <u>ideas</u> and concepts of authority.

This does not just apply to studies of the so-called primitive peoples, but is relevant in any study of authority. In other words any analysis that is purely in terms of <u>force</u> - such as that implied by, for example, an Austinian definition of sovereignty - or of the naked economic or coercive power held by a king, is rejected here. Ireland is perhaps a particularly good example of the very great significance of the ideas associated with authority, but the point that is

being made here is intended to be a general one, applicable to all authority.

I now come to the second theme in the theoretical approach in this study. Not only should we take seriously the ideas connected with any people's institutions, but we must also be prepared to look for the rationale lying behind their thinking and doing, of which they may not themselves be wholly aware. Again it is in the analysis of authority that this is especially important.

Clearly this is closely connected with our examination of a people's ideas and concepts; for these may be more, or less, conscious and we reach an understanding of them both from what individuals say and from what they do. In the same sort of way we can try to discover what has been called the "symbolic classification" of the world in some society, by studying not only what is said, but, perhaps more illuminatingly, what is done. Thus we can see what is felt to be analogous to what, and in what way - the analogies between whiteness and truth and poetry, for example, as opposed to black and falsehood and lack of insight.

Some symbolic associations are said to be common to many societies. For instance, in many societies what is conceived of as a fundamental dualism of the universe is represented in

terms of the duality of right and left, corresponding to that between pure and impure, man and woman, sky and earth, light and dark..... This is reflected and "acted out" in their social organisation and activity. Clearly this thesis of cosmic dualism is not present as a systematic whole in the minds of individuals in general. It is reached by the comparative work of anthropologists, involving interpretation of statements, actions, ritual and the symbolic depth underlying all these.[1]

Or rather - it may have been misleading to speak just above of "ritual" as if this was a specified mode of action clearly demarcated from all other. Rather what is implied here is the symbolic and ritualistic aspect of <u>all</u> social activities (though some of course may be more so than others). This is in fact, to give a famous example, the main point of <u>The Gift</u>:[2] Mauss was bringing out the symbolic and ritualistic element in gift giving and gift exchange, as distinct from the purely economic and utilitarian: and this kind of action was described as being common to all societies.

Clearly this differs from a description of a society in purely economic or purely "political" terms. We are implying a picture of society as shot through by the symbolic and

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1. e.g. Hertz, 1960, <u>passim</u>.
2. Mauss, 1954.

ritualistic, as having <u>depth</u> as it were - the submerged mass of the iceberg behind the outwardly expressed ideas of its members. And this depth is something that can be reached in an anthropological analysis and which makes interpretation richer and more meaningful. If interpretation is to come in at all - and of course it must and does in any intellectual analysis - then this is a fruitful mode of interpretation. This may seem to be introducing an oddly metaphysical idea of a Super-society or Personality beyond the ideas and actions of individuals; but it is rather merely the willingness to go beyond a crudely literal and rationalistic interpretation of activities such as gift-giving, or initiation, and to see their long term implications and meaning. For meaning after all is not just something that attaches only to statements of truth or falsity. A better analogy - though it is only an analogy - might be to Freud's introduction of the concept of the unconscious; this has basically the same justification: that it <u>made sense</u> of phenomena that had before seemed meaningless or arbitrary. Judged by this test of making sense, the anthropologist's approach seems reasonable enough. As is pointed out by E.R. Leach, it rests on a psychological assumption - that all human beings tend to construct symbols and make mental associations in the same general sort of way, whether in verbal or non-verbal behaviour:

this assumption, he continues, it is "difficult entirely to justify.... but without it all the activities of anthropologists become meaningless."[1]

Following this method of taking symbol and ritual seriously and in connection with expressed beliefs and ideas, the significance of certain institutions can be more fully understood. Traditional myths, for example, with their basically political function among many peoples, can be interpreted as having a living and dramatic meaning beyond their mere literal statement. A myth may tell of the beginning of authority in the world, perhaps, and what situation it was designed to meet; or it may describe the first endowment of a certain ruling family with their power and why. The importance of this for an anthropologist seeking to understand the pattern of authority is, then, obvious. Certain myths may be connected (by observer or actors) with particular rituals, such as the installation of a ruler, or the initiation ceremonies, or the death rites of kings.[2]

Sometimes the notion of "conflict" is used here. Certain conflicts in a society, as expressed in myth and on ceremonial occasions, are interpreted as being "acted out" in a ritualistic form on these occasions. This sort of interpretation can, it

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1. Leach, 1954, pp. 14-5.
2. e.g. Malinowski, 1948; Evans-Pritchard 1948; Lienhardt, 1954.

seems, sometimes lead to mere nonsense: the existence of some of these "conflicts", not apparent to the people concerned, may be in the observer's mind alone! Indeed it is the special danger of this rather subtle approach in social anthropology now, that the end result may sometimes turn out to be mere metaphysical imaginings. Nevertheless, it can be a most fruitful approach - thus for instance, the ritualised conflict and combination of what are represented as different elements in a society at the election and inauguration of a king may throw light on the political structure, and vice versa.

It was by this method of taking seriously the beliefs, rites and ceremonies associated with kings in several different societies that Hocart analysed the nature of what he called "Divine Kingship"; he followed this method with whole-hearted enthusiasm through the various detail of coronation ceremonies, beliefs in the miraculous powers of kings, their divine attributes, the creative power inherent in the installation of kings and chieftains - and thus brilliantly made sense of what was before either meaningless or apparently quite arbitrary. He followed this method to extremes. But he was after all in part merely following the practice of earlier writers, like Figgis or R.H. Woolley, and of political controversialists too, in reading great significance into the form of the

installation ceremony.[1] The same method - to give an example from recent social anthropology - has been used effectively to throw light on the concepts of authority among an East African people through an account of the symbolism of the myths and ritual of kingship. In this way is clarified the terms in which their kingship is conceived, the actual exercise of the king's power, the conditions under which he can use it and the way in which he can delegate it. Indeed this lucid paper by J.H.M. Beattie could serve as a model for the description of a king's authority.[2]

I have been describing what I consider to be the main approach in modern social anthropology as well as the approach I am adopting here; and I have tried to do this, on the whole, in my own words, and from the point of view of my analysis here of early Irish kingship.

But this may seem puzzling. For if there is any one thing that is usually ascribed to British anthropology, it is its specialised "functionalist", or at least, "structuralist" approach, and these are words that I have barely mentioned, if, indeed, at all. This omission has been on purpose - and for two reasons.

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1. Hocart, 1927; Figgis, 1922; Woolley, 1915.
2. Beattie, 1959.

Discussion of the uses of "structure" and "function" have a point if we are studying, as we must, the history of anthropological theory. But by now methodological controversy about the real meaning of "function" or in what "structure" really consists has become, I think, quite barren. It seems to lead to no new insight, while at the same time giving us the feeling that until we have somehow mastered the real meaning of these words we shall never really understand... Therefore I have purposely avoided entering into this discussion here, as I think it often only serves to confuse.

In the second place, in spite of much talk among social anthropologists about, for example, "functional integration" or "structural equilibrium", I believe that in fact my description here approximates fairly closely to the approach evident in much anthropological writing in England recently, even though the specifically methodological studies are often still preoccupied with "structure and function".[1] The main theoretical principles behind much important anthropological work is thus often, as I think, incorrectly described. A striking exception is however the clearly argued exposition in a recent book by E.R. Leach, designed as a contribution to anthropological theory: he describes ritual and myth as essentially one and the same thing, and speaks of ritual

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1. e.g. Emmet, 1958; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Firth JRAI, 1954; Beattie, Sociologus, 1955.

action and belief as "forms of symbolic statement about the social order". "The main task of the social anthropologist," he concludes, "is to attempt the interpretation of such symbolism."[1]

But however that may be - whether or not, that is, the methods adopted by modern social anthropologists are different in fact from what they are often described to be - the approach I have outlined is at least that followed in this study of early Irish kingship. This is yet another reason why I have stated it in my own words, and tried to argue from first principles, as it were, and in rather a naive way. The fundamental words used, like idea, concept, ritualistic, symbol, have - intentionally - not been defined: for if this approach is in fact illuminating, this will emerge most clearly in the later more concrete discussion.

The method followed here can be seen to have certain implications in the fields of political theory, in the concepts of, for instance, law or religion, and finally of the general view taken of social life, in the widest possible sense.

This may seem surprising or perverse. For why should what is merely a method of studying <u>primitive</u> society - another concept I have persistently refused to define - have

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1. Leach, 1954, pp. 13-4.

any such general implications at all?

But one of the main points made was that in many ways the study of primitive peoples does not in fact involve any basically new method over and above that traditionally used in what used to be called the humanities, when it was assumed that the ideas and institutions of the more familiar peoples considered were in fact reasonable in their own terms. There is then no clear cut distinction that can be drawn, in respect of method, between primitive and not so primitive, and what is said about unfamiliar applies also to more familiar societies. Furthermore things we may notice for the first time in a strange context, where they may, for their unfamiliarity, be more noticeable (in this case it is the importance of the symbolic and ritualistic aspect of social life), then turn out to be recognisable too in more familiar contexts.

In some ways it <u>is</u> a special approach. It <u>does</u> involve a certain view of authority - the central concept in fact - as analysable in large part at least, in terms of its associated ideas, concepts, symbolism; it <u>does</u> deny the possibility of a complete analysis in purely "materialist" or "nationalist" terms, or by emphasising primarily the concept of <u>force</u>, or naked power or coercive administration; it <u>does</u> positively reject some theories of society, those which give determining power to factors like "race", climate, biology, "utility";

finally, and most emphatically, it rejects any theory of crude social evolutionism which invokes the doctrine of "survivals" or seeks to equate on the one side moral and technological advance, and on the other chronological stratum.

Some theories then are positively rejected as being in effect inconsistent with the known evidence or irrelevant in a sociological analysis - race, crude determinism, evolutionism, are useless concepts. Others, though not adopted here, are not, logically, contradicted by the present approach. For instance, instead of laying the ultimate stress on ideas and symbols, it would be perfectly sensible, sociological and useful - though in the case of early Ireland probably in practice impossible - to describe the exact amount of economic power held by the upper class, the degree of mobility between classes, or the extent of the actual abuse of power or despotic behaviour by the kings in fact. This sort of approach is not being denied outright, it is merely not followed. We can recall Max Weber's much quoted remark, after his analysis of <u>ideas</u>, ideals and ethics, that he was not trying to <u>substitute</u> a one-sided "spiritual" interpretation of civilisation and history for a one-sided "materialist" one.[1] Nor is the relevance of, say, geographical factors or the distribution

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1. Weber, 1930, p. 183.

of wealth ignored, though their determining power may be denied; ecology, for example, is seen as an important aspect in sociological description. But, in spite of all this, it is clear that a special emphasis is being laid here - an emphasis on the real significance in human society of ideas and symbolism and ritual.

So, even when all provisos, provisions, disclaimers and concessions are made; when we confess the danger of an airy pursuit of such fugitive elements as ideas or symbols; when the limitations of such an outlook are admitted - still, even so, it is still asserted that this approach has special value, and leads to real insights. We may admit some of its drawbacks: the stress on unity and coherence may at times be misleading, for we may unawares merely be reporting the ideas of one group; we may seem to be ignoring the influences of individuals, or be understood - wrongly - to be implying that there are in fact no real conflicts in social life only illusions of conflicts. Further, by invoking as an analogy Freud's concept of the unconscious as an indirect justification of our concept of the depths of symbolism implicit in social life, we may be laying ourselves open to precisely analogous objections to those brought against Freud's concept.[1] We

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1. e.g. in MacIntyre: The Unconscious, London, 1958.

may seem to be suggesting a very far-fetched and poetic picture of social life as a sort of drama in which, within the framework of certain concepts and symbols, conflicts at various levels are enacted, and convictions and truths that are conceived of are symbolically and poetically represented through myth and ritual; and we may appear to run the danger of encouraging confusion between model and empirical fact. And yet all this must be risked. In the study of any kind of authority we must take into account the opinions, ideas and beliefs, the rituals, symbols and ceremonies that are an essential part of it.

2. Ireland and anthropology

The method of modern social anthropology involves taking seriously the concepts, symbols and ritual of any people studied, whoever they may be, and connecting in an integrated account their saying and acting; the presupposition is that their life may be found to be reasonable in their own terms, just as ours is to us, or the Greeks' to those steeped in classical studies. Thus to dismiss institutions or customs as "primitive magic", and therefore in principle unexplainable or not needing to be further explained than that, is to give up in advance; another approach now rejected is to "reduce" or explain away anything which does not seem "natural", in

terms of racial origin, "survival", "primitive psychology" or unclear and often unhelpful foreign concepts, which have, apparently, from much use been promoted from mere words to existence as <u>things</u>, such as "<u>taboo</u>" or "fetish" - or, indeed, "tribalism". All these methods have, from time to time, been applied to what in fact amounted to a "fragmented" approach to the study of early Irish society in the past.

Although such explaining away or else refusal to admit the possibility of any explanation was perhaps understandable, however mistaken, in the case of obviously non-literate and technologically undeveloped peoples, it is surprising that it should have been so in the study of such a literary and articulate society as early Ireland. But for this, alas, the misunderstood, or, more often, <u>bad</u> anthropology of the past is largely to blame. Thus, for example, in what became a classic article on the druids, Pokorny argues for the pre-Celtic origin of <u>Druidism</u>: the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, supposedly held by the druids, was, he considers taken over from aboriginals - "it is possible that already the men of the Stone Age believed in metempsychosis, as they often buried their dead in a cowering position. We can detect the belief in metempsychosis chiefly among peoples of a low culture. The next step is the belief in rebirth..." Citing the <u>Golden Bough</u> he finds traces of a former priestship

in the Irish kings "for Indo-European peoples once believed what savages of the present time believe..." and considers a tradition in Ulster said to resemble the couvade as "surely a non-Indo-European custom".[1] For years, then, any discussion of the part played by the druids in Irish society had to give way to arguments and assumptions about their pre-Celtic origin, and to description of pre-Indo-European survivals which, being primitive, could and should be fragmented from the actual functioning of the truly Irish institutions.

Sadly, it was often in fact immaculate or imaginative scholarship that was spoiled by the taking over of some uncritical or misleading concept popularised by anthropologists. Thus Baudiš concludes a penetrating analysis of the ordeals associated with kingship with the triumphant point that the king was, in fact, a "living fetish".[2] A study concerned with Irish "geasa" concludes that they are indeed "tabus", for "according to the belief held by men in a primitive stage of culture all things, except men themselves, could be assigned to two classes, holy and common"; others are totemistic, for "savage man did not hesitate to identify himself with the other members of the living world".[3] But it was of course

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1. Pokorny. Celtic Review V 1908; followed in part by MacNeill, 1935, p. 63ff. cf. Curtis, 1936, p. 2.
2. Baudiš. Eriu VIII, 1916.
3. Reinhard, 1933, pp. 56, 87.

Frazer's influence that was the most pervasive. Discussion of the kingship has been specially affected here, with for example Macalister's analysis in Frazerian and uncritical terms in his Tara in 1931.[1] It is obvious from reading this account how much anthropology has moved on since Frazer, and the importance of applying the methods and comparative material of modern social anthropology here is equally obvious. Even the most recent published discussion of Irish kingship is somewhat disappointing for the theoretical framework is still not very different from that of the Golden Bough.[2] It is too easy to apply, either wholesale or with only slight modifications, Frazer's myth of kingship; that was, after all, only one possible variety of kingship, not necessarily, contrary to what he believed, applicable to all, or even perhaps any, societies.

Another way in which earlier anthropology has affected Irish studies unfavourably has been the impression given that there are special elements in society which are the anthropologists' special preserve; such things for example, as the power of satire and the satirist in Irish society ("magic"),[3] the legal institution of fasting on an enemy ("primitive

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1. Chap. IV, passim.
2. Draak, 1959.
3. Knott, 1957, p. 62.

magic")[1], or the "gessa" observed by the kings ("we are dealing with primitive magic, and it may be beyond explanation")[2] are the business of those who study such customs i.e. anthropologists, and can be disregarded by the specialist scholar. But in fact the stress in modern social anthropology on the connection between concept and action, on the symbolic and ritualistic aspect of social life, would relate all such beliefs and customs to the whole symbolic and institutional background of Irish society; for social anthropology has a specialised approach rather than a special subject matter. Following this, Irish gessa, fasting and satire can be seen to be perfectly reasonable in their own context. There is no need to explain away by calling them primitive.

But anthropology does have a great range of comparative material which can also contribute to specialist study, and thus avoid some of the misrepresentations which arise from analyses which proceed only in terms of a student's own experience. A good example of such narrowness has, in fact been pointed out by the Irish scholar D.A. Binchy; he criticises the views of two earlier historians who presented early Irish society, as respectively, either completely anarchical, since it lacked centralised enforcement of law, or, on the other

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1. Dillon, 1948, p. xv.
2. Dillon, 1951, p. 2.

hand, as much more centrally dominated and administered than seems to have been the case; "it has always seemed to me," he writes, "that these two eminent scholars, despite their violent collusion, started out from precisely the same suppressed premise: that law and order were impossible in any society where the State had not substantially the same functions as in the late Victorian era in which they both grew up!"[1] Professor Binchy reached this conclusion through his knowledge of comparative law - the same sort of insight is made possible through comparative sociology, and its stress on the reasonableness of a foreign people's institutions in their own terms and concepts.

There is a further point connected with this example. Since Hobbes and, more particularly, Austin, it has often apparently been assumed that social order and authority in a society can ultimately be described in terms of <u>force</u> (via, sometimes, the concept of Sovereignty.) Thus it has seemed that any people without any chief or leader possessed of power to <u>enforce</u> his decisions must, in the nature of things, be anarchical, or, at best, "tribal" (with much the same connotations). But with our increasing knowledge of non-European peoples, and the anthropological exposition of

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1. Binchy, 1954, p. 62.

the importance of ideas and symbolic action in social life, it is clear that an analysis of social organisation solely in terms of force can be very misleading. This is evident in the case of early Ireland. Indeed it was in his conclusion to a study of the early Irish law tracts that Maine launched his most powerful attack on the theoretical approach of the analytic jurists: speaking of "the Austinian view of Sovereignty" he says -

> "It is arrived at by throwing aside all the characteristics and attributes of Government and Society except one, and by connecting all forms of political superiority together through their common possession of force...../But/ it is its history, the entire mass of its historical antecedents, which in each community determines how the Sovereign shall exercise or forbear from exercising his irresistible coercive power. All that constitutes this - the whole enormous aggregate of opinions, sentiments, beliefs, superstitions, and prejudices, of ideas of all kinds, hereditary and acquired, some produced by institutions and some by the constitution of human nature - is rejected by the Analytical Jurists. And thus it is that, so far as the restrictions contained in their definition of Sovereignty are concerned, the Queen and Parliament of our own country might direct all weakly children to be put to death or establish a system of lettres de cachet." 1

It is clear from this quotation that in some ways Maine would be very much in sympathy with the approach of modern social anthropology. Since indeed he is still read and influential among anthropologists, it is all the more worth while to correct the wrong ideas that he has perpetrated among

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1. Maine, 1875, pp. 359-60.

them about early Ireland, where he was misled by the 19th century introductions to the Ancient Laws of Ireland. But at any rate, if, with Maine, we reject the theory of force as the ultimate element in social order, we can explore more freely the ideas connected with authority in Irish society, as well as the significance of, for example, the giving of gifts, exchange of stock, emphasis on pledges and hostages, legal procedure by "distress", or, indeed, fasting. For once we abandon the idea that only physical sanctions can enforce order, and see all these as fitting into the whole complex of social relationships and authority, there is no need to explain away as "primitive", "tribal" or "magical".

In any study of authority, then, in whatever society, it is important to take into consideration the ideas attaching to its origins and exercise, the ends it is expected to serve, and its ground of "legitimation".

This applies equally to an analysis of the authority of a king.

"Kingship" however is sometimes spoken of as if it presents a special problem, or a mysterious magical domain in which the anthropologist can legislate (as in the cases, or supposed cases, of magic or satire quoted above). This has meant that earlier writings by anthropologists have often

been used by specialists in other spheres in the interpretation of their own material. Irish studies are no exception to this tendency.

Thus there is all the more reason for a social anthropologist at least to correct some of the wrong notions apparently held about their work in this subject, and to point to some of the recent writings on kingship which in fact clarify some of the previous evidence.[1] But again it must be stressed that what the anthropologist can contribute is not any esoteric insight into the dark recesses of primitive mentality or savage rituals concerned with a taboo-ridden and magical kingship - the anthropological study of the authority of kings is now a matter of scholarship and not, it is hoped, of imagination. It rests on comparative knowledge of authority and social relations among many different peoples, on some acquaintance, for example, with the authority held by certain chiefs and priests in East Africa, with Indonesian ideas about cosmic dualism and its implications in relations of authority, or with the Indian caste system (which, indeed, has special relevance for a study of Irish society). For if all social life, and all authority can be imbued with ideas and with a

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1. e.g. Evans-Pritchard, 1948; Beattie, 1959; Hocart, 1927 and 1936. cf. also Dumézil, 1943, and 1948, etc., Frankfort, 1948; The Sacral Kingship, 1959.

ritualistic and symbolic aspect, as has been suggested, then the authority of a king, even if by its very nature especially surrounded with such elements, is in no way radically different in kind from any other sort of authority.

For the mysterious, magical and esoteric nature of kingship that is often assumed by writers on the subject, Sir James Frazer[1] is perhaps mainly to blame. Now it is tempting perhaps to be too far-reaching and righteously indignant in our rejection nowadays of Frazer; in spite of his many unwarranted assumptions, his uncritical use of sources, and his method of picking and choosing with no regard to social context, he was looking for the rationale behind people's explicit thinking and acting, just as modern anthropologists do, and trying to interpret this by the method of comparative sociology. It would be too easy just to write him off, as is sometimes implied, as not an anthropologist at all.

But it cannot be too strongly emphasised that his main influence has been almost completely for the bad. The evolutionist "stages" of development rest on what we now know to be mistaken assumptions; the rhetoric of the Golden Bough may conceal but cannot excuse the lack of rigorous argument; and finally, and most relevantly, many of the basic concepts

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1. Golden Bough, passim.

are too uncritical and vague to be of any use at all in comparative analysis. "Fertility rites", "vegetation daimons" and "dying gods" are cover-words, to include a whole mass of data. But they cover too much, so that "fertility rites" and "dying gods" turn out to be too common! they lose all clear and precise meaning. Thus - like "primitive" - they are not explanatory terms, and to say that a king is a fertility symbol gets us no further at all (unless perhaps in misleading).

Not much has in fact been written specifically on Irish kingship - but much of what there is has been vitiated by precisely this influence of Frazer and the use, following him, of uncritical and unhelpful concepts.

Thus we have the example of R.A.S. Macalister, writing in 1931 on "The Kings of Tara". Because of the "epoch in the history of the human mind ... marked by the publication of The Golden Bough" Macalister can fully understand, apparently, the real nature of "the king ... a personage who, by his inauguration has been elevated to godhead"; he was slain by his successor ("such an event as the natural death of the king was probably regarded as divine interposition") and so that he would avoid age and its evils he was given certain natural produce from specially select places, from which he "derived

a new influx of strength which enabled him to carry out the duties of a Vegetation-spirit with renewed vigour". Special ordeals were laid down for his successor, provided by the Fetish stone, Fal, and Fal's Voice produced by the Bull-roarer:

> "What vistas of antiquity seem to open up before us as we stand beside this ancient stone! Far back behind "Tea" ... the Good God and his companions... is the fluttering bull-roarer of the ancient neolithic peasants, who assembled to invoke a blessing on their toils, and to choose them a leader to be at once king and god." 1

Nor is this sort of approach confined to those who, like Bury[2] were near enough to that new "epoch in the history of the human mind" to be dazzled by its modernity; in later writers too we trace Frazer's influence. A recent general book on the Celts speaks of the dreadful results of the king's ageing -

> "the king must grow old, and with his ageing came the risk of the decline in prosperity of the people and the land. At this stage the goddess takes on the aspect of a repulsive hag, withering with the king's declining powers, and emphasising the need for a new mate who will ensure the continuation of prosperity. There can be little doubt (sic) that the Celtic king, in fully pagan times at least, met a violent but ritual end, and there are a number of somewhat veiled allusions to deaths by weapon wounds, drowning and burning, in the midst of high magic, in the presence of the hag and the tribal god." 3

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1. Macalister, 1931, pp. 126-7, 130, 153, 148.
2. Bury, 1905, follows and cites Frazer, p. 110.
3. Powell, 1959, pp. 121-2.

The absence of any actual instances of this ritual slaying of the king (for the "somewhat veiled allusions" above amount to very little) is firmly and rightly noted by M. Draak in her article on Kingship in Pagan Ireland. But even here there is a disproportionate emphasis on ideas like fertility, magic and the deaths of kings.

> "The (sacral) King tries all his life to keep in balance with the forces of Fate and magic, but at any moment the magic of his enemies may prevail, and Fate - of course - always is stronger in the end. Then the equilibrium is disturbed and the King is killed in battle... or dies ..." 1

Fertility rites come in again as a climax even into Professor Binchy's closely argued scholar's paper on the feast of Tara. His conclusion is that

> "the historical feast of Tara was a primitive fertility rite culminating in the apotheosis of the sacred king" ... it is "obvious that this pagan fertility rite with a quasi-divine king at its centre, could not survive the christianisation of the Tara dynasty". 2

It is not to be wondered at, that, in the midst of such writings (and not only on Ireland) with their invocations and evocations of the Golden Bough - that if there is any word avoided among modern anthropologists it is "fertility" and all its compounds. Used as it was by Frazer and his followers, it is a term so loose that it can be used to cover almost

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1. Draak, 1959, p. 663.
2. Binchy, 1958, pp. 136-7.

anything that at first sight appears strange or unfamiliar, and is, as such, quite useless for sociological analysis.

But for the confident modern social anthropologist, Ireland provides somewhat of an embarrassment. For try as we may, we cannot, at length, conceal the fact that our texts continually - <u>continually</u> - speak of the fruitfulness of the land as depending on the king, the abundance of the fruits on the trees and the fish in the rivers, and the health of the cattle and their young. But all we can try to do is to show the precise nature of the connection that was represented as existing between the behaviour of the king and the fruitfulness of his kingdom; there will be no need to invoke notions of Vegetation gods or corn daimons, nor of ritually slain king-gods. And if the tabooed word of "fertility" does, after all, have to be used, can it perhaps be understood as washed clean of all Frazerian imputation? and at least, we may be thankful, in the case of Ireland there is no need to conjoin it with "rites".

That said, it is clear even from the writings of Irish scholars who touch on the kingship amidst their other interests - quite apart, that is, from the evidence of the Irish texts themselves - that to a social anthropologist and student of comparative institutions the Irish concepts of kingship are intensely interesting. Perhaps the best short account is

that given by the way by Vendryes in a review of a book on the Cycles of the Irish kings; and, our provisos now stated, this may be quoted in full

> Le roi passait d'ailleurs pour être investi de pouvoirs surnaturels. C'est de lui que dépendait la fertilité de la terre ou du bétail, et par conséquent l'alimentation du peuple. Il décidait par sa conduite de l'abondance ou de la famine. S'il arrivait de violer quelque interdiction ou de transgresser une prescription, il condamnait le pays à la stérilité...(cette idée) se rattache a la conception de la geis qui joue un rôle si important dans l'intrigue de beaucoup de récits. C'est par la geis aussi qu'il faut expliquer qu'un roi atteint d'un défaut physique se trouve ipso facto frappé de déchéance. L'excellent roi Cormac en fut victime, lorsqu'un fâcheux accident le rendit borgne. Un poète, étant capable de faire pousser un bouton sur la face d'un roi, exposait celui-ci a semblable disgrâce.[1]

From this can be glimpsed already the responsibility of the Irish king, the symbolic importance of his physical perfection, and, most significant of all, the power of the poet over the king. The present study does little more than elaborate and follow through these ideas.

3. Standards of Relevance

There is much general writing as well as unlimited scholarly controversy which I shall consider irrelevant to the present study on Irish kingship. I wish therefore to

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1. Vendryes: Etudes Celtiques V. 1950, pp. 437-8.

say a little about some of these discussions and about the standards of relevance I am applying.

There is, for example, in addition to the usual popular and romantic speculations on the subject, much learned argument[1] about who exactly the Irish were, and are - and whence. The controversies are manifold, and complicated by the use of mingled evidence from ethnology or physical anthropology, or built up from philological-cum-archaeological theories.

The whole question is still a matter of discussion, and the details are so complex and disputed that I could not treat it here even if I wished. Different invasions, for instance, are postulated and counter-postulated of various peoples speaking respectively "non-Celtic" and "pre-Aryan" languages, or differing types of non-Gaelic, then, later, Gaelic languages. Since Irish and Scottish Gaelic are clearly distinguished as forming one separate group in the Celtic languages, being "Q-Celtic" as distinct from the "P-Celtic" Welsh and Cornish languages, the question is then raised as to the date and place of the divergence of these from the postulated root-language. And when, it is further demanded, did the speakers of these languages in fact come to Ireland? Were the "Q-Celts" the first to move, and thus

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1. e.g. O'Rahilly, 1946; Powell, 1948; and 1950; Hencken, 1955; MacWhite, 1955.

reach Ireland, as was asserted for long? Or is a more recent theory better that argues from detailed historical and mythological evidence and points to a fourth wave of Celts, Q-speaking, coming last and latest, direct from Gaul to Ireland, following the three earlier waves of "P-Celts"?[1] And who furthermore were the original bearers of Gaelic to Ireland?

These questions are complicated and problematical enough. But to them is also added the concept of differing racial groups within Ireland itself, so that political and mythological relations can be described according to the various linguistic or racial origins of these groups. Again the evidence cited here is mostly a combination of the archaeological and the philological - the oldest population strata are perhaps along the western coast;[2] or we find the "major portion of Irish tradition" (sc. the "Indo-European elements") among the ethnic groups in the north and west of the island;[3] or, in a masterly correlation of all the evidence, four major groups in early Ireland, linguistically, racially and mythologically characterised, are discovered by O'Rahilly.[4] The physical anthropologists too have tried to correlate the morphological types they examined in the 1934-6 survey of Ireland

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1. O'Rahilly, 1946, p. 419ff.
2. Macalister, 1949, p. 8.
3. Powell, 1948, p. 78.
4. O'Rahilly, 1946.

with the legendary, historical and linguistic data cited for the earlier period by O'Rahilly:[1] but by one scholar at least this is regarded as "by no means satisfactory or convincing" because of "the very hypothetical character of O'Rahilly's theories".[2]

Amidst such disagreement, however, one saving consensus happily emerges. Whatever the language or physical beginnings of the Irish folk, it seems at least to be accepted that the immigrations and invasions were complete, and the population patterns settled, some centuries at least before the period to which this study of Irish kingship relates.[3] Unless we think that rules against all inter-marriage were enforced in the strictest way we can imagine possible, it seems on the face of it unlikely that in a small country like Ireland, and one with a nationally accepted order of culture and learning, that it would be sufficient or possible, after five or six centuries, to distinguish in purely genetical terms. A social anthropologist, in any case, does not find descriptions that

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1. Hooton and Dupetuis, 1955, p. 205 ff.
2. Sommerfelt, in Lochlann I, 1958, p. 265. For further references to racial-cum-historical theory cf. e.g. Pokorny, 1953, p. 16f. who thinks that the "small dark-haired" element may have been descended from the Eskimoes; and Green, 1925, pp. 27-8, who tries to identify other divisions into e.g. a "smith-folk" and others who were "probably a fisher caste."
3. By 1st century A.D. - Powell, 1950, pp. 194-5; by 1st century B.C. O'Rahilly, 1946, p. 208. cf. section on chronology below.

are purely in terms of race, or of language, sufficient or, indeed, necessary in analysing relations of authority or social order.

Nor is it necessary for the anthropologist to take seriously such topics as the "Pictish problem" or the "Mother-right" and matrilineal succession[1] - a "non-Celtic trait" perhaps! - that the Picts may have bequeathed to the Irish. ("Just moonshine" this idea, as D.A. Binchy rightly remarks.)[2] This approach is now refined by the work of philologists who speak of a pre-Celtic or pre-Aryan "substratum" in the language of Ireland. Some extend this, however, from a study of linguistic matters to speculation about imagined institutions in early Ireland: "The Gaels ... retain many traces of that pre-Aryan culture in their laws, customs, beliefs and language" and "the oldest Irish literature ... opens to us the most important gate to that mysterious pre-Aryan world, a knowledge of which is essential to the study of the ethnological problems of Europe." This is shown, Pokorny considers, by some of the non-Aryan characteristics of the language - the use of sentence as unit, for example, the "frequent use of concrete for abstract", the impersonal verb, and, finally, the

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1. On "Pictish problem" and matrilineal succession cf. McLennan, 1865, pp. 127-31; 214; Hubert, 1934, p. 204. Contra Binchy, 1936, pp. 185-6, 209.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 58.

"conjugation" of prepositions![1]

Pokorny spoke of the importance such studies could have in "ethnology"; and ethnology has in the past been connected with anthropology. So in case anyone should still think that such arguments and speculations have <u>any</u> connexion with modern social anthropology, <u>any</u> relevance for sociological analysis, may I yet again refer to the methods of modern social anthropology -

Any analysis in terms of "stages", strata, racial characteristics, pre-Aryan or pre-Celtic traits, and "survivals" is regarded as insufficient and uncritical or, at the very least, irrelevant in social anthropology. Such terminology was used 50 years ago; it is not used now.

Furthermore - and this is perhaps equally important - the method of arguing from a <u>combination</u> of linguistic and archaeological evidence is open to very grave objections. David Greene was ridiculing this approach when he spoke of "the archaeologists who claim to determine a man's culture, race and language from the shape of his sword",[2] and his gibe has a very real point. <u>Of course</u> not all those who speak the same language have the same shaped heads; and <u>of course</u> those who look alike do not necessarily have the same language or

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1. Pokorny, 1933, pp. 23-4.
2. Greene in Dillon, 1954, p. 79.

the same social organisation. This has been cogently stated by many[1] (including some of those who then proceed to use the very methods thus rejected!) and serves as yet another reason why I am treating as irrelevant the great amount of published work on Ireland that has proceeded by this method.

Social anthropology in general, then, proceeds by the method of examining the institutions and ideas in a given social context, and does not try to account for these by reference to their racial, material or linguistic beginnings, above all when these origins rest mainly on conjecture or speculation; again it can be seen how this general approach fits the view adopted of <u>authority</u> as primarily resting on a basis of justification, rather than of force, race or material power. In the case of Ireland in particular, a description according to racial-cum-linguistic origins is unnecessary as well as irrelevant since the period treated here is, as has already been pointed out, some centuries at least after the suggested date for the final settlement of the Irish population.

It is illuminating to quote in this connexion some remarks of a modern social anthropologist stating his approach to the analogous study of <u>India</u>: this is the more relevant as many

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1. e.g. G. Daniel PBA, 1954, esp. pp.158f.; O'Rahilly, 1946, pp. 430-3; Powell, 1948, p. 71; MacWhite, 1955, p. 2.

modern Irish scholars are concerned to stress the similarities between India and early Ireland.[1] Here then is the general approach outlined in the first issue of the recent publication "Contributions to Indian Sociology":

> The most disastrous of these imaginary divisions which has been imposed, and is still imposed, on Indian culture is the so-called distinction between Aryan and Dravidian features... In imposing this distinction our western ethnocentrism has led us to distort the object of our study...Philologists looked in ancient India first of all for their Aryan, or rather Indo-European cousins (if not indeed their grandfathers). ... In order to explain the birth of Hinduism from Vedism it was found necessary to refer to what linguists call a substratum..labelled as (mainly) Dravidian ... This is how .... ethnologists turned their attention for so long to the so-called local substratum. They were thus indirectly prisoners of philological ethnocentricity which relied on their help to complete a decidedly insufficient picture. For Indian civilisation, looked at in a narrow western perspective, did not quite cease to appear as a bizarre outgrowth, as though our Aryan cousins had not turned out as they should.
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> At the same time, ethnology made a positive contribution ... Certainly we find throughout India elementary material with which we are familiar from the ethnology of other parts of the world. But we should now come to recognise that these more or less "primitive" elements in India are profoundly modified by the fact that they become there parts of an original and complex construction.[2]

This is equally applicable to Ireland; for the same method of describing as non-Aryan or "primitive" features

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1. See below, p.47
2. Contributions to Indian Sociology ed. Dumont and Pocock I, 1957, pp. 15-6.

which seemed odd or surprising has been applied to Ireland too - a method perhaps taken over from that of India; is it in this connexion perhaps significant that some of the influential Irish scholars of the 19th century were also Indian experts?[1] But just as this method has been felt inadequate now by social anthropologists in the study of India, so is it, analogously, in the case of Ireland.

To sum up this section, then, on standards of relevance: we are concerned with the peculiarly Irish concepts and ideas as represented in an Irish social context. We can speak, that is, of the invasion motif in Irish mythology and political justification, without having to specify who exactly the invaders or the gods "really were", whether from comparative Indo-European philology or mythology,[2] or in terms of "actual" racial origins, or of "forgeries" or "euhemerisation" or systematic Christian misrepresentation.[3] We can speak of the special Irish traditions and stories associated with various places in Ireland without having to explain who the populations of these places actually and originally are. We can consider the Irish explanations and justifications in terms of their descent from one or other of the legendary invading peoples,

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1. e.g. Whitley Stokes (a friend of Sir Henry Maine's); Windisch; Robert Atkinson.
2. e.g. Rhys, 1888.
3. O'Rahilly, 1946, Ch. XIV; Powell, 1950; MacNeill, 1921.

without having to decide precisely who these invaders <u>really</u> and racially and historically were (if at all). After all, the notion of supernatural or legendary ancestry among royal and ruling families is widespread enough for it not to need any special explanation.

So, although the importance of history, including population movements, is not denied, still for the social anthropologist, any explanation in terms of race, whether defined in philology, archaeology or physical anthropology, is not in itself either sufficient or relevant.

Something has been said already about the supposed similarity between Ireland and India; in view of the great interest taken by many Irish scholars and comparative philologists in this subject something must be added about it here.

Clearly Ireland and India both lie on the periphery of the Indo-European complex, a periphery that was not Romanised; a resemblance then, even if only negative, as being non-Roman, would not be surprising. Positive similarities had in fact already excited 19th century Irish students,[1] and the fundamental resemblances in the religious vocabulary in particular, as between Indo-Iranian and Italo-Celtic, were noted in a classic article by Vendryes in 1918.[2] More recently we have

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1. e.g. Introd. to AL I, p. XLVIII; Maine, 1875; Stokes, Academy XXVIII, 1885.
2. Vendryes, Mem. Soc. Ling. XX, (1918).

had comparisons concerning, for example, the importance of "the act of Truth" in Indian and Irish thought, pointed out in Dillon's stimulating paper,[1] and the resemblances in the various institutions of "fasting", law, the significance of the learned class and its traditions, and the social organisation in general.[2] The analogies are, in fact, striking; for this very reason I do not intend to point to them every time they are evident; the general picture should emerge clearly enough.

In the field of comparative Indo-European philology, no one can ignore the work of Georges Dumézil.[3] Again the aim of analysis is, as he says, not to describe the origin migrations or material culture of the Indo-Europeans; rather "la 'civilisation indo-européenne' que nous envisageons est celle de l'esprit."[4] The stimulus of his examination of Indo-European concepts, ideas and classification lies behind much modern work in social anthropology, including, as will be obvious, this study of Irish kingship.

This has been taken further by some, and used to postulate the actually existing "original Indo-European institutions" the date and place of the original i.E. dispersion.[5] Such

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1. Dillon, PBA, 1947; cf. also in Mod. Philology XLIV, 1947.
2. e.g. Binchy PBA, 1943; Powell, 1948.
3. Dumézil, e.g. 1943; 1948; 1958.
4. Dumézil, 1958, Introd., p. 5.
5. e.g. Palmer, 1955; Powell, 1948.

speculation is certainly interesting, although some of the arguments and concepts - like the "god-king" attributed to them with little further comment[1] - may strike the social anthropologist nowadays as odd. But at any rate this is a question I need not enter into; for although the results of such work are important and relevant for the philologist and archaeologist; and although for the social anthropologist too, now that the extreme diffusion-versus-independent-invention argument is past and that of "functionalism" versus history passing, such accounts may be striking and illuminating - still, a mere <u>labelling</u> of piece-meal institutions as "Indo-European", is not, sociologically speaking, a sufficient analysis. In general, therefore, such classifications will be avoided here even when the comparative evidence has in fact been illuminating; what is being discussed is the nature of kingship in <u>Irish</u> society.

<u>II. Methods: Chronology and Sources</u>

<u>1. Chronology and the source problem</u>

"The early period with which this ... is mainly concerned is that ... up to the period when the Scandinavian invasions

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1. Palmer, <u>loc. cit.</u>, pp. 9, 18.

began to disrupt the Irish polity - that is, the ninth century. But we do not possess in Ireland a single Irish manuscript (written in Irish, that is) from that period .... The earliest surviving manuscripts preserving literary and scholarly material ... were written in the twelfth century .... and much ancient matter survives only in manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."[1]

David Greene is describing the dilemma that all students of early Ireland find themselves in; the problem must be faced as to how far we can argue from the later sources to the earlier period of Irish history, and how it is possible to speak of Irish institutions and Irish society when we know that the introduction of Christianity in the 5th century - the very thing which, by introducing a tradition of writing thus made possible the permanent recording of specifically Irish ideas - may also have introduced foreign and radically different ideas and concepts. At first sight this seems an insoluble difficulty - we only know about Ireland what was written down under the impact and, maybe, influence of foreign concepts.

My study here of Irish kingship therefore shares this difficulty with all other writings on the period with which it is concerned - with, that is, pre-Conquest times and, in particular, with the period before the coming of the Norsemen

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1. Greene, 1954, pp. 25-6.

or Scandinavians in the 9th century. What must be considered therefore is whether there is any possible way round this problem of sources as related to chronology: but let us lay this on one side for the moment, and instead consider a rough sketch of the events in Irish history which affect us.

Perhaps the most famous date in Irish history is 432 A.D. - the time of "the coming of the Faith to Ireland" and the arrival of St. Patrick. The precise chronology, the previous state of Ireland, even the exact identity of the "real Patrick" (or Patricks?), may now be a matter of furious dispute:[1] but nothing can alter the fact that in Irish tradition, in the hagiographic and annalistic and mythological literature of Ireland, this is represented as the great moment of Christian conversion, when the picturesque encounters between saint and druid at the court of the high king resulted in the clear and proved victory of Christianity, so that, as it is put in the Confession attributed to Patrick himself, "it came to pass that in Ireland they who never had any knowledge and until now have only worshipped idols and unclean things, have lately become a people of the Lord, and are called the sons of God".[2]

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1. On "Patrician problem" e.g. The Life and Legend of St. Patrick, Bieler, Dublin, 1949; Carney, 1955, IX.
2. Confession of Patrick, 18.

But whatever the details, Christianity was introduced in the 5th century, and with it came the Latin language, the Christian traditions, and writing; there followed the writing down for the first time of the old Irish customs and oral literature under the stimulus of these foreign ideas, and the codifying of the customary laws of Ireland, with, it is said, the encouragement and approval of St. Patrick himself after but few alterations: "what did not disagree with the word of God .... was retained in the Brehon code by the Church and the poets. All the law of nature was just, except the faith and its obligations".[1] Finally came the founding, in the centuries that followed, of the great monastic tradition of Ireland, with its wandering monks, its scholars and its scribes, writing first in Latin, then, more and more, in the vernacular and native language and tradition - to give Ireland her famous epithet of "the Land of Saints and Scholars". Equally famous is the special form taken by the "Celtic church"; ecclesiastical centres in cities, after the model of the Continental Church, were not possible, for Ireland was a rural non-centralised country with no towns; thus came about the emphasis, in Ireland, on the monastic settlement, fixed in a locality apart, and the power that attached to the office of abbot rather than, as elsewhere, the bishop.

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1. AL, III, 31-3.

Then about 800 the Scandinavians took to the sea. With their galleys which could at once face the Atlantic seas and sail far up any navigable river, they soon became the terror of settled peoples.[1] Ireland, small, an island, with navigable streams, lay peculiarly open to them and to their plundering and destroying inroads. These were raids, not conquest: but the impact of the "Norsemen" on Irish society was great - for the first time, towns were founded, around the coast, and, under Scandinavian impact and rule, grew in importance. The famed battle of Clontarf in 1014, at which the great Irish king Brian Boru died in the moment of final victory over the Norsemen, marks the end of their inroads; but it also marked the change in Irish society that these raids had brought about.

For from that time the idea of military and forceful overlordship over all the Irish as subjects - a new idea this - seems to have taken hold and grown, with warring "kings with opposition" battle-axing their way through Irish territory and politics. The way was being paved for feudal Norman rule, and by 1172 the Norman Invasion of Ireland had taken place.

For the following centuries the military adventurings, civil wars and manifold rebellions are only too well known. The English lords sent out to rule the barbarous and turbulent

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1. Curtis, 1936, p. 22.

Irish soon, in the much-quoted phrase, "became more Irish than the Irish themselves", while the English government in the Pale continued to try to carry out, from its small area of possession, the impossible task of ruling the native Irish according to various versions and perversions of English law - the "meere Irish" in the meantime continuing to appeal to the standards of their own law and of the old Gaelic literary and learned order, an order not finally smashed until the battle of Kinsale in 1601. So it was not until the end of the 17th century that the English conquest was completed.

Thus we have in the 5th century (or perhaps the 4th) the impact of Christian and Latin learning, in the 9th the Norse inroads, the 12th the Norman Invasion, and, finally, in the 17th century the break-up of the old Irish order. How then is it possible, when the MSS. and the evidence are mainly from later times to argue back from this later evidence to the state of affairs in pre-Norse (or even pre-Norman) Ireland? The sources we have, besides, may be describing different stages of Irish society: thus the law tracts,[1] though written down in their extant form perhaps in the 6th or 7th century, are said to reflect in many ways pre-Christian times and the institutions of pagan Ireland. The annalistic writings on the other hand, and some of the sagas are in many ways very

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1. On laws see below on sources, and Chapter II, 2.

definitely post-Christian; for they were written down by those acquainted with the biblical traditions, and the history of Ireland is recounted as beginning from the Garden of Eden and "the crooked left hand that was stretched to the apple"[1] ..... when "the whole world perished in exchange for a single apple"; accounts of the flood and genealogies stretching back to Noah and his sons are wound in with stories of the peopling of Ireland, and the Irish lawyers used the episodes of the Old Testament as continually cited precedents and justifications.[2] In the sagas we have what may seem at first sight a mere jumble of Christian and pagan elements, for St. Patrick is described as conferring with the heroes of ancient legend. One hero in particular lives on to transmit the old stories to the saint. He on his side is doubtful about the wisdom of listening to these pagan stories - but his mind is put at rest, for his two guardian angels appear to him.

> "Beloved holy cleric," said they, "those ancient warriors can tell you no more than a third of their stories by reason of forgetfulness and lack of memory. And see to it that what they say be written on poets' staves and in learned men's words, for it will be a delight to gatherings of people and to noblemen in later times to listen to those tales." 3

Amidst such combining, then, of Latin, Irish and biblical tradition, how is it that it has been found possible to speak

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1. LG, poem XV.
2. Binchy in Dillon, 1959, p. 40.
3. Quoted Murphy in Dillon, 1959, pp. 131-2.

of a specifically Irish tradition and of the order of society in general in pre-Norse Ireland?

The answer to this problem must be clear in every sentence of this brief survey of Irish history and literature. For if there is any one thing that all scholars and all writers on Ireland agree on - and rightly so - it is on the remarkable conservatism and archaising nature of Irish society and Irish thought.[1]

Ireland imposed her outlook and her social organisation on those who settled within her coasts. Whether Christian cleric or English lord it made little difference. The Celtic church grew up in the form of the monastic settlement as fitted the old political and social divisions of Ireland, and the ecclesiastics were to some extent assimilated into and treated on the same lines as the old Irish men of learning; the English settlers soon became Hibernis ipsis hiberniores; and the happy fusion of the old and newer learning is represented in the traditions of Patrick's blessing and ratifying of the Irish laws and stories.

This continuity is emphasised again and again by all those who have studied Ireland. Irish, for example, is the oldest

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1. In addition to references below cf. also Plummer, V.SS.H. 1910, Introd. V; Curtis, 1936, p. 21; Sjoestedt, 1949, pp. xix-xx; Dillon, 1947; MacNeill, 1935, p. 132.

vernacular literature in Europe; for though Latin was at first the language of the Church, Irish came to be more and more accepted, and, in a quite unparallelled way, the native tradition and the Irish learning were gradually assimilated even in the monasteries. There are many stories, as before remarked, about the mutual and peaceful meeting of native and Christian tradition, but, significantly enough, none about any martyrs in Ireland - the change was not felt to involve that kind of disruption. This is again striking in the native legends of the saints - the old concepts of heroism, power or wizardry recurr again in the hagiographical writings; we find, for example, the old method of proceeding against an enemy by "fasting on" him being used - successfully - by St. Fimen against a rich warrior who refused to admit him.[1] As has often been pointed out the figure of Patrick in Irish story is fundamentally influenced by the native Irish concepts about hero and druid - this is the subject of Czarnowski's book on "Le culte des héros et ses conditions sociales".[2] Perhaps however, St. Columba - the Irish Colmcille - is the most interesting representation of the Irish saint. He is described as saint, and poet, and of kingly birth. He unites

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1. D'Arbois, 1903, p. 27; cf. story of 12 apostles fasting against Tara, Ryan, 1928, Ch. V.
2. Czarnowski, 1919, passim.

in himself the characteristics of a king - his pride and anger - and the knowledge and insight of the poet. It was he who defended the old order of the poets of Ireland against accusation in the 6th century; and he who concluded one of the famous poems attributed to him in later times - "Christ is my druid".[1] He, and other clerics too, was considered as heir to the druidic tradition and power; "Christianity did not abolish Druidism, but rather transformed it".[2]

The strength and continuity of Irish tradition is marked not only by its assimilation of Christianity, but also in the long-continued practice of the old "brehon" laws of Ireland. Certainly there were changes of detail, even important detail - the size of the legal kin group for various purposes, for example, or the precise way in which compensation for homicide was assessed.[3] But the amazing continuity in main outline throughout the historic period is constantly remarked - and indeed even up to the 16th and 17th centuries. Thus D.A. Binchy, for instance, describes the "conservatism of Irish law" and its influence, even in later times, on land tenure and marriage-law, and concludes that the effect of Christianity was mostly on the surface: the law tracts were an "essentially

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1. Mo drui .... Mac Dé. qu. from Chron. Scotorum 52, in Adamnan, ed. Fowler, 1920, p. 56.
2. MacNeill, 1935, p. 81.
3. Binchy, 1943, p. 222; 1941, p. 86.

pagan structure erected by the jurists".[1] For the later period we have the evidence of a typically prejudiced member of the conquering and dominant people: the Irish, he writes in 1596, are not "made to learn obedience unto lawes, scarcely to know the name of law, but instead thereof have alwayes preserved and kept their owne law, which is the Brehon law..... (a) rule of right unwritten, but delivered by tradition from one to another .... but in many things repugning quite both to Gods law, and mans"[2] ... The Irish "delight to leane to their old customes and Brehon lawes, though they be more unjust and also more inconvenient for the common people".[3]

This remarkable tenacity and conservatism in their own ways and laws from very early times right up to the time of the Norman Invasion in the 12th century and even, in many respects, to the 16th and 17th centuries, has led to the possibility of treating the evidence on early Ireland in a special way. For although there were of course changes in Irish society in the period mentioned and Irish scholars sometimes stress the fact that it was, in fact, not static, still they are in general prepared to use evidence from later times - the 14th or 15th century, say - to illuminate what happened

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 218.
2. Spencer (1809), pp. 6-7.
3. Ibid., pp. 15-6.

earlier. Thus discussion of the inauguration of the king commonly uses sources which were actually written down quite late in Irish history; for they describe the way in which the king was "mystically invested with sovereignty by means of immemorial inauguration rites, which survived - though doubtless in attenuated form - down to the destruction of the Gaelic order."[1] In reference to the actual choice of king from all those eligible, even Eoin MacNeill is prepared to use, for the pre-Norman period, the description of the election of Aodh Ruadh Ua Domhnaill to the kingship of Tír Conaill in the year 1592, as given in the near contemporary biography by Lughaidh Ua Cleirigh.[2]

The principle therefore of using the later in combination with the earlier evidence is thus conceded. (Naturally in practice this is not always possible). I have, then, no hesitation about following this general attitude in my discussions of such central concepts as that of satire or of the inauguration ceremonies of kings, especially when the evidence is in fact consistent, reasonable and illuminating.

This accepted possibility of using material from different

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1. Binchy, 1945, p. 56; cf. Hogan, 1932, on the 17th century version of a tract on a 14th century inauguration, "it is a reasonable surmise that the procedure on that occasion did not differ very much from that which prevailed even before the Invasion", p. 196.
2. MacNeill, 1921, p. 121; contra Hogan, 1932, p. 190.

chronological periods to describe Irish institutions is not - naturally - coincidental. Nor is it even just due to the fact that Ireland was not, for many years, thoroughly conquered, and that the English government found itself unable, in a land without urban or centralised power, to impose a new legal and political structure from the top. Rather - as also in case of India - we can connect the extraordinary conservatism and strength of tradition in that society with the existence of the Irish "men of art", with, that is, the position assigned in Irish society to the learned class who handed down from generation to generation, at first through oral tradition and later by writing, their knowledge and traditional lore of law, poetry, art, myth, and history. It was in terms of this tradition that the later "synthetic histories" of the 7th and 8th centuries were composed, with all their fabricated dates and fabulous connections and synchronisms between Irish and biblical story.[1] For the archaising of these centuries is no accident, nor, as is sometimes suggested, is it merely due to planned forgery by Irish monks and writers, designed to conceal from the Irish people themselves their own pagan past or the lack, for the most part, of a sought-after racial purity.[2] It was the strength and continuing significance of

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1. MacNeill, 1921, Chap. III.
2. O'Rahilly, 1946, pp. 261, 267.

the native tradition that made it necessary and possible for these "synthetic histories" and genealogies to be written at all, and the new to be expressed in terms of the old.

In Ireland then we have a society in which the most striking feature is the strength and power given to the traditional knowledge and the national learned order. The nature and significance of this can be discussed later. What we have to notice here is that it is this archaising and traditional tendency among the important Irish "men of art" that makes it possible for us to treat the writings of differing centuries as, ultimately, part of the same tradition.

That the actual power of this learned order did in fact continue in Ireland until a late date, is demonstrated by, for one thing, the fear as well as attempted conciliation by the English government of the 16th century of the poetic or bardic order - for they were the influential inheritors of this learned tradition.[1] Like many foreign governments, though, the English as often as not misunderstood the real nature of the native institutions: we read in the English writers the usual descriptions of the general barbarity and independability of the wild Irish, their primitive and pastoral mode of life, their wicked use of their native dress and language, and of their abominable treachery - beyond that of any other nation.[2] Whereas all

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1. O'Rahilly, 1922, p. 86; Quiggin, 1911, p. 91.
2. Giraldus III. 10, 20. Spencer, p. 84f; 112f.

this time, as Corkery suggests throughout his book on 18th century Gaelic Munster ("The Hidden Ireland"),[1] the old respect for the traditional knowledge and for the men of learning continued even under the unrecognising eyes of the English governors; the wandering poets travelled through Ireland with their songs - "the one national force that overshadowed and dominated all others."[2]

At any rate, it can now be seen that the apparent difficulty about chronology stated at the outset of this discussion, has both a precedent in the writings of others, and a real reason in the nature of Irish society. For our discussion of this difficulty has led us to one of the basic characteristics of Ireland.

My answer, then, to this problem about chronology, is that, as the kernel of my study, the period of roughly the 5th to the 9th century has been picked out as central. But I am prepared to use a certain amount of evidence from much later centuries, and also to follow some of the fairly accepted conjectural material for an earlier period.

In adopting this position I am, firstly, following the precedent set by most Irish scholars; secondly I am able to avoid many of the complicated controversies about the exact

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1. Corkery, 1925.
2. Ibid., pp. 60-61.

date at which some story in the traditional Irish style was in fact first written down or composed. Thirdly this approach is supported by the nature of Irish society with its emphasis on tradition and continuity.

Furthermore the importance in Irish tradition of learning and the knowledge and theories of the learned class fits very well with the general emphasis in this study on the significance, in studies of authority, of ideas and symbolic representation. The theoretical and learned views of kingship, say, may well be especially tenacious and conservative. Ireland is a good illustration of this; and this again supports the rather long-term view of chronology adopted in the study of early Ireland.

In social anthropology too there is good precedent for this approach to the problems of chronology. The case of India has already been mentioned.[1] There is also the classic study of kingship in Egypt and Mesopotamia by Frankfort; speaking of his treatment of kingship in Egypt, he admits that an alternative method would be to discuss the different degrees of the realisation of kingship at different times, the various shrinkings and reassertions of the royal power. "But," he continues "such observations are meaningless unless we understand the true nature of Egyptian kingship ... the motive force

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1. And cf. Hocart, 1927, and 1936.

of Egyptian kingship throughout Egyptian history remained the concept of kingship which we are presenting here".[1]

The same words could have been written about the study of Irish kingship.

2. Sources

Only a very brief and schematic list is given here. Further references can be found in bibliographies[2] and general works[3] on Ireland; additional consideration of some of the sources will occur throughout the text.

1. Law Tracts[4]

The customary law of pre-Christian times, written down, with slight alterations, in the 6-7th centuries, and embodied in its present form by 8th century. "Though the Irish laws have a Christian facade, their basic structure is pagan". The language is archaic, difficult and over-schematic, further obscured by the commentaries, "a crazy pattern of rabbinical distinctions..." [5]

A very important source, but not yet fully elucidated. The much criticised 19th century edition and translation (The Ancient Laws of Ireland) is superseded or supplemented by modern work, mostly to be found in various of the learned journals.[6]

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1. Frankfort, 1948, pp. 56-7.
2. Best, 1913 and 1942; Kenney, 1929.
3. MacNeill, 1921; de Paor, 1958; Hubert, 1934.
4. Cf. esp. Thurneysen: Das Keltische Recht, 1935; Binchy: The linguistic and historical value of the Irish law tracts PBA 1943.
5. Binchy, 1954, p. 53; 1943, p. 225.
6. Esp. ZCP; Eriu; Preuss. Akad. der Wissensch.

1D/i.c.

2. Sagas and other mythical or romantic writing[1]

Various cycles are included in the traditional tales
Mythological cycle - the adventures and invasion of the mythical Tuatha Dé Danann and their enemies the Fomorians.
Ulster cycle - deals with King Conchobar of Ulster and the hero Cuchulain. The most famous saga is Táin Bó Cúalgne, the driving of the bull of Cooley.
The cycle of Finn, Ossian and their companions.
The cycles of the kings - stories about, for example, Art, Cormac, and Niall of the Nine Hostages.

All quite useful, especially the Mythological cycle, as illustrating Irish view of society, and ideals and theory of kingship.

Some of the late romantic tales and those influenced directly by Latin literature are less relevant here.

3. Annals and Histories

Often purport to deal with Irish history from the beginning of the world, so these early portions are to be closely connected with the saga and mythical material, synthesised with biblical and world history.

For post-Patrician period they are the most authentic source for Irish history, often dating back to contemporary records later compiled and edited in the monasteries. The most famous is the great Annals of the Four Masters compiled between 1632 and 1636 in the convent of the friars of Donegal.

Often illuminating (e.g. detail about inauguration ceremonies and obituary notices of kings), but, like much annalistic writing, concerned rather with the marvellous or striking (a snow storm or a "cow's giving birth to 4 calves") than the normal.

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1. cf. Short Bibliography in Sjoestedt, 1949; useful collection of translations in Cross and Slover: Ancient Irish Tales, 1937 (=AIT).

Geoffrey Keating's "Elements of the History of Ireland" (Foras Feasa ar Éirinn) 1633-34" is drawn faithfully and uncritically from ancient sources many of which have since perished". [1] Designedly attractive and controversial in style.

4. Gnomic and other specialist literature

a) Gnomic or proverbial - of the large number of such texts, many closely connected with the legal and mythological writings, the most interesting are the Instructions to kings (the Tecosca) concerned with the duties and virtues of kingship.[2]

b) Genealogies of royal families

c) Treatises about the particular rights or dues of special areas and kings

d) Other specialist writing, such as the stylised lore of place-names (Dindshenchas) about the legends and traditions of certain famous places.

5. Ecclesiastical[3]

a) Lives and writings of saints - in Latin and, later, Irish. Among the great volume of such writings the most useful and well-known include the Confession and Epistola of Patrick, usually thought to be genuine (i.e. 5th century): the "Tripartite Life" of Patrick (Vita Tripartita) dating from the end of the 9th century, and the 7th century life of St. Columba (Irish Colmcille) by Adamnan.

b) Martyrologies, genealogies of saints, etc.

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1. Kenney, 1929, p. 44.
2. Cf. R.M. Smith; The Speculum Principum in early Irish Literature, 1927.
3. Kenney, 1929, passim.

Besides these native Irish writings outlined above are the descriptions in foreign writers, usually English, and the work of more recent students of Ireland (many merely romantic and nationalistic). Indeed it is only comparatively recently that objective historical work on Ireland has been at all common.

6. Contemporary foreign writers

e.g. 8th century Bede: History of the English Church and People
1185 Giraldus Cambrensis: Topographia Hibernica
16th-17th century Spencer: View of the state of Ireland 1596
Campion: Historie of Ireland 1571
Many of these are very hostile to Ireland.

7. Modern secondary sources

Much specialist work isavailable, such as editions, translations, and discussions of Irish texts, detailed observation, and the elucidation of particular problems, many of these to be found in French, German, English and Irish learned journals. There is however no really good recent survey of all the available evidence on early Ireland although there are many useful books and articles. [1]

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1. de Paor, 1958, is very useful; also Dillon, 1954 (incl. contrib. by Binchy and Greene); Binchy, 1941; Sjoestedt, 1949; MacNeill, 1935.

THE DIVISIONS OF IRISH SOCIETY

I. Ecology, Territorial Distribution and the Irish Year

Ireland is a small island, about 32,000 square miles, lying off the western coasts of Europe, not very far from Britain to the east or Spain on the south yet separated from them both by treacherous seas; on the west coasts there is nothing but the open seas of the Atlantic. Around the shores lies a rim of mountain-ranges, broken only by the open stretch of fifty miles on the east coast, just north of Dublin, "the gate of Ireland". All year the climate is mild with little extreme of temperature for the Atlantic tempers the winter cold; but all year too Ireland is drenched with rain, from the clouds rolling up from the south-west over the Atlantic and breaking against the mountain masses, so that the air is continually damp, and the moisture drains down into the water-logged central plain. In earlier times, as now, the rivers had not a steep enough fall to drain off the moisture from this central limestone plain, and the land

was broken up by innumerable lakes and patches of inaccessible bog. There was then more forest than now - oak, ash, hazel and yew - roamed by stags, wild pigs, hares. As always the over-abundance of moisture was unsuitable for cereal crops in general, but throughout Ireland there was lush pasture and, with that, herds of cattle; everywhere, in story and saga, in political relations, in the distribution of wealth, we hear of cattle.

The most striking thing about early Ireland is its rural nature. There are, in fact, no truly Irish cities; the first towns in Ireland were founded by the Norse and the Normans. To remember this is essential if we are to understand many of the different facets of Irish society - the significance of the pastoral tradition, the personal aspect of authority and political organisation, the importance of kinship. But the most interesting implication of this rural nature of early Ireland is the conjunction we find here between the local and the national: between, that is, the local nature of early Irish political organisation and mode of life, and the national culture and learning of all Ireland, as conceived by and through the druids, the poets and the lawyers. The real changes that came about in Ireland came from the breakdown of the one or the other element in this conjunction, after the introduction, by the Norse, of coastal towns, and the

influences, from Europe, of ideas of feudalism and political centralisation. It is only through understanding these two aspects, locality and unity, in rural Ireland that we can grasp the nature of early Irish society. The two themes will run through all the description that follows.

The geographical formation of Ireland is significant in this context. The wet central plain is, except for the break on the east coast, surrounded by a wall of mountains along the coasts. These mountains do not form a continuous chain, but are scattered in fragments round the coasts, forming the four major groups of the northern, western, south-western and south-eastern massifs. Now this mountain grouping has relevance for the distribution of settlement and the forms of social organisation. The four modern provinces, Ulster, Connacht, Munster and Leinster correspond to these same areas; and they seem for centuries to have been the main points of settlement well away from the wet, boggy and forested plain. "The ground pattern of regional differentiation in Ireland" writes Estyn Evans "was established in the megalithic era during the first half of the second millenium B.C."; and he imagines the four main areas of Irish civilisation which "broadly correspond to the four areas which have upland massifs as their nuclei ... slowly crystallising throughout prehistoric times around the areas of primary settlement".[1]

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1. E.E. Evans, 1957, p. 17.

The lowlying central plain, on the other hand, was not so congenial to settlers. It would be waterlogged - for the moisture drains to the centre. The drainage necessary, in the humid atmosphere of Ireland, to keep the plains clear is not provided by the rivers. Nor are the rivers of great use for communications: the Shannon indeed runs north to south; but between the east and the west, across the central plains, there are no waterways. In particular, between Meath at the lowlying and fertile "gate of Ireland" in the east, and the mountains of Connacht in the west, communications were never easy until the days of the introduction of the improved wheeled vehicles and of the canal and railway. The plain, too, was thickly forested until at least the seventh century and to some extent later too. The English rulers speak in despair of "the thickness of the woods and the depth of the adjacent bogs".[1] The conditions, then, of the central part of Ireland were not conducive to travel or permanent centralised settlements there. But contacts between the isolated mountain areas were, for individuals, quite possible. And, for a pastoral people like the early Irish, the four mountainous parts of the country, scattered around the coasts and never far from the sea, were the most suitable for habitation.

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1. Irish Statutes, p. 209. cf. Curtis, 1938, p. xxxv.

The four main mountainous regions of Ireland fitted with the tendency towards this settlement on the peripheries, looking to the corners rather than the centre; they also coincided with the four main provinces or kingdoms that were said to make up the whole of Ireland. They were both the ancient kingdoms of early Ireland, and the four modern provinces. The early names were, in the main, of those who occupied them, not, as now, of clearly defined and bounded units: (the modern terms come through the Norse, -ster or "steading"):[1] thus in pre-Norse Ireland there were, in the north, the Ulaid (mod. Ulster), in the east the Laigin (Leinster), Connachta in the west, and, in the south-west, Mumu (Munster).

But there was also - and this is significant - a fifth province. This was Meath, at the eastern gateway, Meath, the "Middle" province of Ireland. Meath is, in fact, towards the east, and clearly not in the middle; and yet it was always thought and spoken of as being the centre point. It was from Meath that the roads radiated, in story, to all the provinces of Ireland; it was at Uisnech in Meath that there was situated the "stone of division" that marked the navel of all Ireland; in Meath was Tara, the centre, according to the old life of St. Patrick, of Irish religion and druidery,

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1. Dillon, 1948, p. xiii: from O.N. staðir = steadings.

and the hill of Tara, the traditional seat of the ardrí the high-king of all Ireland.[1]

It was natural that Meath should be thought of as the central province of the five provinces of Ireland. It was here, one would have thought, that a central power could have unified and administered all Ireland. For Meath lies at the geographical entrance to Ireland; trade, foreign ideas, immigrants all enter via Meath. Here too, so unusual in Ireland, the low-lying and fertile soil is well drained and the rainfall low. Clearly the commercial and economic centre of the island.[2]

But, though the oneness of all Ireland was thus expressed in terms of its five provinces, with, at the centre of it all, Meath the Middle one, even so there was not any defined or centralised political centralisation or powerful administration by Meath over the other provinces. For the moment we need only notice the geographical aspect of this fact. The eastern part of the plain was indeed, in Meath, clear of forest: but the woods and low-lying bogs between that and the western parts made fast communication and control impossible. There were no clear cut mountain strongholds or frontiers in Meath as against

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1. Meath = O.Ir. Mide = the middle one. cf. Giraldus, III, 4, on Uisnech: "umbilicus Hiberniae dicitur, quasi in medio et meditullio terrae positus". cf. O'Rahilly, 1946, Ch. IX.
2. On Meath: FitzGerald, 1925, pp. 34-6.

those of the four other provinces. Finally the local and rural nature of the regional settlements and their pastoral way of life would have made it difficult for the kings in Meath to establish political power over the outlying yet centrally important zones in the mountainous parts of the island. The same pattern is of course evident in the adventures of the later English government of Ireland situated in the Pale, with little authority over the rest of Ireland.

The conjunction, then, of the local and the national in Ireland can be partly understood with reference to its geography. An island - and, after all, not a large one - with innumerable lakes and loughs and inlets, no part further than 60 miles from the sea, Ireland accommodated a dispersed, rural population of no great density, living in more or less isolated local groups. A consciousness of the unity of all Ireland could well be combined with the personal and local political pattern.

A consideration of the mode of livelihood and the economic position of the local groups brings this out more clearly. In brief - the pastoral tradition. Cattle were what mattered. The climate of Ireland is characterised by its excess of rain and humidity, the variability of the rainfall, and the mildness of both summer and winter. The soil of Ireland is, indeed, rich - but rather heavy. All this, with, as well, the many

hilly areas, made Ireland as a whole more suitable for pasture than agriculture. That there was <u>some</u> agriculture is certain from the literary and archaeological evidence; wheat and oats were an essential supplement to the diet.[1] But it was the pastoral tradition that was basic to almost every aspect of Irish society, economic, political or religious.[2]

There has been any amount of argument and counter-argument between the friends and enemies of Ireland about their alleged "nomadism" with its usual connotations of "primitive", "barbaric" and "tribal". In fact, of course, as Estyn Evans has now made clear, they were, not nomadic, but <u>transhumant</u>: and the pattern of the Irish economic, ritual and social year fits with this seasonal variation.[3]

After the spring sowing of the crops, the summer season, from Beltany, the 1st of May, was the time when the young people took the cattle, weak from winter hunger, to their summer pasturage in the hills: to the "<u>buaile</u>" (booley, or milking place) away from the "<u>baile</u>" (bally) or homeland. The crops they had sown were left to grow in peace until their return in the autumn. Thus the two occasions in the year when

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1. Duignan, JRSAI, 74, 1944.
2. Duignan, <u>loc. cit.</u> p. 141 "tillage has always been definitely subordinate to stock-rearing". E.E. Evans, 1957, p. 8. "The pastoral tradition has dominated Irish life through the ages."
3. E.E. Evans, 1942 and 1957.

the maximum effort was required were at the time of sowing in spring, of gathering in the harvest; and these were the two times when, above all, the services of subjects to their lords were required. This seasonal rhythm has meant that the Irish have been charged, in true imperial fashion, with the familiar laziness and inconsistency of effort - from the time of the hostile Giraldus in the twelfth century, who remarked on their lack of industry and the way they "hold agricultural labour in contempt", to the writer of a recent standard geography of Ireland.[1] The pattern of the pastoral year is completed with the return from the hills, the gathering of the harvest, and, after that, from the beginning of November, the cattle were allowed free run over the home fields again. Some too were slaughtered, for with no hay to support them over the winter, not all the cattle were kept. Furthermore this was the time of feasting, and meat was the "winter food", accompanied with the oat-meal now available for porridge and bread, in contrast to the "summer food", mainly of dairy produce, that had been the main fare in the hills.[2]

The Irish field distribution has been contrasted with the pattern in other parts of Europe;[3] contrasted, for instance,

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1. Giraldus, III, 10. Freeman, 1950, p. 91: the Irish before the Norman Conquest, he writes "found idleness more attractive than work".
2. de Paor, 1958, p. 77.
3. cf. Gray, 1915, Chap. V; East, 1943; E.E. Evans, 1957, pp. 8-9.

with the "3-field system" of the richer lowlands of Europe, with their feudal associations, or the "2-field Mediterranean system" of the south of France. The Irish was what has been called the "Celtic" or "run-rig system", which is associated in general with the upland parts, as in Ireland, the relative scarcity of plain and arable soils, heavy rainfall, and abundance of natural wood and pasture lands. The basic pattern was of an enclosed arable area round a settlement, the "infield", combined with the temporary use of areas in the waste, moved every few years, with, as well, plenty of common pasturage in the hills, where cattle were taken in the summer in the short range transhumance of the Irish. The "infield" or home pasture was used continually for the corn in summer, and grazed and manured by the cattle in winter.

This pastoral mode of livelihood, with its emphasis on cattle, was basically important in Irish life. The size of a local settlement was measured not by the acreage of land, but by the number of cattle it could support on its pastures.[1] There was no coinage (coins were apparently first struck in Ireland about 1000A.D., nearly 12 centuries after they were first struck in Britain!), and cattle were the units of wealth.[2] Cattle provided the bulk of the food, milk and its products in

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1. E.E. Evans, 1957, p. 29.
2. O'Sullivan, 1949; Binchy, 1941, pp. 105-6.

summer, meat in winter; from the cattle hides were made the flails and the boats (curraghs); throughout the Annals there are continual references to cattle - the numbers taken on raids, or, dying from "a murrain"; and, even now, one of the modern Irish terms for a road is still bóthar or "cattle-way". In the mythical theories associated with the kingship, it was a bull that was killed so that the druids and the dreamer could "see" the new and rightful king; for the regular festivals, too, the central points coincided with the beginning and end of the hill-pasturing, on the 1st of May and the 1st of November. The regular grant given by king or chief to his subordinates was not of land, as in the feudal system, but of cattle, and interest of milk and young and produce was paid for this.

Each local community, it is clear, could in this way be more or less economically self-sufficient, with livelihood based on the rhythm of short-range transhumance in a rural and pastoral society without centralised administrative institutions; it was connected with the political and legal independence of the local community, and the part played by kinship. What then was this local and territorial community?

The local unit was the túath,[1] an area roughly corresponding

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1. On the túath see Binchy, 1941, sv. túath; RIA dictionary sv. túath; MacNeill, 1935, passim; Binchy, 1954, p. 54 and passim.

to the modern barony. There were in Ireland over 100 of these *túatha* - the number and size varied somewhat at different periods - so that they were, in area, about 20 by 30 miles across. Each *tuath* was separate from the others in its local life and politically, socially and economically independent even though there were also larger groups made up of several *túatha* very loosely linked together; these larger groups in turn were grouped together to make up the five provinces of Ireland.

Tuath has been translated in various ways: it can mean people, tribe or nation; sometimes it is "territory" or "petty kingdom", and has even been translated as "state"; it also means the people as opposed to the king, or the laity as opposed to the Church. To pick on any one of these terms, particularly as between the two that have caused the greatest controversies among the Irish scholars, "tribe" and "state", would be to beg the question at the outset, and, for this reason, I have preferred to keep the Irish term throughout. What is important is that the people inhabiting a certain area with more or less accepted boundaries made up the local community and formed the political and legal unit, each under their own king, and the members of another such community were, technically, strangers.[1] Within the *tuath* the settlements were

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1. Binchy, 1941, *loc. cit.*

dispersed, not grouped together in towns or even villages, with each family group living in isolation on its hereditary land and caring in common for its cattle.

The *túath* then was the primary unit made up of the inhabitants of a certain territory under their own king, and it was really through personal loyalty to him that the *túath* had unity; he was their representative to other *túatha*. The pastoral mode of life would take the people into the nearby hills with their cattle over the summer months where pasture and water were plentiful; but moving from *túath* to *túath* was not necessary, indeed it was only as a member of his own *túath* that an individual had his rights and legal status. There was no merchant class to trade through the country. The ordinary member of a *túath* did not travel, but tended his cattle and cooperated with his kin under the authority of the local king.[1]

Relations between the different *túatha* - it is evident - were not of primary importance for the mass of the people. The king was their agent whether towards a king regarded as superior as head of a larger group of territories or in negotiating with a king of equal rank. There was the custom of raiding too, and here again it was the king who was expected to increase his own and thus his people's wealth by regular

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1. Binchy, *loc. cit.*; *ibid*, 1954, pp. 58-9.

raids on the cattle of neighbouring peoples. In this way the pastoral tradition of Ireland at the same time as making for a tendency to the isolation of the local community with lack of large and defined settlements in favour of more mobile cattle herds, also led to regular and expected contacts between members of different <u>túatha</u>, through the accepted convention of frequent raiding which is, after all, merely one kind of social relationship.

The real links between the different local groups, however, were those created through the only class that truly belonged to the whole of Ireland, and travelled through the length and breadth of the island.[1] These were the members of the learned class, the Irish "men of art", who included skilled craftsmen, like jewellers, carpenters and smiths, but, most important of all, the poets, jurists and historians.

These people lived by their specialised art, and were not, like the others, tied to the local and seasonal rhythm of the pastoral year; the pasture land of Ireland was rich enough for the specialists to be freed for the practice of their art and supported by the labour of others and the surplus they produced. The poet, for example, was given horses or cattle

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1. Greene, 1954, p. 85; Curtis, 1938, p. xvii. Cf. MacNeill, 1919, pp. 247-8 on the "national consciousness in Ireland ..... to a degree that is found nowhere else".

or hospitality by the king in exchange for the poems of panegyric he sang at the king's court. The "men of art", then, were free in a way the ordinary individual was not, to travel from túath to túath. Not all of course did so; many lived on their hereditary land within the bound of the túath. But the possibility was there, and poets and historians, like the religious of later times, had a recognised place wherever in Ireland they travelled. The poetic, historic and legal traditions were common to the whole of Ireland; and poets, we are told, had safe-conduct even in time of war, just as the persons, lands and chattels of the "men of art" in general were, like the historic pagan sanctuaries, immune from carnage and plunder.[1]

Such travelling and contact through the country is not surprising in view of the geographical background. Ireland is not so large: roughly 225 by 100 miles across. Large scale or military communications were not possible, admittedly, in a way that would be necessary for centralised and controlling administration; we may even be doubtful about the built-up roads over the bogs that were said in saga to radiate over the whole of the country.[2] But tracks for individual travellers

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1. Binchy, 1954, p. 64; Knott, 1922, p. xxxiii.
2. Cf. Colm O Lochlainn in MacNeill, Essays, 1940. contra E.E. Evans, 1942, pp. 111-2.

and messengers are a different matter, through the wide lowlands blocked by no central mountain barriers or along the slopes of the hills. Ireland, we are told by the twelfth century Giraldus, was reckoned to extend in length eight good Irish days' journey.[1]

It was through the national character[2] of this learned class of Ireland that the separate túatha had real unity, and that the traditions and heritage of Ireland as a whole were represented. The Irish, for example, did not live in towns, but dispersed through the countryside, and, correspondingly, the landmarks were not those of an urban settlement, but were part of the land itself; it would be these that were noted by the countryman in his shorter travellings with his herds, and by the poets in their wider journeys and knowledge. Round these famous places clustered the myths and stories: and it was the members of the learned class that knew these, and could explain and describe their associations. It was the poet too, or the historian who knew the proper times and seasons of the festivals[3] of the Irish year, when the dispersed population gathered together and met in the celebrations.

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1. Giraldus, I, 2; cf. de Paor, pp. 19, 98.
2. Cf. Greene, 1954, loc. cit.; Kenney, 1929, p. 6; MacNeill, 1919, loc. cit., 1935, p. 82.
3. On festivals: e.g. E.E. Evans, 1957, Chap. XIX; Sjoestedt, 1949, Chap. V; Hubert, 1934, 241ff.

The Irish year[1] was, fundamentally, divided into two: the winter, the time of darkness and blackness, and the summer when the cattle were in their hill pastures. The beginning of this twofold year was on the first of November, and this was the time of the most important of all the festivals, that of Samain, the start of year and winter, the period of mythical battles and historic events, and the time when the harvest had been gathered in and all were together in the homeground, back from the hills. The summer half of the year opened with the celebration of Beltany or Cetshamain (lit, the start of summer) on the first of May, marking the season when the cattle could be driven again to the hills; this was the date, it was said, when the first invaders reached Ireland, and the time when the druids, in pagan ages, rekindled the sacred fires throughout Ireland and the cattle were driven between two great fires to guard them from disease in the coming months. These two main seasons of the Irish year were, in turn, subdivided by two lesser festivals, that of Imbolc on the 1st of February, and, half way through the summer half, Lugnasad on the 1st of August.

These festivals were the occasions on which the scattered and dispersed people met and joined together in celebrations that were recognised as belonging to the country and history

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1. Cf. also d'Arbois, 1895, pp. 295ff.

of all Ireland, associated with the myth and legal lore known by the men of learning, the holders of the national tradition; the main festivals and the two-fold nature of the year mark the seasonal rhythm in habitation, diet, and occupation.

So the rural and pastoral nature of Irish society has far-reaching implications. The lack of coinage or large-scale trade, the personal aspect of authority and local life, the seasonal and "familiar" mode of livelihood, the local relations of lord and subject in terms of grants of cattle, the absence of cities, let alone a capital of Ireland - all these contributed to the local and rural character of social and political relations. On the other hand were the contacts between the different <u>túatha</u>, perhaps by movements in trans-humance, certainly by agreements between neighbouring kings, and, above all, by the existence of the national festivals, history and myth, and by the national learned order of the "men of art". The conjunction of locality and unity in early Ireland can be seen to fit with the geographical and climatic facts.

The rural nature of early Irish society, with no cities, towns or even villages, is in clear and significant contrast to the pattern through most of the contemporary Europe, and with the tradition inherited from the Roman imperial organisation,

of rule through cities. This lack of cities in Ireland is of primary importance if we are to understand the nature of political authority of Ireland, less explicitly and officially defined, more local and personal, more supported by the rights of the kin or the influence of non-political factors; it was failure to grasp the importance of this rural aspect in which Ireland, like Wales, differed from the rest of Europe, that led in the past to misunderstanding of the Irish evidence as if only centralised or State-like societies could possibly work and avoid complete anarchy (unless, that is, the Irish were just nomadic or tribal, and classifiable as such). On the other hand Ireland, though without political centralisation, does also present a contrast to a loose conglomeration of several tribes who are without any explicit or recognised institutions expressing their own distinctiveness, as a whole, from other peoples; for in Ireland, bounded by seas, not very big, coming into contact with foreign ideas or peoples through the eastern gateway, or through the foreign travels of their own people, there does seem to have been a clear idea of their own national unity, reflected through the Irish tradition known by the men of learning.

Gradually the Irish pattern of life changed. In the monastic settlements the stress on agriculture as against cattle herding increased, especially after the introduction

of Roman techniques (the heavy plough perhaps?), as the forests were slowly felled and communications opened. Feudal ideas crept in from Europe and the kings began to lay more stress on political might and military control; towns were founded by Norse raiders along the coast. And finally we have the striking of the first coins in Ireland and the rise, at the turn of the millenium, of the famous Brian Boru who aspired to rule all Ireland by military force.

The geography of Ireland, it is clear, was not <u>compelling</u>; it could not determine the political forms or prevent change. There is no geographical determinism to be attributed here. And yet it remains true that without grasping the rural and pastoral aspects of the early period against the background of Irish geography and climate, we cannot understand the most salient features: the combination of the local character of direct political authority and the national range of Irish poetry, history and law.

II. The Class Structure and the Distribution of Powers

The Irish kings did not possess many of the powers held by kings in some other societies, for these powers were not centralised in the office of the king but distributed more

diffusely through various aspects of the society. We must therefore understand the background of social hierarchy and legal procedure, and the part played by the kin in Irish social relations. The main sources from which these can be traced are the old Irish law tracts, which, written down in Christian times, reflect the customary law of the pagan period and, to a large extent, of contemporary practice.

This Irish law was a jurist-made law.[1] In other words the rules were not laid down by legislation or by innovation on the part of king or assembly, but were formulated and preserved by the jurists, or those learned in law, and transmitted at first by oral tradition then, later, under the impact of Christianity, in writing. For the king had, in fact, no power to legislate at this period: there was no centralised kingship over all Ireland, and "superior" kings had no right to legislate for their sub-kings, for each <u>túath</u> formed, in theory, a separate jurisdiction under its own king, himself subject to the law.

These law tracts are marked by the wholesale theorising of the jurists, over-schematism, fantastic elaboration and classification, with the typical fictions of complete uniformity and continuity. How far then can we trust them as a record of the institutions of early Ireland? They are even classed

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1. The following account based mainly on Binchy, 1941, 1943, 1954; de Paor, 1958; Greene, 1954.

"false laws" by A.S. Diamond in his book on "Primitive Law" as bearing no relation to actual practice.[1] Of course if Diamond is only willing to include as real laws those promulgated by an explicit legislative power, then he is consistent enough to exclude the Irish laws. But if he means to imply that they are to be dismissed as purely fanciful speculation bearing no relation to the actual practice, then he is quite mistaken; for, however marked by over-symmetry or schematic classification, the Irish law tracts do represent in outline the main structure of Irish society; the main picture, it seems to be agreed, may be taken as roughly correct. This picture then is something as follows:

Irish society was definitely hierarchical, with the various strata, based on differences in birth and calling, legally recognised and asserted. To be without such differences was represented by the Irish as equivalent to being without law and order altogether - in the days before the compilation of the great law book, the Senchus Mor, men lived, it was said, actually in a state of equality, with king's son and churl's son having equal status! The principle of one man's being superior in status to another runs all through Irish law, although of course the gradations were probably far less clear cut than the schematic 7-fold divisions and subdivisions would suggest.[2]

1. Diamond, 1935, p. 81.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 56. AL, I, 41-3.

The basic distinction was that between noble and non-noble, between those of noble birth, the aristocracy, whose family trees were preserved among the official genealogies, and the commoners or churls.[1]

But superimposed on this division, we can distinguish in practice three main classes. 1) The aristocracy of nobles, including the royal family and the king. 2) The class of professional learned men, the "men of art" who were closely associated with the noble class. 3) The commoners with free but not noble status.

The king was a member of the first class, and was chosen, according to certain rules to be described later, from the eligible members of the royal family or families of the túath. Next to the king were ranked the different sub-divisions of the noble grades (the grád fhlatha) which were distinguished from the commoner grades (grád Fhéne) not only by their birth and genealogies, but also by their higher property qualifications, and certain prerogatives like the right to have "clients", an important facet of their power which I shall discuss shortly. These nobles were, above all, famous as warriors, the military class, and, besides, were also the patrons and supporters of the "men of art".

These men of art (the aes dána) included not only the

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1. Binchy, 1954, p. 57.

professional men of traditional learning, but also the skilled craftsmen - harpers, jugglers, braziers, chain-makers, engravers. More important, and with a higher status, were the carpenters, smiths, doctors and brehons or jurists; and, above all, the historians and poets. In pagan times the druids, we are told, belonged to this same class, and, after the conversion of Ireland to Christianity in the 5th century, the clergy too were to some extent assimilated to this class. At any rate, even after the introduction of Christianity and the monastic principle, the powers and position of the native learned tradition and its representatives continued. The poets and historians in particular remained the guardians of the national learning and of the ideals of the kingship, representatives of a tradition to which even the kings had to give honour and attention. The brehons too continued to be the interpreters of the law, the members of society who knew the details of legal procedure, precedent, and right all over Ireland.[1]

The non-noble classes,[2] the commoners, were subdivided by the schematising jurists into 7 sub-classes to correspond to the 7-fold division attributed likewise to the noble grades. In practice however the commoner grades merely included all

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1. See Chapter IV below.
2. Binchy, 1941, pp. 69, 88; 1954, p. 57; Thurneysen Ir. Recht, p. 60.

those freemen who, without the high rank of the nobles or the skill of the men of art, possessed legal status and capacity; this meant that they had the right to join in the public festivals, and in the "assemblies" held by the king, and possessed a fixed "honour price", the mark of free status. In virtue of this they had the right to make contracts or go surety, and, as such, they were distinguished from those who, like women or sons in potestate, were dependent on their superiors for this. Many of these commoners were the clients of members of the noble classes, to whom they paid food rent and rendered certain services in return for protection and a grant of stock from the patron. There is not very much in the literature about those of commoner status. However we do know that towards the bottom of the scale, below those who were clients to members of the nobility, came the "tenant at will" (fuidir), whose condition was, unlike that of the client, semi-servile; he could, indeed, end his relationship with his patron who had given him his holding, but for this he had to surrender two-thirds of the products of his husbandry; furthermore his services to his lord were, unlike the client's, always uncertain, and "tenants at will" whose ancestors had been on the same lord's land for nine generations became reduced to the condition of a serf, adscriptus glebae. These serfs (sen-chléithe) were the hereditary possessions of the

owner of the land and, again, subject to quite uncertain services. They were bound to the soil and unable to renounce their tenancy.[1]

The status of each free member of the three-fold social hierarchy was marked by his "honour-price" (eneclann),[2] which was a sign of his present standing in the community. The amount of this honour price formed the basis of any assessment of the compensation due for any injury to him, homicide, theft or wounding; it was further relevant for various legal procedures, for it marked his legal capacity to perform certain acts such as binding himself by contract, going as surety, giving evidence or an oath. Only those of full legal capacity possessed honour-price: dependents, that is, women or children, had no honour price of their own, but offences against them were compensated for according to a fixed proportion of the legal superior's honour price. Certain grave illegalities brought the loss of honour price, and with it, of legal status and its rights and privileges until the honour was cleansed by proper amends. Thus a king, for example, could lose his honour by acting unfittingly for a king, and his honour price would therefore fall to the level of a commoner's.

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1. Binchy, 1941, sv. fuidir, sen-chléithe, aithech.
2. Sometimes also called lóg n-enech or díre, qq. v. Binchy, loc. cit.

The honour price marked the <u>present</u> status of any individual in the hierarchical order. Legal rights, in other words, were not fixed absolutely and irrevocably by birth. Indeed we hear of the possibility of rising from one grade to another, by the learning of an "art", or by the acquisition of wealth or clients. Thus by the possession of property or a large number of clients, a commoner might be counted as halfway between the common and the noble grades, and his grandson would be a full member of the noble grade as having been "noble" through three generations.[1]

The different hierarchical classes were therefore not definitively and absolutely fixed; they were not, even in a wide sense, "castes". Transference between classes, and change in the assessment of honour price, was possible. And, quite apart from this, the hierarchical organisation was to some extent cut across by the institution of clientship, by which individuals from other classes had a special relationship to their own patron; by the custom of fosterage, common among the noble grades;[2] and, finally, by the way in which the official head of a family group, even a commoner one, was accorded a special status by his function as head of the kin.[3]

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1. Binchy, sv. <u>fer fothlai</u>; MacNeill, 1921, p. 101.
2. Binchy, 1936, p. 187.
3. Binchy, 1941, sv. <u>aire coisring</u>.

It was the concept, then, of hierarchical grading that was so important rather than an actual rigid and absolute distinction between those of different classes. Many of the words used in reference to the hierarchical groupings are relative, having wider or narrower applications according to how many classes or sub-classes they are used to include.[1] The general outline however remains valid - of the three classes of the nobles (including royalty), the men of art, and the commoners, distinguished from each other by differences of wealth, birth and legal status.

In the field of legal procedure and social control, power in early Ireland was diffuse and non-centralised. There was no administrative government with power to initiate and enforce its decisions, for there was neither - at the highest level - a regular king of all Ireland with defined authority to rule all the smaller kingdoms under him, nor - within the túath - was there a central power which could act with impersonal force.[2]

The "judges" or brehons of Ireland were not judges with executive or legislative functions or official positions. They were rather jurists who knew the law, had insight into

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1. e.g. Féni, aire, flaith, qq. v. in Binchy, loc. cit.
2. Binchy, 1954, pp. 55, 60f.

the precedents, and could say what ought to be done in any particular circumstances. They were the arbitrators in cases which the parties on both sides agreed to submit to them. A few matters only seem to have been considered as the concern of public order, for certain crimes (treason, and some cases to do with tribute) were treated as public; we hear of a special brehon appointed by the king to deal with these, and the sentence, whether death outlawry or imprisonment, may have been carried out by the king's officers. But in general, in the local and personal life of the túath disputes were settled by personal and not governmental initiative, according to set rules of arbitration.[1]

Compensation was paid for homicide, in cattle usually, which were divided in fixed proportions among the kin of the dead man, following either an accepted agreement between them and the kin of the slayer, or the submission of both parties to the arbitration of one of the professional jurists whose judgment both sides bound themselves in advance to accept. Following the same prineiples, any act of illegal violence which did not lead to death and compensation, laid the injurer under the obligation of looking after the wounded man or making himself responsible for his maintenance: there is an explanation of this obligation in the "Law of Sick Maintenance"

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1. Loc. cit.; 1941 sv. brithem.

(Eretha Crólige),[1] covering, for example, the part played by the leech, the public removal of the patient, and the pledges given by both invalid (or his kin) and the maintainer. Compensation had also to be paid for the insult to a man's honour implied by the violation of his protection, if someone under his care was slain or wounded; and for any violation of his "house-peace", the area or "precinct" round the residences of certain grades within which any injury committed involved an insult to the owner's honour.[2]

The main method of regulated self help in Ireland was by the process of distraint. This was a centrally important part of Irish law: it is not by chance that the great collection of the Senchus Mor opens with a consideration of the details of distraint; and Maine, in his Early History of Institutions, devotes two chapters, dealing with the Irish evidence, to this "primitive form of legal remedy" by Distress.[3] This taking of distress (athgabail) involved a formal seizure of the debtor's cattle according to the regular and prescribed procedure.[4] The different stages are described: there was the demand, for example, followed by the seizure, placing in the pound, the formal announcement of this, and,

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1. Ériu, XII, 1934.
2. Binchy, sv. díguin. AL, IV, 226f.
3. Maine, 1875, Chaps. IX-X.
4. AL, I; Thurneysen, 1935.

finally, the fixed date at which the cattle began, gradually, to be forfeited, as settlement of the debt, to the claimant. The process was subject to set "delays" at different points, with special formalities and complications according to the circumstances and personnel. It is not surprising that jurists were needed to expound the details or accompany the distrainers, for every detail had to be correctly observed. A more drastic action was where land was wrongfully occupied, for land could not be seized and kept like cattle: formal possession was taken of the land in the presence of set witnesses, and by taking animals to graze, and formally lighting a fire.[1] The main principle in both procedures is clear - a formal and recognised way of making a claim, self help according not to force but to prescribed legal procedure.

With distraint of some of the higher ranks, this had to be preceded by fasting.[2] The claimant fasted overnight, thus missing the main meal of the evening, doing this as a public and formal act, which had to be put to an end by the man who was being "fasted against" giving a pledge to the faster, and thus recognising his claim by entering into a formal relationship with him through the pledge.

The English rulers were of course puzzled and shocked by

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1. Thurneysen, loc. cit., p. 104; AL, IV 19f.
2. AL, I, 113f; Thurneysen, ZCP, XV, 1924.

the Irish customs of compensation (especially that for homicide which was considered as "repugning quite both to God's law and man's")[1] and of distraint which they tried to forbid by legislation.[2] But the general principles are now quite clear and intelligible: the king did not possess power to initiate proceedings, legislate, enforce decisions, or interfere among the kin. D.A. Binchy sums up the general position of this lack of the public execution of judgments in favour of negotiation between the members of different families over the disputes that could arise: "apart from delicts ... such as manslaughter, maiming, arson, theft, insult and trespass, there would be problems of title to immoveable property and such elementary contractual relationships as could develop in a civilisation which lacked both the urban market-place and the cash nexus, these primary engines of development for the law of obligations. Where litigation was thus restricted, one might say that the public authority did not establish the machinery for enforcing judgment, simply because it wouldn't have paid to do so."[3]

The idea of giving pledges and sureties was very important. There was a complex system of <u>suretyship</u> in various forms, "a

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1. Spencer, p. 7.
2. E.g. Irish Statues, p. 61 (1285 A.D.).
3. Binchy, 1954, p. 61.

primitive substitute for the public enforcement of legal obligations".[1]

There were several different kinds of surety. In one variety, for instance (ráth), the man standing surety warranted with his own <u>property</u> the performance of his principal's obligation; this kind of surety then had the two-fold function of 1) "keeping memory" of the transaction so that in case of dispute he could testify to its conclusion and terms, and 2) being prepared to discharge his principal's obligations under it in case of default. Secondly there was the <u>personal</u> surety (aitire) who guaranteed with his own person, not, like the first (ráth), with his property: in case of default he had to surrender himself to the other party who could keep him in captivity for a definite period. This was closely connected with the idea of the <u>hostage</u> (gíall), which had, as will appear later, important implications for the authority of the king. Finally there was what has been called the <u>enforcing surety</u> (naidm) who answered not with his person or his property but rather forced his principal to discharge his obligations by using against him the usual method of execution - by distress. In general for any important contract, two or more of these sureties (naidm) had to be found, and they played

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 213. The following account is based on Binchy, 1954, 1941 sv. <u>ráth</u>, <u>aitire</u>, <u>gíall</u>, <u>naidm</u>; Thurneysen, 1928.

an essential part in the formal conclusion of the contract. The honour of the surety was pledged for the fulfilment of the obligation in question, so that if the pledger broke faith he was committed to pay his surety a heavy price as compensation for the insult to his honour.

Since every legal transaction required sureties, sometimes of all three kinds, there would in each case be a number of people implicated in it to whose interest it would be to see that the man fulfilled his obligations; the relations between the different members of the túath were thus formally and publicly recognised.

The use of pledges was also common. This is connected with the system of surety, and the word for pledge (gell)[1] is cognate not only with the term for the hostage (gíall) who is a kind of personal surety, but also with one of the variants of clientship (gíallnae). The giving of a pledge was often the first step towards the fulfilment of an obligation, for it was a token of readiness to meet the claim, or, if it was disputed, to submit the case to arbitration; the token was usually given into the possession of the creditor, but was in certain circumstances kept by the pledger, though naturally he could make no use of it while it was thus pledged. Giving a pledge was an important formal step in many of the complicated

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1. qv. in Binchy, 1941.

legal procedures, in the process of "fasting", for instance, or of action against a rath surety.

The institution of clientship[1] must now be described. The word usually translated as client (céle) meant originally a companion or attendant, and clientship involved services by the client to his patron in return for a grant, not of land, but of cattle from the lord to client.

There were two kinds of clientship, "free" and "base". In "free clientship" (sóer-rath), a grant of stock (rath) was made by the patron for which the client had to pay a heavy interest of milk, young and increase, and owed general homage and respect as well as certain personal services to his lord. But he also had an honoured position himself with his patron, for nobles as well as commoners entered into this relationship: we hear of the king's free clients as among the honoured guests in his house. At the end of seven years the contract came to an end, and the cattle became the absolute property of the client.

In "base-clientship" (gíallnae or dóer-rath), on the other hand, the client was actually given a larger grant in the first place, usually of cattle, less frequently of land, and for this

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1. MacNeill, 1935, Ch. VII; Binchy, loc. cit. sv. sóer-rath, gíallnae; Thurneysen, 1923, 1924.

he had to pay lighter interest than the "free client". In addition to this payment which consisted of a fixed food-tribute of, in winter, meat, in summer, vegetables, milk and milk products, he had certain other services to pay: help in reaping the lord's harvest, for instance, or building his fort. The patron's advance of a preliminary payment equivalent to the amount of the client's honour price gave him the right to share in any compensation, due primarily to the client and his kinsmen, for homicide, theft, injury. "The property advanced ... was plainly regarded as a bond rather than a boon."[1] But the client was not "unfree" in the sense of being permanently bound to his lord, or adscriptus glebae; he could own property in his own right, and the whole relationship was one of contract, terminable by either party.

The standing of a noble was partly measured by the number of his clients, base or free, and this relationship, marked by the formal grant of cattle, and, in return, services and tribute in kind from the client, was an important one in Irish society. It fits in with the whole system of suretyship by which members of the community were bound to one another.

Thus we can see the part played by contract and suretyship in early Ireland. The giving of pledges (gell) was an essential step in legal procedure; the part taken by the hostage

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1. MacNeill, op. cit., p. 126.

was significant in certain legal processes; lords and clients were bound to each other by mutual grants and services; and the relationship between king and people was often described in similar terminology: he gave them pledges or sureties for his good behaviour, or took hostages from them as a sign of their obedience, and could "pledge" certain observances "on" his people. Furthermore, the legal head of the kin or joint family had a special position as their representative in their dealings with external authorities; and he is described as their automatic surety, who gave pledges for the observance of the family's obligations to Church and king.[1]

The non-centralised túath was without specialised administrative or judicial organs; yet the different members of it were, in various ways, committed to one another by quite formal ties: the interchange of sureties and giving of tokens. This process recalls Mauss and Van Gennep, who have both illustrated the principle that, in a sense, what is being given in an interchange of gifts is, ultimately, oneself, and that "to accept a gift is to be bound to the giver".[2] The same idea is to be found - quite clearly - in the Irish attitude to sureties and pledges. The pledge (gell) may originally have been regarded as a substitute for a personal surety or hostage

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1. Binchy, 1941. sv. aire coisring.
2. Van Gennep, 1960, p. 29; Mauss, 1954, passim.

(gíall); and, as Binchy writes "the subject matter of the gell is usually an article fashioned from some valuable material such as bronze, silver, or yew; above all things, however, it must be an object intimately associated with the physical life of the pledgor, so that he is regarded as handing over, as it were, part of himself to the pledgee."[1]

In this sense then contract could be said to be important in early Irish society; but it was subject also to certain provisions about the solidarity of the kin. Irish law, it has been said, was concerned with relations between and not within families,[2] and the part taken by the head of the family group has already been mentioned. Something therefore must now be said about Irish kinship and the organisation of the Irish family.

The Irish were patrilineal: agnatic relations were those which, in most contexts, had primary importance.

This is worth stating at the outset of any discussion about Irish kinship, as so much nonsense has been talked about the alleged "mother-right" or "matriarchy" which the Irish were supposed to have shared with the Picts.[3] The original evidence

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1. Binchy, 1941, p. 94.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 58.
3. Zimmer: Mutterrecht bei den Pikten; Zeitsch. der Savigny-Stiftung f. Rechtsgeschichte. Rom. Abt XV, p. 209f.; McLennan 1865, p. 127; 214; Hubert, 1934, p. 204.

given for this assertion is far from proving any likelihood at all of matrilineality - let alone "matriarchy" - among the Irish, and most modern Irish scholars are now unanimous in repudiating this suggestion and pointing to the clear agnatic basis of Irish legal and social relations.[1] The legal kindred (fine) were traced through the father, on the usual principle that "pater est quem nuptiae demonstrant"; relations through women were not part of the legal kin, and were distinguished in terminology (maithre, or fine maithre) from the father's side; similarly the maternal uncle was called by a different name from the father's brother.

To describe Irish kinship as "patrilineal" is - naturally - not sufficient as a description, for this is always a relative term, to be applied to certain relations and particular rights or duties in specified contexts. Certainly in Ireland, the separation of the woman (and her children) from her own family after her marriage was not so drastic as, say, in Roman Law. For one thing, there were different types of union recognised in the law tracts, for though, after the fifth century, lip service was paid to the Christian precept of monogamy, the unions with other women besides the formal "first wife" (cétmuinter) were legally safeguarded and provided for. According

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1. Binchy, 1936, p. 185-6; 209. Following account based mainly on Binchy, 1943, p. 216f.; 222f.; MacNeill, 1921, Chapter VIII.

to the various types of these relationships, the original family of the woman had differing rights to her liabilities and assets, and certain limited rights and responsibilities in her children. The general principle here, as it has been elucidated by D.A. Binchy,[1] was that the more formal the type of marriage, the greater was the legal separation of the woman from her own kin; the tie was loosest in the case of a chief wife with sons. The rights of the maternal kin were also recognised in the division of the compensation for homicide, for one seventh of the total was commonly paid to relations through the dead man's mother. Finally, the children of the upper classes in particular were sometimes educated or fostered by the mother's people.[2]

But the main emphasis, as I have said, was patrilineal, and it was on an agnatic basis that the family groups were built up. Now the organisation of the Irish family (fine) was described and defined in law, with complex gradations and sub-divisions by the lawyers to meet all contingencies. The main principles of this organisation have been thoroughly confused by some earlier writers, like, for example, the editors of the Ancient Laws of Ireland, followed by both Maine and McLennan,[3]

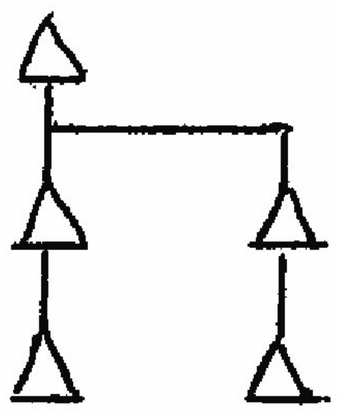
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1. 1936, p. 182.
2. According to Hubert, 1934, p. 201.
3. AL, III, Introd.; Maine, 1875, Chapter VII; McLennan, 1885, pp. 120-31.

and it is only relatively recently that the subject has been clarified by Irish scholars such as MacNeill and Hogan.[1] The main outline is worth describing here, both because of its importance in Irish society in general, and because, as will appear, it is relevant to the question of succession to the kingship; also the mistaken controversies of Maine and McLennan have misled modern social anthropologists as to the nature of Irish social organisation.

The Irish legal writers distinguished four different family groups of varying size: of 3, 4, 5, or 6 generation depth. The technical terms for these are, respectively, the gelfine, the derbfine, the iarfine, and the indfine.

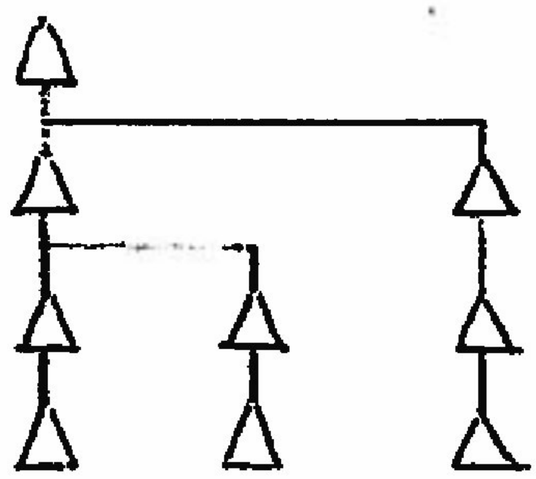
The gelfine was the smallest, comprising 3 generations in all, the agnatic descendants of a common grandfather.



Next in depth was the derbfine, which included, of course, the members of a gelfine, but extended back one more generation; it was made up, then, of all the descendants of a common great-grandfather.

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1. MacNeill, loc. cit.; Hogan, 1932; Binchy, 1943, loc. cit.



Less important, but still specified in the laws, were the <u>iarfine</u>, traced back to 5 generations, and the <u>indfine</u>, the fourth division of the family which included 6 generations. Beyond that kinship was not traced, not even, that is, in principle: "from this forth it is a case of a community of people, it is then family relations cease."[1]

These different groups were relevant or invoked in different circumstances; the wider ones had no constant corporate existence as a legal group, but were mainly relevant for tracing kinship for certain kinds of succession. The most common group, with a certain unity under a definite head, living on its hereditary land, and with specified rights and assets, was the <u>derbfine</u> (the "certain" kin), or 4 generation group; in practice, to put it another way, agnatic kin out to the 2nd cousins had special bonds and responsibilities in common. The special symbol of this <u>derbfine</u> was the hand, the palm representing the ancestor, and the 3 joints of the fingers the 3 generations of descendants. Later on the narrower group of

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1. AL, IV, 284, qu. RIA dict. sv. <u>indfine</u>.

the gelfine, descendants of a common grandfather, apparently began to replace the wider group, but, in general, the derbfine was "the normal unit for succession, wergild, ... and landowning"; it was "the ultimate owner of the fintiu "kin land", no parcel of which could be alienated to any outsider by any of its members without the assent of the whole group".[1] Beyond this four generation unit, in the iarfine and the indfine, rights and duties were merely contingent and not vested.

The divisions of the Irish family are, therefore, quite simple, indeed familiar from anthropological study in general. Once this is understood, the confusions induced by former writers vanish. Maine and McLennan were misled by the introductions to the 19th century Ancient Laws, into believing that the numbers of 5, 4, etc. mentioned in the laws were those of individuals, and not, as was really the case, of categories of kin. Thus Maine quotes with interest the editor of volume 3 of the laws.

> "Within the Family, 17 members were organised in 4 divisions of which the junior class, known as the Geilfine division, consisted of 5 persons; the Deirbfhine, the 2nd in order; the Iarfine, the 3rd in order; and the Indfine, the senior of all, consisted respectively of 4 persons. The whole organisation consisted, and could only consist, of 17 members. If any person was born into the Geilfine division its eldest member was promoted into the Deirbfhine ..... (and so on). It would appear that this transition from a lower to a higher grade took place upon the introduction of a new member into the Geilfine division." 2

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 223.
2. Maine, loc cit. p. 209, from Introduction to AL, III, p.cxl.

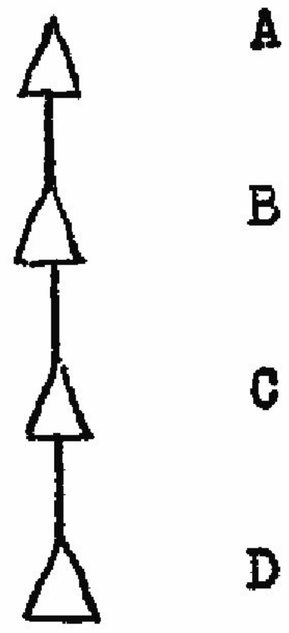
Maine goes on to discuss minutely this division, as he considers it, into 3 groups of 4 persons and one of 5 persons, of which he takes the fifth to be the parent of the group, endowed with Patria Potestas. Since the Gelfine group is sometimes spoken of in the Irish sources as the junior and yet nearest division of the family (we can see that it is this, in the sense that it is the group united by the nearest ties of kinship, as descended from a recent, maybe living, common ancestor) - because of this Maine is led into a general discussion of ultimogeniture, which, however fascinating in principle, has nothing to do with the Irish practice at all: nor, again, have d'Arbois[1] ingenious calculations of the respective ages of the different groups, gelfine, derbfine and the rest, as if, again, the 4 and the 5 mentioned were sets of determinate individuals.

Once however we recognise that these numbers attached to categories and that when the Irish texts say, for example, "father's brother" they are referring to all the father's brothers and not just one individual, then the situation becomes quite clear. For of course, when offspring is born to the youngest generation of, say, the original 3 generation group of the gelfine (A B and C), then a new 3 generation group (B C and D), has come into being, and the great

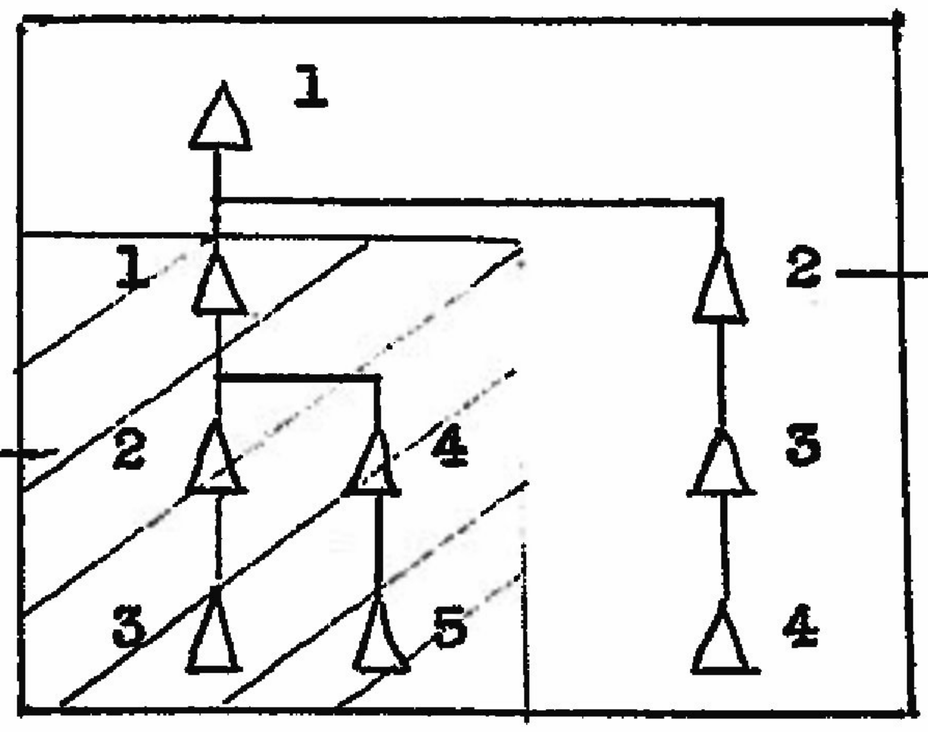
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1. d'Arbois RC, XXV, 1904.

grandfather of D belongs not to the <u>gelfine</u> but to the <u>derbfine</u> (4 generation group) of his great grandchild D.



The fact that it is categories and not individuals that are in question throws light on the point about the <u>numbers</u> in the different kinds of <u>fine</u>. The <u>gelfine</u> is said to have 5, the <u>derbfine</u> 4 (in addition to the <u>gelfine</u>, which it includes). We can represent it thus.



The further detailed relationships and proportioning described or misdescribed by the Irish lawyers or later glossators, need not be entered into here; for in spite of the misunderstandings of Maine and others, the general picture

is clear enough. In certain contexts kinship was traced to a depth of 5 or 6 generations; in others the 3 generation gelfine was relevant; but in general the derbfine, the 4 generation group was the unit, as the joint family for most legal, social and economic purposes.

THE FUNCTIONS AND POWERS OF THE KINGS

So far we have proceeded negatively; indicating the powers which the king, in the nature of Irish society, did not have. There was no currency nor direct monetary taxation to the king. He was lord of people rather than land, and in the absence of what we call the State political relations were in personal or in kinship terms: there was none of the depersonalisation of institutions. There were no towns; neither were there centralised powers possessed by the king, his court or any complex staff of executive officers. The law, finally, was not made by the king, he did not initiate legal cases, and it was not by his judicial decisions that his people were ordered and bound to one another; instead the law was something that was formulated and supervised by the learned class, legal procedure was initiated by the claimant, and, at the local level, combined with the bonds of surety-ship and clientship; the unit was the kin-group.

Against this background a more positive description of the king's position is possible. His duties and functions

are indicated as extracted from the legal and historical writings. The correlative virtues attributed to him emerge from the praise-songs or the obituary notices of the kings in, for example, the various Annals of Irish affairs. From this we can make sense of the otherwise puzzling list that has come down to us, of the "Gessa" or ritual prohibitions (and prescriptions) of the Irish kings, "these strange rules" as they are called by a recent editor.

The Irish name for king was rí. (genitive ríg). This is cognate with the other words for king, such as Latin rex and Indian rāja, from the Indo-European rēĝ-.[1] As with these terms, the Irish rí had connotations of majesty and semi-divine attributes, as expressed in the theory of kingship put forward in the literature of the Irish learned class. Another synonym for the king was flaith - but this was less specific, and could be used not only of the king but of a noble in general, or of a "lord" over clients.[2] The technical term was certainly rí. "The only title their territorial chiefs had was that of king."[3] Irish society, it has been said, was based on monarchy;[4] indeed in the saga of "the revolt of the vassals" the people of Ireland, it is narrated, rebelled against

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1. Buck, 1949, sv. king (p.1321): cf. O. Corn ruy; Br. roue: Gall. -rix e.g. in Dumnorix, Ambiorix, Vercingetorix.
2. Cf. above on clientship; Binchy, 1941, sv. flaith.
3. Keating, II, l. (Vol. 3, p. 9.).
4. Dillon, 1948, p. xii; HKS, p. 78.

the kings because of their oppression and misrule: and yet the result of the rebellion was not a different kind of government, but - of course - merely the appointment of a king of their own, Cairbre Cathead.

The correlative of rí was the túath. For each of the little territorial or political divisions of Ireland had its own king; which means that the number of kings in Ireland is embarrassingly large, with each little group having its own chief, called rí. A túath was not a proper túath without a king (ni ba túath túath gan ... rígh).[1] So there might have been, at any one point of time, about 100 "kings" reigning at once within the bounds of the small island of Ireland. These different petty kingdoms were loosely grouped together into larger areas under the general suzerainty of a superior king, and so on up to the kings of the five "provinces" and even, at some periods, the king of all Ireland. I will not for the moment justify my use of the term "king" applied to the rulers of all these little sub-divisions of Ireland (at first sight at least "chief" would have seemed more accurate) except by saying that if we are willing to speak of the ruler of all Ireland, or even of a province, as a king, then we must do the same for the ruler of even the smallest túath: for the word in Irish is the same.

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1. qu. RIA dict. sv. rí, from Ériu, 13.31.10.

There were, then, various classes of kings.[1] There was the king of one <u>túath</u> (sometimes called the "king of peaks"), who was the direct ruler and agent of his own people and territory. Then there was the king of a group of several <u>túatha</u>, himself exercising direct authority <u>only</u> over his own <u>túath</u> but accepted as over-lord by the kings of three or four neighbouring <u>túatha</u> who gave him hostages and tribute; this group was called a <u>mor-thúath</u> (lit. big <u>túath</u>). The over-king therefore exercised no direct rule over the subject kingdoms. He was himself in turn subordinate in the same way to a member of the next class - the king of a province. Finally, in the saga material though not in the laws, the king of all Ireland, at Tara in the centre, was ranked above all the other kings in dignity.

This wider organisation throughout all Ireland was thus made possible by ties of inferiority and superiority between the kings as also by the existence of the common learned class and tradition. But it was only in his own <u>túath</u> that the king had authority over his own people. First of all then we must see how, at the local level, the king was chosen; who was the king of the <u>túath</u>?

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1. sv. <u>rí</u> in Binchy, 1941 and RIA dict., Pokorny, 1933, p. 29; Binchy, 1954, p. 54ff.

I. Succession and Appointment

The legal family in Ireland for the purposes of inheritance was the four-generation group that has already been described - the derbfine. The royal family too was organised on the basis of the derbfine so that in the case of succession to the kingship[1] as with succession to any kind of property, the descendants of a common great grandfather all belonged to the same derbfine and were all, in theory, eligible to succeed to the kingship. In other words anyone whose great grandfather had been king was eligible to become king himself, and could be considered as a potential heir. This applied even if a member of some other family had been king in between - provided only that a man belonged to the derbfine of someone who had been king, he was, as far as that went, eligible to succeed.

There was a limit to this eligibility. This coincided with the limits of the derbfine, which included only four generations, i.e. a recognised king, his sons, his grandsons, and great grandsons. Beyond this dynastic rights did not pass; they did not carry on to the fifth generation. (See diagram I)

In this way since future eligibility extended to the

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1. The account here mainly based on Hogan, 1932; MacNeill, 1921, Chapter VIII; Binchy, Celtica III, 1956.

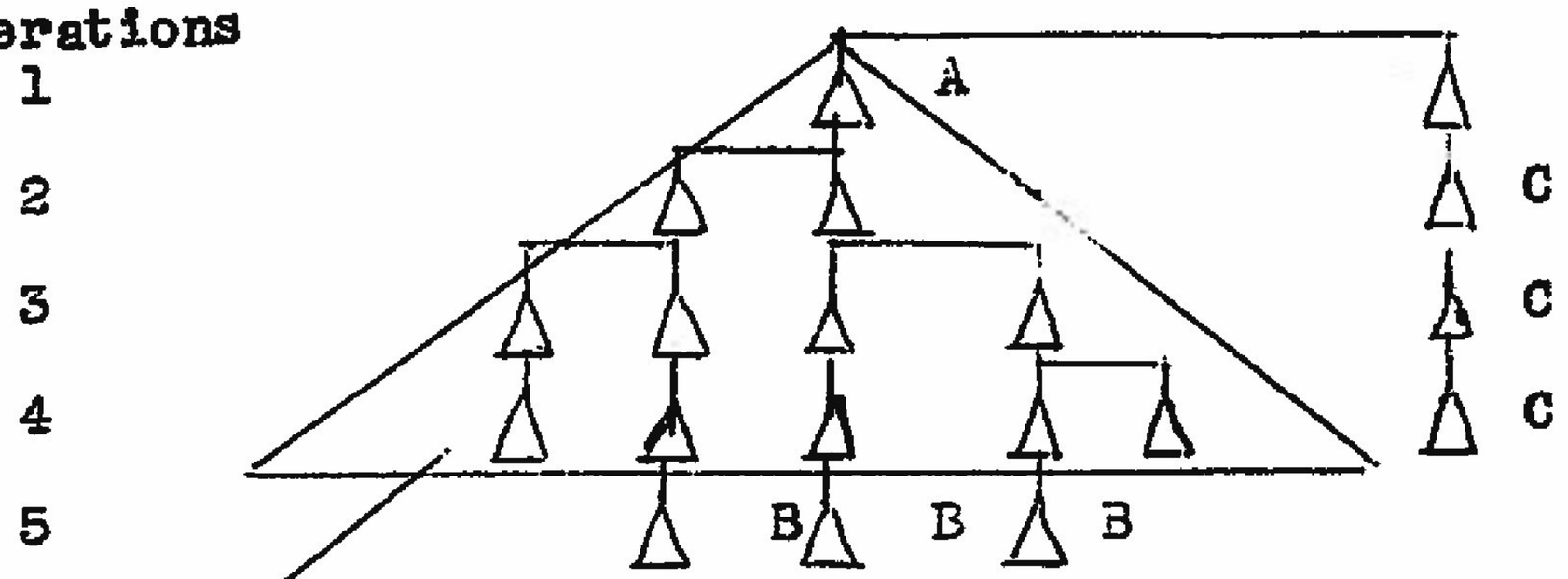
whole derbfine descended from any one king, a dynasty might be carried on indefinitely in more than one line, if each line continued to be represented in the kingship without a break of more than three generations. This in fact happened not uncommonly with the provincial kingships and the high-kingship, as Hogan demonstrated in his article in 1932.[1] Thus, for example, the high-kingship alternated from 734 - 1002 between two lines; and in Leinster, the succession was legally maintained in three distinct lines without a break, for more than three centuries (727 - 1036). (See diagram II)

This possibility depended of course on each line's being represented at certain intervals, or else falling out of the succession; and this seems to suggest some sort of tacit agreement between the different lines to provide a candidate roughly by turns. This did not always work smoothly of course - the number of kings who died a violent death often at the hands of kinsmen or members of collateral lines is sufficient proof. Hogan gives some figures from the Cenél Eoghain dynasty: of the four hundred and eighty members of this dynastic line who are mentioned over about seven centuries, nearly half are known to have died a violent death; thirty-three slain by the foreigner, Norsemen, Normans, Englishmen or Scots; seventy-six in internal warfare; and one hundred

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1. Hogan, p. 189.

I. Diagram to illustrate succession rules for kingship.



Triangle = derbfine founded by A. Therefore if A was king, all his derbfine eligible for kingship, whoever had been king in between.

B and C not eligible to become king, unless one of their respective derbfines was king at some point.

II. Succession of Kings of Leinster over 3 centuries. (from MacNeill 1921, p.126)

generations			
	1. Murchad d.738		
1	2. Dunchad d.728	3. Faelan d.738	4. Muiredach d.760
2	5. Cellach d.776	6. Ruaidri d. 785	7. Bran d. 795
3	8. Finnechta d.803	9. Muiredach d.829	10. Cellach d.834
4	11. Bran d. 838	14. Muirecan d. 863	12. Lorcan d.848 13. Tuathal d. 854 15. Dunlaing d.865?
5	19. Muiredach d.885	17. Domnall d.884 20. Cerball d.909	16. Ailill d.871 18? Coirpre
6	22. Faelan d.942	24. Broen d.947	21. Augaire d.917
7	23. Lorcan d.943	26. Murchad d.972	25. Tuathal d.958
8	28. Domnall d.984	30. Mael Morda d.1014	27. Augaire d.978 31. Dunlaing d.1014
9	29. Donnchad deposed 999	33. Broen deposed 1018	32. Donncuan d.1016 34. Augaire d.1024 35. Donnchad d.1036.

(N.B. succession legally maintained in 3 distinct lines over 9 generations, with each line obtaining the kingship at least once in every generation.)

and eleven by kinsmen.[1] The dynastic lines segmenting out into different branches, could thus be bitterly opposed to one another; for if in any case more than two generations elapsed without their representative obtaining the kingship a family group would in future not be eligible; sometimes then there would be a position where either one of their members must become king or they must in future be debarred and fall out of the succession altogether, for the family would have reached the "nail in front of the fingers" (ingin ar méraibh), the limit of the derbfine. In this case the royal family would have lost its dynastic rights with corresponding reduction in its social and economic status. This is referred to in the Irish expression "five generations from king to spade" - cúig glúine ó rígh go rámhainn.[2] We can understand then the source of the inter-dynastic rivalries. But in fact lineal succession in the same family from father to son seems to have been the exception rather than the rule until the later attempts, under feudal influence, to introduce lineal succession, even primogeniture. Earlier the circulation of the kingship between different collateral lines seems to have been quite regular.[3]

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1. Hogan, p. 251; cf. the constant references in the Annals to kings' being killed, often treacherously, by their kinsmen - a suis or la a braithrib fein.
2. Hogan, pp. 248-9.
3. Hogan, pp. 247-9; 200.

In any single case of succession there might be several men even in one line who were of royal birth and thus eligible for the kingship. All male members of a king's derbfine of suitable age and accomplishments were, it seems,[1] considered as potential heirs. Technically they were all known by a name meaning literally "material of a king" or "makings of a king", like the Latin materies regis; they were, as eligible princes of the royal blood, rígdamnai.

From amongst this group of claimants to the kingship, one had to be chosen to succeed. For though succession to office resembled inheritance of any other property in that it took place within the recognised limits of the derbfine, it differed from, say, land or stock in that it could not be divided amongst the members of the family. Only one man could succeed. It is necessary, then, to say something about the obscure subject of the election to kingship from among the eligible members of the royal family or families.

The occasion and nature of the election are a matter of some dispute. Was it, for example, an election by the whole body of freemen within the state? A special electoral body

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1. There is some difficulty about this, as some of those eligible on other grounds do not seem to be given the official title; Hogan suggests that it may have "denoted an eligible possessing a higher degree of eligibility than his kinsmen", p. 221.

made up of the nobles and clergy of the kingdom who duly announced their choice to the freemen who could then - or could they? - veto the proposed candidate if they wished?[1] The most plausible account however, the one followed by Hogan, and, tentatively, by Binchy, is that the actual selection between the different possibilities was in fact by the members of the royal families themselves.[2] This would fit well with the general rivalries between the different lines, for it was between the royal dynasties that factions and fights were so frequent; it may have been to avoid these that joint kings were sometimes appointed, one way of reconciling and answering opposing claims by representatives of different families.[3] But in most cases apparently the strongest party in the dynasty secured the election of its own nominee, often a collateral relative of the last king.

Sometimes, it seems, the actual successor was designated before the death of the reigning king. This was the institution called "tanistry",[4] so much misunderstood in later times by the English rulers. According to this one of the potential heirs (rígdamnai) was elected as the official heir to the

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1. MacNeill, 1921, p. 121.
2. Hogan, pp. 189-92, where the point is argued; Binchy, Celtica III, 1956, p. 226.
3. Hogan, p. 194; MacNeill, 1921, p. 121.
4. Binchy, loc. cit.; and 1941 sv. tánaise; Hogan, pp.244-7; MacNeill, 1921, p. 142.

throne during his predecessor's reign, and he then became, as heir apparent to the throne, the tánaise ríg, literally the "second (or next) to the king". The effect would be to avoid the dynastic quarrels and disputes between the different claimants on the death of the king. "The tanist of a king, why is he so called?" says one text, and gives the answer "because the whole of the túath look forward to his kingship without opposition to him".[1]

It has been suggested that in its later form at least in which the tanist was not only elected immediately after the accession of the new king but even inaugurated with the king, this institution of tanistry was a later introduction due to feudal influence and a new awareness on the part of the Irish of the drawbacks inter-dynastic disputes over the succession.[2] The references to tanistry from the 13th century on - a time of feudal influence - are particularly frequent. However there are references even in pre-Norman times to the tanist of the king; these references, then, must according to this theory be interpreted as evidence of a more vague custom in earlier times: of perhaps some general understanding between the different dynasties concerned as to the most suitable candidate to succeed, rather than a precise office filled by

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1. AL, IV, 329, Binchy, loc. cit.
2. MacNeill and Hogan, loc. cit.; contra Binchy, loc. cit.

formal election or inauguration. This would be plausible and, indeed, not unparallelled - but there may have been variations of local custom in different parts of Ireland.[1] Either way, whether the tanist was merely the man considered most likely to succeed or was formally elected during the lifetime of the king, "tanistry" is consistent with the general law of succession according to the derbfine organisation, and the possibility of the circulation of the kingship among several dynastic branches.

The king of a túath was, therefore, elected from among the eligible members of the royal house or houses of the túath. From time to time lines branching out from the royal family would lose their right to provide the kings according to the derbfine rule of succession, and these lines were then, presumably, counted among the nobility of the túath. Certain of the dynastic lines might in fact have gained control in different túatha from those of their collateral lines, whether by conquest or some other means. Each line would then provide the direct king of its own little túath. But the over-lordship of the larger group made up of three or four of such túatha (the mor-thúath) could circulate between the different families; with the result that each of the different túatha in turn might in theory provide the over-king

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1. Binchy, 1941, loc. cit.

of the larger area and be thus associated with the ruling royal family. This happened to some extent in practice too - for many centuries the high-king of all Ireland was chosen in turn from members of the two lines of the Ui Neill, one in the north and one in the south.

II. The King in the Local Kingdom

We must now consider the position held by the king after he had been elected according to the rules described above, and after his formal installation as king.

The king's powers have been variously assessed. One suggestion is that once accepted by the chiefs and inaugurated "he then became a considerable despot".[1] Hubert writes in the same strain: "once appointed, the king possessed all power, religious, judicial and military; he had certain subsidies in addition to the revenues of the royal lands and lived at his subjects' expense on his official taxes. He had a regular retinue... he travelled often and was the guest of his vassals".[2]

Was the king's power as oppressive and firm as might appear from this? What were his rights and how were they exercised?

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1. Curtis, 1936, p. 36.
2. Hubert, 1934, p. 220.

In this section I intend to describe the position of the king in his own <u>túath</u>, and the military economic and judicial aspects of his authority. The following section will be concerned with the external relations between different kings, overlords and sub-kings, and the overall organisation of the different <u>tuatha</u>. An account of the rituals of the King's inauguration will be reserved for a later chapter; so too will be a consideration of the <u>theory</u> of kingship underlying each king's actual authority.

The king had a special position at the head of the hierarchy of his territory. He belonged to the royal dynasty, one of the most powerful families of the area who had evident superiority over the collateral lines that had fallen out of the royal succession. He lived in his own fortress or 'dun', and, according to the lawyers, should be in possession of a kiln, a mill, a barn and a plough, and should own three residences with 20 cows and 20 sheep to each one.[1] He was not supposed to go out without his proper attendance,[2] or to undertake servile work, on pain of being reduced to a commoner's status - he must not use a spade or shovel, travel alone, own swine, or kill and cook an animal for food.[3] Unlike commoners, the king could not sue for sick-maintenance, nor was he (with

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1. MacNeill, 1921, p. 104; AL, V, 53.
2. AL, V, 173.
3. AL, IV, 335; 383; Silv. Gad. 351.

his heirs and counsellors) allowed to practice distraint: in both cases apparently because of his high position and power already.[1] Similarly the king himself could not be sued directly, and a bond could not be laid on a king because of his high rank;[2] in one of the didactic tracts the advice is given not to "accept a king or a prince as a surety for you, for it is not possible for you to fight with him in the event of his unrighteousness".[3] Some of these privileges and liabilities were shared with some of the other members of society: with the learned grades, especially the poets and ecclesiastics. The king's testimony, for example, was accounted to excel all, so that he could decide against every class of person except those of the 2 orders of religion and learning;[4] and the king's "precinct" was comparable in size (extending for 64 spear casts) only to those of poets and bishops.[5] The king himself stood, as Binchy writes, "at the top of the pyramid in each <u>túath</u>".[6] The king, in short, with his high rank and nobility was not only at the head of the hierarchical structure of the local community, but was also considered necessary for the life of the <u>túath</u>: "tribes

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1. Binchy, Ériu, XII, 1934, p. 121; AL, I, 85-7.
2. AL, II, 95; Ériu, XIII, 1942, 31.6.
3. Advice to Doidin 1 (cf.4) in Ériu XI; cf. Heptad XXX = AL, V, 225f.
4. AL, I, 79.
5. AL, IV, 227-9.
6. Binchy, 1954, p. 56.

who have lost their king" runs one traditional piece of advice to a prince "are like a cauldron without a cover";[1] and the king himself was ultimately liable for his subject's default, after the defaulter's chattels, derbfine and chief (flaith); if none of these could be found then "his crime is to be on the king" (bid a cin for rígh).[2]

The king was the head and agent of all the people of his túath. But he also had special relations with certain members of his kingdom.

The heads of families were responsible to him for the conduct of their own families. Thus the head of a commoner joint family (aire coisring) represented them, and acted "as an automatic surety for the observance of their obligations to king and Church"; he could give a pledge on their behalf; and, though on his own account he was, like them, a commoner, in virtue of his headship he was in some way accorded a special noble status.[3] The noble families too had their own heads (aire túise), who represented them in dealings with the local king.[4] For relations within the family group were not the concern of the king or the law: under its head the family formed a self-contained unit. They were themselves liable for

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1. AP, 22.
2. AL, IV, 241.
3. Binchy, 1941, on aire coisring.
4. loc. cit. on aire túise; cf. AL, II, 279f.

securing their land against pirates or wolves, repairing their roads and fences, answering for the contracts and debts of their members, and attending the king's hostings or assemblies.[1] Thus one of the ways in which king and people met was through this position of the family head who was responsible to the king for the unity and obligations of his own family group living, like other such groups, in isolation on its hereditary land.

The institutions of clientship[2] had the same effect of bringing the king into a special relationship with certain particular members of his kingdom. A king of one <u>túath</u> was expected to have a large number of clients of all kinds, bound to him according to set rules: the king gave a formal grant of cattle, and in return was given services, honour and interest by his clients. People were bound to enter into a relation of free clientship with the king of their own <u>túath</u> if he so required. These free or noble clients were honoured members among the followers and attendants at the king's house, for free clientship did not in any way infringe the free status of the client: indeed many of the king's free clients might be wealthy nobles who had several clients of their own. They were bound however to certain duties of respect for the

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1. Ryan, 1928, pp. 167-8; cf. Spencer, p. 54 on "kin-cogish".
2. AL, II, 222ff; Thurneysen, ZCP, XIV, 1923.

king and attendance at his court. Servile clients (céli gíallnai) were committed, in addition to their food rent, to certain services involving manual labour, and to giving hospitality to their king, as their patron, in the winter or "cosbering" quarter of the year: their patron had the right to bring with him a considerable retinue to share in the hospitality of his base clients - a night's entertainment from each.[1]

The more wealthy a lord or king, the more clients he could afford to have, for in each case the relationship was founded on the initial grant of cattle to the client. The king of one <u>túath</u> was normally expected to have 30 or 40 clients, whose personal services to him thus depended in part on his wealth and property.[2] "A king without property is no king".[3]

In these ways, therefore, the king, in addition to his general position at the head of the <u>túath</u> as a whole, did have special personal ties with members of the commoner and the noble classes through the authority of the family heads, and the practice of clientship. Besides this of course, he also had a special position in relation to members of his own royal

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1. Binchy, 1941, sv. <u>cóe</u>, <u>céle</u>.
2. MacNeill, 1921, p. 104.
3. AL, IV, 381.

dynasty, and his own derbfine, made up in part of those who were eligible to succeed him - one of whom might even be officially known as the king's heir (his "tanist") or informally favoured as the most likely or suitable successor.

He had also an official retinue[1] permanently attached to his court sometimes with hereditary land near the king's settlement. The two most important members of this retinue were the king's brehon, or jurist, and his chief poet (ollam) or expert in the traditional learning. These two are continually mentioned as an essential part of the king's following - the brehon had to accompany the king even at the season when he had his smallest retinue;[2] and, up to the time of such great monarchs as Brian Boru in the 11th century, an ollam was attached to every royal court.[3]

Sometimes the offices of brehon and ollam, both representatives of the national learned tradition, are described as split up into their several components; as, for instance, in Keating's idealised description[4] of the 10 officers who attended the king of Ireland from the time of the legendary king Cormac - "a prince (flaith), a brehon, a druid, a physician, a bard or poet (file), a historian (sencha) a musician and 3 stewards."

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1. On retinue Joyce, 1913, I, pp. 61-7; Kenney, 1929, pp. 5-6.
2. Binchy, 1941, sv. brithem.
3. Curtis, 1938, p. xvii.
4. Keating, I, 46, (Vol. 2, p. 343).

The brehon was "to explain the customs and laws of the country in the king's presence"; the poet "to compose satire and panegyric for each one according to his good or evil deeds"; the historian "to preserve the genealogies, history and transactions of the nobles from age to age". "Since the Faith," according to Keating, an ecclesiastical chaplain replaced the druid; but it was not in fact common to have a clergyman as one of the king's close attendants.[1]

This emphasis on the presence of representatives of history, poetry and law is also clear in the ninth century Triads of Ireland where it is laid down that a chief "does not grant speech save to four - a poet (fer cerda) for satire and praise, a chronicler of good memory for narration and story-telling, a judge (brethem) for giving judgments, a historian (sencha) for ancient lore" (fri senchas).[2] This practice continued, and was remarked by a later English writer of the 16-17th century - it was not, then, merely an imaginative theory propounded by the learned that the king should have such a following:

> "these lords" writes Camden of the Irish kings and chiefs, "have their historians about them, who write their acts and deeds: they have their physicians, their rymers whom they call bards, and their harpers: all of whom

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1. Kenney, 1929, p. 6.
2. TR, 248.

have their several livelihoods, and have lands set out for them." [1]

A king also had guards in his following. In the arrangement of the king's house for a feast, according to a description in the laws, there are men at arms guarding the doors; and the king is said to have 4 men in his body-guard (a "front-man, a rearman, and 2 sides-men") who should be bound to the king by special ties of gratitude, as having been rescued or freed from servitude by the king.[2]

Altogether the king of one *túath* was expected to have a retinue of 12 men for public occasions. (The number is also sometimes said to be 9).[3] He was forbidden to go out without his proper attendance. In the "month of sowing" however he was allowed to have the minimum number of three only to escort him - a judge, and 2 servants.[4]

The king therefore had his special retinue officially attached to his position over and above the following provided by his own clients. He had his bodyguard, his servants, and representatives of the learned grades (poets, historians and lawyers) to advise and support him. But - and this is most significant - among the king's officers we find no mention of anyone appointed to act as military leader or, in any sense,

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1. Qu. Joyce, p. 65.
2. AL, IV, 339.
3. Binchy, 1941, pp. 38,82.
4. AL, IV, 335; Heptad, XIII = AL, V, 173.

as a commander in chief for the king. For it was the king himself who was the leader of his tuath in war.

The king's primary function was in the sphere of war.[1] It was in military affairs that his powers of decision seem to have been marked and in war that his personal leadership was most effective and necessary. The people of the tuath in general followed the king on military expeditions. He had the right to proclaim a "hosting" (slógad) at one of the assemblies, and after that it was the duty of his people to obey the call to follow him. It was this practice, it seems, that survived as the "rising out" which is a frequent prerogative attributed to the Gaelic chiefs in the Tudor State Papers.[2]

These military expeditions might be to meet an invading force led by the king of another tuath, or to resist the attempt of an overking to impose or resume his control over the king of the local tuath.[3] The wars that are so continually mentioned in the sources were most often small affairs, where the aristocratic combatants of each side were competing for glory and cattle; the armed raid, led by the king or one of the royal dynasty, was a regular means of gaining booty and, above all, cattle. A cattle raid was a normal occurrence

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1. "Er ist vor allem Führer im Kampf, Kriegsherr" Thurneysen, 1935, p. 102.
2. Binchy, 1941, sv. slógad.
3. Loc. cit.

as a sequel to a king's inauguration, as well as being one of the ways in which a potential heir could build up a following, for it was a method of obtaining the prestige and cattle - the means of wealth and possibility of gaining clients - that accrued to the leader of a successful raid.[1] Regularly it was the king himself who led expeditions against other kings or raids for cattle, and in the Irish proverb "no battle should be fought without a king".[2] It was his function to be brave and skilful in war, and he could be degraded if he showed cowardice, if he was "wounded in the back in fleeing from combat".[3]

The king's powers in war were central to his position: he had specific rights, when leading expeditions, of requisitioning property (stock),[4] and special powers to "consolidate people after battle". A king, then, had to be skilled and brave in everything to do with fighting. He was the <u>personal</u> leader - he was not, that is, a commander-in-chief of an organised and regular army. There were not standing military forces, nor professional soldiers, and among all the occupations and professions enlisted in the laws, that of soldiering is not to be found.[5] Fighting was a normal pursuit, not a

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1. Binchy, 1954, p. 65; MacNeill, 1921, p. 122.
2. AIT, p. 236.
3. AL, IV, 335.
4. Binchy, 1941, sv. <u>errech</u>; AL, IV, 335.
5. MacNeill, 1935, pp. 98-9.

specialised skill. The king's personal experience and valour as military leader and increaser of wealth in cattle were what counted. How fully exercised was this aspect of his power is clear from the constant references to war or to kings slain in battle in all Irish writing, in particular in the Annals.

Closely allied to his powers in war was the king's duty to arrange treaties with neighbouring kings, for in inter-túath relations it was the king alone who could represent his own particular people.[1] When he marched out as leader of the túath's forces, he could either make war on the rival king or negotiate an agreement with him at the boundaries, "so that he may have either battle or treaty".[2] A solemn compact could therefore be concluded between two or more kings on behalf of their túatha; they "pledged" their subjects to obey the provisions of these agreements. There were various different kinds of compact, varying from a mere armistice, to comprehensive arrangements for mutual recognition and acceptance of legal claims: all versions were, however, known by the same term, cairde, lit. friendship.[3] This then was one of the ways in which the separate túatha were brought into

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1. Binchy, 1954, p. 59.
2. CG (Binchy), 512.
3. Binchy, 1941 sv. cairde; AL, III, 133; Thurneysen ZCP, XV, 1925, p. 326.

relationship with each other by their own kings. The other two ways were the constant raids led by kings between the various tuatha, and, finally, the links between over- and under-kings, to be described in the next section.

The Irish king was not owner of land in the feudal sense, nor, as in a cash economy, was he paid organised taxes by his subjects. However he did receive a "food-rent" or tribute in kind from his people, and this was sometimes overseen by the steward (rechtaire) in his retinue.[1] Besides this if he was an over-king he had also the tribute from his sub-king(s); he in his turn paid tribute to his own overlord with the wealth provided from his own resources as king of the local tuath. The king was also in control of the produce and cattle from his own family estates - those belonging, of course, to a powerful and presumably wealthy family. He may too have had rights in certain lands in virtue of his royal office.[2]

Besides this actual "income" the king had various rights he could claim from his subjects. His resources need not be spent on the upkeep of roads, for example, or the construction of dwellings, for a right to specified labour from his subjects was part of his authority as king. He was due hospitality,

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1. Powell, 1959, p. 76; RIA dict. sv. rechtaire.
2. On finance: Joyce, 1913, I, p.50ff; Pokorny, 1933, p. 29.

and could make his circuit among his people, being entertained in their houses. He, on his side, gave food to his servants, and feasts for his nobles and followers. An account of one of these banquets in the laws describes the seating arrangements in the king's house:[1] four guardsmen to the southern end, and near them visitors and envoys; then poets and harpers, with flautists, horn-players and jugglers in the south-east; to the north were the men at arms, who were guarding the doors to "prevent confusion in the ale-house", then the king's free clients, hostages, judges, and, next to the king, his wife; in the north-east were the forfeited hostages, in fetters.

The king's wealth was thus built up from these various sources ("a king without property is no king") - and, in return, he dispensed it in grants of cattle to his clients, and feasts for his nobles, poets and brehons. He was not, it must be repeated, in any feudal sense dominus terrae: he did not give grants of land in return for armed service, nor were his clients "unfree" in the feudal sense, for they could not only own land and cattle on their own account, but could themselves put an end to their contract of clientship.

As has been seen already, the king's powers of decision were very limited in the nature of Irish society since law was

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1. CG (Binchy), 577.

not due to legislation by king or assembly but was a matter of agreement between different kindreds formalised and supervised by the jurists. Law in the tuath was in the possession of people and brehons, and not due to the over-riding decision of the local king, nor, a fortiori, to the act of a superior king, for overlords had no power to legislate for a subordinate king.[1]

Nevertheless, the king could issue special ordinances at gatherings of the people, especially in time of war or of other grave emergencies: he could proclaim a hosting (slégad), and make special arrangements after a defeat in battle ("he consolidates his people afterwards so that they be not broken up"), or after a plague or invasion.[2] These ordinances were "the sustaining means of a true ruler (firfhlaitheman) over his túatha, and he cannot violate them by falsity (goi) or violence or overmight. Let him be sound, distinguishing (fairly), and upright between weak and strong".[3] And these ordinances, unlike the traditional customary law, are spoken of as being "enforced" by the king.[4]

The king of each túath was bound to convene a public gathering (óenach) or "fair" at regular intervals, and it was

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 214 etc.
2. AL, IV, 335.
3. AL, IV, 335 - MacNeill, PRIA. C. 1923, p. 303.
4. Binchy, 1941, sv. rechtge, p. 104; cf. AL III, 409.

at these gatherings apparently that his special ordinances were issued. The gatherings or assemblies were normally held at some traditional site, often, according to legend, an ancient burial ground. They included games, with horse-racing and various athletic competitions, and were an occasion when the dispersed populations met and exchanged their goods, arranged marriages and alliances and saw to the settling of lawsuits between different kindreds. Thus these gatherings were important events in the rural life of the local túath, and the king's responsibility for calling them was a significant part of his authority. The fairs or assemblies of overkings were more important for they could be attended by members of the sub-túatha also; most important of all was a fair held by a provincial king, which covered all the túatha within his realm.[1]

In the sagas and gnomic writings, the king is frequently represented as being a judge, and the all-embracing quality of the ideal king is justice or truth (fír). But the king's actual power of "judging" in the normal sense of the word was very limited. Descriptions by previous historians of the Irish king as "President of the Assembly", "supreme judge" or presiding over "the highest court of his kingdom" have been rejected in more recent accounts as being much too formal for

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1. On assemblies and fairs Binchy, loc. cit. sv. Óenach; Ériu, 1958, p. 124 f.

the non-centralised organisation of the small túath. Nor can we assume that the picture we are given of a king's banquet (as described above) would also apply to a postulated court of law under the direction of the king.[1]

There were a few cases, admittedly, which were treated as, in a sense, "public". In these the king's brehon had jurisdiction, and the sentence of outlawry or death may have been carried out by the king's officers. Cases of treason to the king or concerned with taxation were in this category.[2] Certain misdemeanours seem to have been considered as direct insults to the king - a misdeed inside his precinct, for instance, or in his "drinking-hall", disobedience in the camp, injury to his road (i.e. the main road of the túath) or in the assemblies called by the king when there should be peace and no quarrelling.[3] How far even in such cases the king himself made a formal judicial decision is obscure. But he was certainly ultimately dependent on his brehon who was the expert in the customary procedure and standards, and advised the king. So even if some cases were heard at one of the public assemblies, perhaps in the presence of the king, it was the brehon who really interpreted the law. In any case,

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1. Binchy, 1941, p. 105 vs. MacNeill, 1923, p. 306.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 60.
3. Ériu, XVI, 1952 - Airgialla poem 31-2.

the king could not be said to represent the "state" here - not even in the limited way in which the Welsh king seems to have done in the codification of the Welsh law books.[1]

In the main, it was the brehons who had responsibility for settling disputes (even disputes between kings). These were the jurists in general, as distinct, probably, from the brehon who was specially attached to the king. The king's presence does not seem to have been a necessary part in the arbitration by jurists of disputes between different families, or in the various legal acts at which the accompaniment of a brehon was essential. The king, in short, was not the supreme judge or legal expert of his kingdom.[2]

Indeed the king was not primarily concerned with law at all. It was the function of the brehons to interpret and apply the traditional customary law; the king did not legislate, nor was he the source of law; he was not the regular judge, nor head of any constituted judicial court; he did not enforce law, and was not the chief legal representative of a "state.

Nevertheless his existence was necessary for justice to be applied in his kingdom. He, as the head of the tuath, "extends over his peoples with coercive power",[3] and, without

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 216.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 61; Thurneysen ZCP, XVI, 1927, pp.199-201; Powell, 1959, p. 78.
3. CG, 444 - AL, IV, 329.

a king, just as without a scholar or a poet or a church, a túath was not a proper túath.[1] The position of the king, supported by the brehons, was an essential part of the whole life of the túath; he convened the regular gatherings, negotiated treaties with others, and was the guarantee for the validity of legal judgments.

The Irish king, then, did not possess very extensive powers within his small and non-centralised túath. The exercise of his authority was rather a matter of personal action than a formal imposition of coercive power through a complex system of officials. He was not an irresponsible despot. Indeed we could say that his authority was from below rather than imposed from above,[2] whether in the sense of delegated authority from a central king, or of power received directly from God (as in the developed theory of the Divine Right of Kings) which would have meant corresponding responsibility not to his people but to the giver of his power. The Irish king did not own his kingdom, neither the people nor the soil of his tuath. Even in much later times something of this traditional idea of kingship was maintained, in spite of English policies. As late as 1542 there was what Hogan

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1. Ériu, XIII, loc. cit.
2. Cf. Curtis, 1938, p. xxx.

considers a definite re-assertion of Irish custom and the Irish law of kingship, in the reply to the English government's query as to whether they might not re-grant a rebel's land and realm: "though O'Nele rebelled he was but a captain and so an officer, and the lands which he held belonged to his office; and therefore his offence could not make a forfeiture, but either for his own life, or but until another captain were chosen by the country".[1] The king was not the owner but merely the one appointed for life to hold the kingship. If he was killed by a kinsman, or in battle, or even by a member of a usurping line, the kingship was in theory open for a new eligible member to be appointed (though of course in practice there was sometimes usurpation by forcible seizure). It was impossible according to the native practice for a king to sign away either the right of succession to the kingship (for succession was vested in the dynastic families, not at the disposal of the king), or the ownership of his whole territory and people or even the royal land pertaining to him as king.[2] Authority was limited, and the king not an irresponsible despot.

The idea of contract was, as we have seen, an important one among Irish legal concepts; to some extent this seems to have applied to the position of the king also. He had hostages

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1. Qu. Hogan, 1932, p. 239.
2. Ibid., p. 235.

and pledges from his people which signified their acceptance of him as king; these hostages, unless forfeited for a breach of faith, were honoured guests in the king's house.[1] The king in his turn provided sureties for his rule to the people - he gave guarantees from the natural phenomena of the world, sun and moon and wind, to rule justly. At his installation he was instructed in his duties and promised solemnly to abide by the traditional rules.[2] Just as a contract between lord and client could be brought to an end under certain conditions if the lord abused his power, so too a king could be degraded and lose his rank through certain faults - judging falsely, dispensing with his proper attendance; becoming physically unfitted to reign.[3] He was responsible to the people of whom he was one. "Which is higher, the king or the people?" It is asked in one old law tract; "The king ... because it is the people that ordain the king, not the king the people."[4]

The little local kinglet of a *túath*, who led his warriors in raids, and had no complex administrative functions, was thus in many ways just a small local *chief*; hardly at all like the

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1. Binchy, 1941, sv. *giall*.
2. See below, Chapter VI.
3. AL, I, 55; V, 173; on king's physical perfection see *sub*. Chapter V.
4. AL, IV, 333.

usual picture we have of a "king". His relations with his people were personal, without the intervention of state or currency, he had no elaborate train or palace or organisation. He led the people scattered through his little rural realm in small-scale raids and battles against near-by chiefs, and took little interest in the family affairs of the kin groups living in their isolated homesteads.

Yet attached to the position of this little chief, as also to all the overlords above him right up to the postulated king of all Ireland, was a complex learned theory of the virtues and prerogatives ideally characterising that position - a theory of kingship. It is this learned theory that above all makes it suitable to speak of "Irish kingship", and to call even the ruler of the little <u>túath</u>, a "king".

Those who formulated and expressed this theory of kingship were, as we have seen, represented in the king's returns, and agents and advisors in the exercise of the limited powers he held. These were the poets, historians and jurists. But - and this brings us to an important point - there is one significant omission to notice among the followers and advisors of the king. It is very seldom that a clergyman is mentioned as among the regular retinue of the king.

In fact, Irish kingship could be said not to be a "Christian kingship" in the usual sense. As Kenney writes in the

introduction to his standard treatment of the ecclesiastical sources for the early history of Ireland,

> "Church and State were more clearly separated in Ireland than elsewhere in Christian Europe .... elsewhere his (the king's) counsellors could only be bishops, abbots and chaplains ... in Ireland his brehon and ollam stood beside the king, in whom he had counsellors with a long tradition of service ... only very rarely do we hear of a churchman holding the position of a king's minister." [1]

Naturally there are many references to churchmen, and the ecclesiastics in the laws are to some extent assimilated, in honour-price and privilege, to the native men of learning.[2] But even so the absence of ecclesiastical control over Irish monarchy is striking. It is indeed commonly said that Irish kingship was "pagan rather than Christian"[3], and even in the inauguration of the king, the rite was never in Ireland, in contrast to the contemporary Europe, dominated by the Church. Even though we hear of bishops and clerics at the installation

> "the Church never succeeded in assuming the chief role in the matter of inauguration, which remained to the last essentially a civil ceremony, and what is more, a ceremony bearing distinct traces of its pagan origin. The most the ecclesiastical authorities ever succeeded in doing was, by a religious ceremony, to set the seal of the Church on the civil ceremony which preceeded it." [4]

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1. Kenney, 1929, p. 6.
2. Binchy, 1954, p. 57.
3. Curtis, 1938, p. xxiv; Hogan, p. 195.
4. Hogan loc. cit.; O'Grady EHR 1889, p. 292, thinks there were regularly two distinct ceremonies, first pagan with the ceremony of the wand, secondly ecclesiastical, with the oil of consecration; cf. Hogan, p. 198, who, however, thinks this formal benediction to have been "a rare occurrence".

So, at the same time as the growth of the great monastic settlements and the famous missionary journeys and scholarship of the Irish monks that gained Ireland the title of "Land of Saints and Scholars", the monarchy in Ireland remained to a large extent undominated by ecclesiastical authority. Just as in Ireland there was no administrative bureaucracy or centralisation, so there was no church organisation closely associated with political authority. Not, that is, until Brian Boru attempted to become king of all Ireland in a new and more centralised pattern, and bid for the support of Armagh in the north as the ecclesiastical capital of all Ireland.

So in addition to the absence in the local kingdom of organised administrative machinery standing between king and subjects, there was, equally, no complex clerical service that intervened between the position of king and people. The king was personally responsible for his rule, and not dependent on government officials. This personal responsibility can be seen to fit with the Irish mode of succession, by appointment from several eligible kinsmen: there was not one fixed heir destined to succeed by birth alone whether weak, unsuitable or still a child, during whose reign other officials might have to represent and guard him. According to the Irish rule, the member of the royal derbfine who was at that moment most suited to rule could be appointed. It was, then,

about this personal leader appointed to rule the tuath like any other kind of little chief, that there was the learned theory of kingship, according to which every little rí or king was assimilated in theory to rulers over kingdoms many times to size. It is to this theory that much of the rest of this study will be devoted. First however, we must describe the relations between the kings of different tuatha, and the problems connected with the "high-king of Ireland".

III. The Links Between Different Kings

Each king had his own túath over which he was primarily in authority. But these kings also joined together into loose groupings under the over-lordship of the more powerful kings, groups which might shift and change at various times according to the power of particular dynasties. A "king" then could be not only ruler of his own special túath, but also the lord of a group of túatha (mor-thúath), of a province, or even perhaps of all Ireland. For Ireland was made up of many kingdoms, each under their own kings:

1. Túath or local kingdom - of about 20 miles across. (Sometimes referred to as a sub-túath).

2. Mor-thúath (lit. big túath) - consisting of 3 or 4 túatha.

3. Over-kingdom or Province - made up of several túatha or mor-thúatha.

4. Ireland - made up of the seven main over-kingdoms (the "Five Provinces of Ireland"), and including in all about 100 *túatha*.

A superior king or overlord received in most cases tribute from his sub-kings, a payment, of cattle and other goods, that was the personal responsibility of the sub-king rather than a liability of his people as a whole. In return the overking gave a "stipend" or grant (*túarastal*) to his sub-king, such as cattle, drinking horns, gold, mantles.. (- "a curious custom" according to Joyce).[1] The two kings were thus brought into relationship with the interchange of goods. In this transaction however the superiority of the overlord who was giving the grant - the payer - was marked as over the sub-king - the payee.[2] The word for this grant (*túarastal*) is often used in contexts stressing the overlordship of the giver: "receiving *túarastal*" can mean "making submission" and "acknowledging someone as lord". Indeed in one account a king's followers were so mortified at his acceptance of such a grant that they refused to take charge of it, and the receiving king had to give it away.[3] Receiving a "stipend" involved accepting it from the overlord, and thus recognising his right

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1. Joyce, 1913, I, p. 51.
2. RIA, dict. sv. *túarastal*.
3. War of Gael with Gall, p. 133.

to homage: one synonym for submission is to "go into the king's house".

Overkings were also given hostages (giall) by their sub-kings as a pledge of their agreement and submission. "He is not a king of territories who has not three kings of territories under him... and who has not hostages" according to the laws.[1] One of the most famous of Irish kings, the 5th century Niall, had as epithet "of the nine hostages". The concrete proof of a king's sovereignty was for him to "carry off many hostages" from the territory or territories owing allegiance to him, and in the Annals, if a king wished to claim suzerainty over certain peoples, one of his first acts was to make a circuit round the bounds of his potential kingdom, claiming hostages from chiefs and sub-kings.[2] "Forfeited" hostages were in theory kept in chains under guard, and there are frequent references to bound hostages exacted forcibly from sub-kings: "he is not a king who has not hostages in fetters, to whom the rent of a king (cis flatha) is not given".[3] But in spite of the continual stress in poems and saga on the exaction and binding of hostages - a stress which serves to bring out the military concept of kingship - the hostages were not all in fact confined; some are among the honoured guests at the

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1. AL, IV, 381.
2. Binchy, 1941, p. 96.
3. AL, IV, 51.

king's feast, near the king himself.[1] These hostages were a visible sign and guarantee of the king's superiority, and surety for his relation to his sub-kings; after his appointment, then, the king circled his kingdom (righthandwise) collecting the hostages due to him as a sign of his authority.[2]

Some royal dynasties gained wide control and their various branches held authority over several different túatha. There was a distinction between two different kinds of sub-kingdom - "free" (saor túatha) and tributary (for-túatha or "stranger" kingdoms). In the former kind the sub-king was of the same royal line as his over-lord, and, as member of a related dynasty, did not have to pay tribute to him.[3]

Although sub-kings owed allegiance in general to their overlords, a superior king had in fact very little power over his subordinate kings. He could not interfere with the rule of the sub-túath, for that was directly under its own local king.[4] Nor could he legislate for it, nor judge its affairs. In controversies between his individual sub-kings an over-king might sometimes give judgment, "adjusting disputes between territories";[5] but even here the king's right to

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1. Binchy, loc. cit.
2. Joyce, p. 56; de Paor, 1958, p. 98.
3. Essays to MacNeill, 1940, p. 409; 447; Pokorny, 1933, p. 28; Hogan, 1932, p. 204.
4. Binchy, 1954, p. 54.
5. Binchy, 1941, p. 37.

decide was only insofar as it concerned the individual sub-kings, not the law of the people, and in any case was limited by the influences of the brehons who knew the expert procedure and standards to be applied, and indeed may themselves have arbitrated between disagreeing kings.[1] A superior king also took some part in the settlement of a case of homicide between two *túatha* under his jurisdiction who had not a specific agreement (cairde) between themselves; the king of the *túath* whose man had been killed took a hostage or pledge from the superior king thus binding him to support the claim, and levy compensation from the defendant's *túath* if he refused otherwise to pay it.[2] The superior king might also lead an expedition of his own followers against a sub-*túath* which had revolted or refused due tribute; as over-king to whom several territories owed allegiance he could declare a hosting against such a rebellious sub-kingdom.[3] It is also sometimes suggested that an over-king had the power of grant over all his sub-territories;[4] but if so - and the subject is obscure - that power was so limited as to make it of little significance; the king had to have the consent of the subjects concerned before recognising a new chief over them;[5] and in any case

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1. Powell, 1959, p. 78.
2. Meyer Ériu I; MacNeill, 1935, pp. 111-3.
3. Binchy, *loc. cit.*, p. 106.
4. Pokorny, 1933, p.29; Ryan, 1928, p.166; MacNeill, 1921, pp. 149-50.
5. In practice "exceedingly rare" acc. Ryan.

the king was not either the owner of land or dispenser of political lordship either in his own túath or a fortiori in those of others. So, although in certain ways he had contact with his sub-túatha through his relationship with their respective kings, (for he was given tribute, homage and support by these subordinate kings and could influence, even decide among them), even so he had in general very little opportunity of interfering in the local kingdom; his relations were primarily only with the king of that túath, and it was only in his own specific little túath that an over-king, however powerful, had direct authority.[1]

Indeed the relation of over-king to sub-king was in many ways analogous to that of lord to client. The sub-kings paid tribute, mainly of cattle, to overlord, and he on his side gave them a grant (tuarastal) in return. Similarly the personal nature of the over/under-king relation is shown by the lack of right of interference in the sub-kingdom and the personal payment[2] of the tribute; in the same way the grant or stipend was a personal grant given as by lord to client, and not in any sense an economic investment in a subject territory.

Like the local kings, superior kings too held fairs or

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1. Binchy, 1954, loc. cit.
2. Ibid., p. 59.

assemblies which were attended by members of all the túatha within their sphere of influence. These gatherings were important according to the rank of the king who held them, and the most important of all was the provincial fair. This was held in the neighbourhood of the chief stronghold, probably on some traditional burial site; it was attended by members of all the túatha of the province, and lasted for several days, including entertainments and transaction of business. The most influential were the "fair of Tailtiu" (aenach Tailten) in Meath, in Connacht the fair of Cruachan (aenach Cruachan), and, in Leinster, the gathering at Colman (aenach Colmain). The Munster fair was at Nenagh (óenach Teite).[1]

There were, then, three main grades of kings:

1. Kings of one túath - (rí túaithe; or rí benn)
2. Overlord of several túatha (rí túath (gen. pl.); or rí buiden).
3. Provincial king (rí coicid; ?rí ruirech)

In addition there was the "king of Tara", sometimes called the king of Ireland, at the head of the hierarchy of kings.

On the subject of this "high king" (ard rí) there is some dispute and obscurity. Historians in the past ascribed to him power over all Ireland, with sovereignty over the provincial kings and the right to call annual assemblies with

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1. Binchy, 1958, pp. 125-6.

nation-wide constitutional functions. In other words, according to this traditional view, it was a truly centralised monarchy. "The primacy attached to his office" in Eoin MacNeill's opinion, "was a valid historical fact from the third to the twelfth century, except in the half-century following the battle of Clontarf (1014), during which the high-kingship was in abeyance. Associated with it was the national assembly held annually at Taillte in the valley of the Boyne."[1]

Even MacNeill however admits that the high king possessed symbolic rather than actual political power, "in primacy rather than in operative authority",[2] and this playing down of the political aspects of the high king of Ireland is evident in more recent theories about the high kingship, as well as being *prima facie* more plausible.

According to the current view[3] the position of the king of Tara has been much exaggerated by previous writers, and his authority was much more limited than might at first appear. There are two main strands in the present approach. In the first place, it is held, whatever the representations by the

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1. MacNeill, 1935, p. 109.
2. MacNeill, *loc. cit.*; 1919, p. 269.
3. See esp. Binchy, 1954 and 1958; O'Rahilly, 1946, p. 176; 234; the elaborate details of the Book of Rights are now regarded as irrelevant for the period before 11th century.

Irish "synthetic" historians of the earlier situation, there was not in fact any king of Tara who even claimed, let alone wielded, power over all Ireland until the 5th century with the rise to power of the famous king Niall of the Nine Hostages.[1] Secondly, though in practice the king of Tara was from the 5th to the 9th century the most powerful king in Ireland since he was head of the influential Ui Néill dynasties, there was not any theoretical justification for this position in the traditional laws. The "king of Tara" may have been the leading king in Ireland at this period: this is not the same thing as a legally defined king of Ireland. Furthermore though the "fair of Tailtiu" was indeed a historical institution intimately connected with the Tara monarchy, and "the most important gathering of its kind in Ireland" where law suits were arranged, ordinance issued, goods exchanged, nevertheless it was not a national assembly for making laws. It was merely the principal gathering of the Ui Néill confederation of dynasties and their vassals, not a constitutional occasion on which the presence of the other provincial kings was legally required.[2]

The high king at Tara therefore did not possess recognised and explicit power over all the other kings in Ireland. He was

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1. O'Rahilly, loc. cit.
2. Binchy, 1958, pp. 117-21, and passim.

not like a feudal sovereign with the right to call out all his subjects on military expeditions on pain of renouncing their fealty and its privileges; nor did he hold a legally defined constitutional position. There was in fact no real political hierarchy controlling the whole island. Ireland was not politically one.

It is necessary to be clear about this lack of central and forceful political power in the position of high king (ard rí). But - this once clear - we can see also that there was, all the same, thought to be something special about the king of Tara. He possessed a dignity which was "expressive and symbolic" even though his powers were "undefined and almost intangible"..[1] The kingship according to another scholar was not a sign of a centralised political system for "the respect paid to the high king at Tara arose from his sacred status rather than from his political or military power."[2] In the old life of St. Patrick (Vita Tripartita) Tara is represented as the head of the pagan religion and of the druidic system;[3] and Tara was in the "Middle Province" not far from Uisnech which was supposed to mark the navel of all Ireland.[4] The king of Tara was thus at the centre

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1. MacNeill, 1935, p. 109.
2. Greene, 1954, p. 85.
3. Vit. Trip., p. 41.
4. O'Rahilly, loc. cit., p. 171.

of the land of Ireland as depicted by the poets and traditional historians. So when the idea of a splendid and famous king of all Ireland was built up it was at Tara that he was naturally situated in elaborate poem and story. Indeed even after the decline of Tara itself as a royal stronghold its dignity continued. The king of Meath was called the "king of Tara" until 1170,[1] and the traditional associations of the well-known "feast of Tara" (feis Temro) were important enough (whatever its original form) to be taken up and stressed by the later archaising "historians".[2] Furthermore, even when the king of Ireland was in fact a member of one of the northern dynasties (the N. Ui Néill), Tailtiu in Meath "in the heart of their ancestral homeland"[3] was still regarded as the site of their principal fair.

It was possible then to speak of the king of Tara in Meath as the highest, most dignified and often most powerful of all the kings of Ireland, even though, as now seems clear, he was not at the head of a politically organised administration. The unity of Ireland in fact can not be expressed in terms of political power with administrative delegation of authority between the different kings, whether the powerful overlords

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1. Curtis, 1938, p.xxi.
2. Binchy, 1958, pp. 133-5.
3. Ibid., p. 126.

of large provinces, or the little kinglets of local tuatha.

Between the various groups of túatha under their royal dynasties there were contimual shiftings and re-alignments. The general overall pattern remained the same: no capital of Ireland, no strong central government, but instead small-scale and local political rulers combining in loosely linked groups. Within this framework took place the struggles for overlordship between the different ruling lines. Some of these conflicts may be reflected in the heroic battles and wars recounted in the sagas; others are certainly chronicled in the Annals. Often enough the wars were to do with cattle; for, as O'Grady penetratingly points out,[1] to drive off a rival's cattle was a sure way of reducing his authority, in a society where position and following depended on the wealth of cattle. In Irish conditions occupation of a rival king's land was never relevant: to deprive him of cattle was sufficient.

This shifting pattern of power amongst the rival kings and their lines was constant in Irish affairs. The main picture from the fifth century onwards, however, is that, in the south, the Eoghanacht line (the descendants of Eogan) were dominent from their main seat at Cashel in Tipperary, claiming overlordship of the southern half of Ireland; and in the north,

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1. EHR, 1889, p. 300.

the Ui Néill, descended from Niall of the Nine Hostages, claimed to rule over all Ireland, though their influence was in fact more or less confined to the northern portion.

A brief account of this latter line, the Ui Néill, with special reference to their northern branch, may serve as an illustration of the distribution of kingship among the dynasties and sub-dynasties as well as exemplifying the mode of succession.[1]

Niall of the Nine Hostages (Niall Noigiallach) was one of the first historical kings of Tara and of Ireland, and one of the most famous of the Irish kings. He was said to have had his nine hostages to mark his suzerainty over nine kingdoms - 5 in Ireland, and, according to tradition, 4 in Britain. From him were descended all the kings of Ireland (with only two exceptions) who ruled over a period of nearly 6 centuries.

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1. Eochu Mugmedon 4th cent.

Fiachra — 2. Niall of the Nine Hostages. d. c.427

Nath I — 3. Loegaire d.c.462 — Eogan — Conall — Enda

4. Ailill Molt killed 482-3 — 5. Lugaid 433-512 — Muiredach

6. Muirchertach Mac Erca 512-536

To illustrate the beginning of the Ui Néill dynasty.
Numbers = order of succession in the high-kingship of Ireland.

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1. Based mainly on Hogan, 1932.

Niall was succeeded about 427 by his son Loegaire, who was the founder of the line of the "southern Ui Néill" or descendants of Niall who were kings in Tara. But the three other sons of Niall, Eogan Conall and Enda, established themselves as kings in the northern part of Ireland, over the Ulaid of Ulster, and began the dynasty of the northern Ui Néill who shared in turn with the southern line the high-kingship of Ireland. First of all, however, both branches had to establish the claim of their own lines to the kingship; for Loegaire had been succeeded by his kinsman Ailill Molt of Connacht; and if the kingship of Tara continued in Ailill's line for any longer, the dynasties descended from Niall would fall out of the succession, according to the Irish rules of succession within the derbfine or four generation group. Muirchertach Mac Erca in particular was endangered, for though he was head of the northern Ui Néill, neither his father nor his grandfather had been king of Tara; unless he could make good his claim to the kingship in virtue of being the great grandson of Niall, his line would fall out of the succession. Muirchertach combined therefore with the head of the southern Ui Néill, his uncle Eugaid, and they slew Ailill at Ocha in 483. As a result Niall's line retained the right to succeed, and, though they lost the claim to the overlordship of Connacht, they provided the kings of Ireland for nearly 6 centuries,

in alternation between the northern and the southern lines.

The main kingship of the northern Ui Néill was, in its turn, held in alternate succession by two dynasties: those descended, respectively, from Niall's two sons Eogan and Conall. Each dynasty had of course its own special sub-kingdom over which the king exercised direct authority, the line from Eogan (Cenél Eoghain) over Inis Eoghain (now Inishowen) centred at the fortress of Ailech; and Conall's descendants (Cenél Conaill) over Tír Conaill (Tirconnell). Between these two lines, then, alternated the succession to the kingship of all the realm under the over-lordship of the northern Ui Neill, which, in course of time, came to include most of central Ulster as well as Donegal. The Cenél Eoghain branch became in the end the dominant one, and their sub-kingdom developed into the over-kingdom of Ailech; by the end of the 8th century they had succeeded in excluding the Cenél Conaill line from the over-kingship. Before that the Cenél Conaill had been quite as strong as their rivals and from the 6th to the 8th century had produced both many of the kings of the northern Ui Néill and many of the kings of Ireland as well. This process can best be seen from the diagram showing the genealogy of the kings of the northern Ui Néill. From this it will be clear that one man could hold, in a sense, 3 positions at once. He could be ruler of his own sub-kingdom

or túath, overlord of all the kingdoms in Ulster under the northern Ui Néill, and, as well, king of Ireland. It was only over the first of these, of course, that he held direct authority.

The regular succession between north and south in the high-kingship was interrupted by the usurpation, as it was considered in the bardic traditions, by the strenuous Brian Boru (Borama). He was king of Munster, not of the dynasty of the Ui Néill, and thus, according to the orthodox annalists, not eligible at all for the kingship of Ireland. He gradually gained control over Leinster, then the southern half of Ireland, and finally, in 1002, was accepted as king of all Ireland - the first breach in the Ui Néill succession for nearly 6 centuries. He carried out the circuit of a high-king round all his territory, claiming hostages and tribute, celebrated the fair of Tailtiu, and, to sanctify his rule, recognised the ecclesiastical supremacy of Armagh, where he had his name inscribed as "Brian imperator Scottorum". For in the changed conditions and the new concepts of kingship as involving centralised control and solidarity, it was to the Church not to the traditional native learned orders that he turned for organised support and justification for his rule. His scribe Maelsuthain entered in the Book of Armagh both Brian's claim to be monarch of all the Irish and of the Irish spheres overseas in Scotland, and

his complementary recognition of Armagh's supremacy in the Irish Church:

> "The holy Patrick, when going to Heaven, ordained that the whole fruit of his labour as well of baptism as of church matters and alms should be paid to the apostolic city which in Irish is called Ardmacha. So have I found it among the books of the Scots (Irish) and have written it in the sight of Brian, emperor of the Scots." 1

Brian tried to organise the whole force of Ireland against the Danes, and the famous battle of Clontarf in 1014 marked the end of the Danish power in Ireland; also the end, to a large extent, of the traditional form of Irish kingship.

For after Brian we hear more and more of kings "battle-axing" their way round Ireland, exacting money, men and hostages, according, it seems, to the changed ideas of authority and the feudal influences from overseas.[2] Force and close

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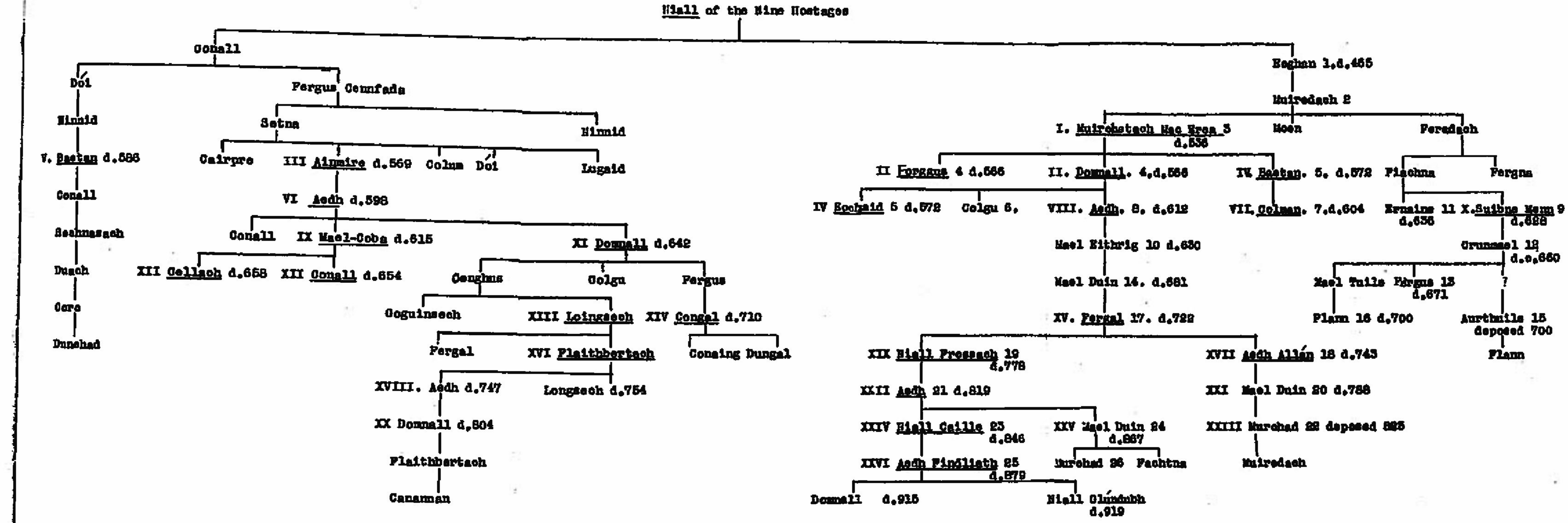
1. Vit. Trip. II, p. 336. Sanctus Patricius iens ad caelum mandavit totum fructum laboris sui tam babtismi tam causarum quam elemoisinarum deferendum esse apostolicae urbi quae Scotice nominatur Ardd macha. Sic reperi in bebliothecis Scotorum. Ego scripsi, id est Caluus Perennis (i.e. Mael-suthain) in conspectu Briain imperatoris Scotorum.
2. O'Grady EHR, 1889, passim. MacNeill suggests that Brian may well have been influenced by the exploits of Charlemagne. Before that, just as in Ireland there were many little kingdoms under the vaguely defined headship of a chief king, so in the world there were many kingdoms, and over all these a chief king whom Irish writers called the king of the world (sometimes this was the emperor at Constantinople). But then, with the reign of Charlemagne, came the new idea of the possibility of 2 kings of the world - and if 2, why not more? Brian then was going to be the emperor of the Irish: "as Basil was then supreme ruler in the east," writes MacNeill, "and Henry of Bavaria in the west, so was Brian in this island." MacNeill, 1919, p. 271; on feudal influence in Ireland, cf. MacNeill, 1935, p. 130ff.

control by the over-kings became more important: for, as Standish O'Grady put it "the genius of the age more and more imperatively demanded a new type of king, who would not be satisfied with the annual receipt of so many ships... swords... tributes, gifts, homage .... but who would intervene strongly in dynastic quarrels and make their power felt and their persons feared."[1] It was these attempts at strong supremacy by would-be feudal over-lords battle-axing their tribal communities into solidarity that led up to the Norman Invasion of Ireland in the 12th century.[2]

There were kings of all grades in pre-Conquest Ireland, little kinglets of local communities, over-lords trying to assert their authority over sub-kings against their rival dynasties, great provincial lords, and the king who claimed to rule all Ireland. All had their genealogies recorded and recited by their poets, and connected, in theory, with the famous genealogies of past kings. And all of them equally, were called by the same term - rí. Most often rí just means a king in the abstract without specification as to which kind; it was with this abstract rí that the theory of kingship was concerned.

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1. O'Grady, p. 294.
2. Loc. cit., p. 303.



Genealogy of the Kings of the Northern Ui Néill

Cenél Conaill, kings of Tirconnell, on the left.
Cenél Eoghain, kings of Ailech on the right.
Roman numerals - order of succession in kingship of N. Ui Néill
Arabic numerals - .....Ailech.
Underlined - also kings of Ireland.
(adapted from Hogan 1932 Appendix III)

THE GUARDIANS OF THE KING'S AUTHORITY: POETS SEERS AND MEN OF ART.

I.

We must now consider what is perhaps the most characteristic feature of early Irish society, a feature which it is necessary to understand if we are to grasp the nature of Irish kingship. Between the two main grades of noble and commoner, but with particularly close connexion with the nobility, came the order of the aes dána, the Irish "men of art".

Reference has frequently been made to the "national literary order" of Ireland, or to the "national learned class" as if to a guild of professional intellectuals. But, although dán has also the specialised meaning of "the poetic faculty" or "the art of poetry", it is basically used of skill in any art or science: it can mean a "gift" in the material sense, as well as a craft or art.[1] So among the aes dána, the men of art, were included those of many arts and professions, not

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1. sv. dán in RIA dictionary.

just those associated with the more literary skills. Thus we hear of harpers, jugglers, shoe-makers, braziers, engravers, chain-makers, chess players, charioteers: all these were distinguished, by virtue of their art, from the ordinary farmers, tillers of the land or cattle herders. The highest and most important in this class were the carpenters (saír), smiths (gobainn), doctors (legi), brehons or jurists (breithemain), and, above all, the historians (senchaidi) and poets (filid). It is in this category too that the druids are placed in the law tracts.[1]

Now this inclusion of the druis is most illuminating. For though the actual power and organisation of the druids was done away with by the introduction of Christianity in the 4th-5th centuries and "druid" came to mean little more than "magician" or "wizard", what could be called the "druidic tradition" did continue: the basic ideas associated with the druids were expressed in the ideas and customs of their later representatives, the poets or seers, the historians and the brehons of Ireland.[2]

The central point in this "druidic tradition" was the power that was attached to art and knowledge. This is

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1. Loc. cit.; cf. AL, V, 90.
2. On continuity e.g. Plummer V. SS. H. 1910, I, clx-clxi; MacNeill, 1935, pp. 81-3; Carney in Dillon, 1954, p. 69; Sjoestedt, p. xvii.

expressed in some of the stories of the Mythological Cycle, the group of tales that are concerned with the various peoples who in turn were said to have invaded and peopled Ireland. In these the Tuatha Dé Danann (the people of the goddess Dana or Danu) were regarded as the special originators of the druidic knowledge: "every darkness of art, and every clearness of reading, and every craft of cunning that is in Ireland, they are of the Tuatha Dé Danann by origin; and though the Faith came into Ireland, those arts were not abolished, for they are good".[1] Those who were descended from the Tuatha Dé were said to be especially skilled in music, magic and medicine.[2] The power of art is brought out in particular in the story of the mythical battle of Moytura (Mag Tuired) between the Tuatha Dé Danann, and their enemies the Fomorians, who represented in opposition the forces of disorder and chaos.[3] The Tuatha Dé call on the help of all their men of art against the enemy. Their leader is Lug, Samil Dánach (i.e. possessing many arts at the same time), who had been admitted to their feast and accepted as leader because "he was a sage in every art".[4]

All the wizards (druids), leeches, smiths, brehons and other craftsmen are summoned to help, and all promise their various

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1. LG, 371.
2. Genealogical Tracts, A 39.
3. Sjoestedt, 1949, pp.5-6; for description of battle, see Cath Maige Turedh: RC 12, 1891.
4. Suí Cach dáno é: op. cit. 71.

help against the Fomorians; the smiths make new weapons, the leeches cure the wounded by their magical arts, the druids use their powers over fire and over the loughs and mountains, the poet Cairpre satirises and shames them "through the strength of my art"[1] so that they will not resist. Finally Lug using his druidic art kills the leader of the enemy, Balor, and the Tuatha Dé Danann are victorious.

Here then, in one of the most fundamental of the Irish mythical stories, is a representation of the triumph of all the crafts, of the "strength of art" under the leadership of Lug who unites in himself all the arts "at the same time". The conjunction of several skills in one person is not uncommon in Irish sagas elsewhere too; crafts which we should consider as very different are attributed to one and the same person, as with, for example, Sithchenn the smith who dwelt in Tara, "a wise man and a wondrous prophet ... a wizard".[2] This assimilation of the different arts and the power that came from them comes out even more clearly in the description of Amairgin as at once poet, druid and judge. He was poet of the last of the mythical invaders of Ireland, and as he set his right foot on the shore of Ireland, he sang his famous song which expresses

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1. Trie bricht mo dam-sa: op. cit. 115.
2. AIT, p.509; cf. smith Olc Acha who was also a prophet and foretold the birth of Cormac: Dillon, 1946, p. 39; on assimilation of different arts (esp. poet, historian, druid and prophet) MacAirt, Eriu 18. 1958.

best of all the power of the druid or sorcerer endowed with the art of poetry and satire.

> I am the wind on the sea.
> I am a wave of ocean.
> I am the roar of the sea.
> I am a powerful ox.
> I am a hawk on a cliff.
> I am a dewdrop in sunshine...
> I am the strength of art...
> Who clears the stony place of the mountain?
> What the place in which the setting of the sun lies?
> Who has sought death seven times without fear?
> Who names the waterfalls?
> What man, what god forges weapons in a fort?
> In a fort that nourishes satirists?
> Who chants a petition, divides the Ogam letters?
> A wise chanter. (or satirist) [1]

This theme of skill, knowledge and, from them, power is a constant one in Irish myth and saga. "I am the strength of art" sings the poet and druid Amairgin. The same attitude is implicit in the institution of the order of the aes dána, for the mythical representation of the men of art was not unrelated to the actual social organisation. All the aes dána partook in this knowledge and art, for they all, more or less, inherited the druidic knowledge, whether jewellers, chess players, poets or judges. Their skill itself gave them special insight and knowledge for this was not just something which pertained only to the more intellectual professions like history or law. Rather all skills were up to a point

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1. Qu. Sjoestedt, p. 12, from LG, Poem LXIX, (=AIT, p. 21); also trans., MacNeill; Celtic Religion, p. 21.

assimilated, and all involved knowledge and art. Ifor Williams, in speaking of the similarities between early Irish and Welsh poetry, describes well this unity in the concept of art and knowledge -

> "he (the poet) sees and then sings, and his song has form, shape, the beauty of the shaped thing: it is not a formless, shapeless chunk of wood, but a carving, a piece of sculpture";

and the Welsh bards, he adds, commonly called themselves "the carpenters of song".[1]

The high position of the men of art is manifested in their place in the Irish hierarchy: they were reckoned as belonging to the privileged class (nemed) and had their own rate of honour price, often a high one though it varied within the class. The nemed grade included "the practisers of every art in general";[2] another text in the laws mentions "the carpenters, smiths, braziers, gold-smiths, doctors, brehons, druids and the people of every art".[3] These were all relatively low ranking (daer-nemed) as compared to the poets, who with (later) the bishops were reckoned as of high rank (saer-nemed): the poet was graded as higher than the bard, or mere reciter, and his honour price was twice that of the

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1. Ifor Williams, 1944, p. 7.
2. AL, V, 15.
3. AL, V, 91.

bard.[1] The honour price of an ollam or chief poet was equal to that of a local king, and, in the laws, poets (and bishops) are constantly rated with kings: their "inviolable precincts" are of comparable size, they are all due the best part from the meat at a feast, and "the two orders" of religion and learning are the only exceptions to the rule that "the king excels all in testimony" for they alone are "of equal rank". It was considered difficult to lay a bond or suretyship on "king or poet or church, for it is (a case of) higher rank".[2] The poet's high position was further consolidated by the great power he derived from his ability to "satirise" his enemies - a practice which will be explained shortly - and this power was recognised and controlled even in the laws. The importance of the aes dána in general and the poet above all is also connected with the high value attached in Irish law to precedent; for many of these precedents were part of the knowledge of poet or historian, and the relevance of this poetic knowledge to the law of Ireland serves to bring out the close connection between the state of affairs described, or at least prescribed, in the laws and the concepts implied in the mythical writings. The importance and position of the men of art, particularly the poets, is clear in both. At

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1. Laws loc. cit.; HKS, p. 66; Knott, 1957, p.7.
2. AL. V. 103; IV. 229; I. 49; I. 79; Eriu 13, 1942, p. 31, 6; cf. p. 224.

the great gathering where, in tradition, St. Patrick was finally welcomed by the Irish people, before him were assembled all the men of art in Ireland, "and each of them exhibited his art before Patrick, in the presence of every chief in Erin."[1]

II.

There was a particularly close bond between the poets, the historians and the brehons (lawyers). "Until Patrick came" according to the Senchus Mor, "only three classes were permitted to speak in public in Erin, viz, a Chronicler, to relate events and tell stories; a Poet to eulogise and satirise; a Brehon, to pass sentence from the precedents and commentaries".[2] Not only were these three professions held in similar honour for their knowledge, but they were all endowed with a part in the druidic powers of insight, as if seers or prophets. They were all part of one tradition, the "druidic tradition".

The relationship between poetry and law was very intimate.[3] The earliest records of Irish law are in verse, and there is a tradition that at one time poet and lawyer were one, but the judgments given by the poets were so obscure that the

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1. AL. I. 15.
2. AL. I. 19.
3. On law and poetry: Binchy, 1943; in Dillon, 1959, p. 38, MacAirt, 1958, pp. 139-40.

people complained and they were deprived of the right to judge by king Conor Mac Nessa, and a new class of brehons created instead.[1] According to the later Irish story the old Irish law, including the great Senchus Mor, which was later written down at the command of Patrick, had been preserved before that by "the joint memory of the elders, the transmission from ear to ear, and the chanting of the poets". This union of the old and new ways when the old laws were written down is symbolised in the assertion that it was compiled by three kings, three bishops (one of them Patrick) and three poets or representatives of the native learning: "these were the nine pillars of the Senchus Mór". Dubhthach, the royal poet of Ireland, exhibited to Patrick "the judgments and all the poetry of Erin, and every law which prevailed among the men of Erin, through the law of nature, and the law of the seers, and in the judgments of the island of Erin, and in the poets".[2] Patrick blessed the old law, with its few Christian innovations, and Dubhthach "put a thread of poetry round it for Patrick".[3] In this tradition, then, poetry and law are clearly closely assimilated to each other.

Furthermore the learned lore that the jurist had to know to interpret the law according to proper precedent could be

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1. AL. I. 18.
2. AL. I. 31; 5; 17.
3. AL. I. 25.

exactly the same as that kept by poet and historian - the stories of Cormac, for example, or of Fergus mac Leti are both found in the laws, and the Irish legal records abound in references to the ancient mythology.[1] And besides their qualities of insight and knowledge, both brehons and poets shared the druidic function of reconciliation between contending peoples or individuals which later belonged strictly to the brehon as arbiter. This is expressed in a description in one saga of the famous poet and historian, Sencha the Great.

> "A sedate, grey-haired man ... a fair bright garment about him, with borders of all-white silver. A beautiful white shirt next to the surface of his skin; a white-silver belt around his waist; ... the sweetness of melody in his voice ... judicial and sage the description and the person whose description it is... the most eloquent man of the men of earth, and the peace-maker of the hosts of the Ulstermen. The men of the world, from the rising to the setting, he would pacify with his three fair words."[2]

III.

The Irish filid above all inherited the functions and powers of the druids when the impact of Christianity crushed the earlier druidic schools and organsation. These were the

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1. Binchy, in Dillon, 1959, pp. 38-9.
2. AIT. p. 230.

"poets" who took over from the druids the qualities of insight, magic, divination, teaching, and prophecy.

Fili is commonly translated as "poet" and I shall be following this regular usage here. Literally, however, fili (pl. filid; M. Ir. file) originally meant a "seer". The word is cognate with the Welsh gweled, to see, and gweledydd, a seer.[1] The idea that one of the characteristics of the poet was his insight is reinforced by two other terms closely associated with fili. Drui (druid) is often in the literature used interchangeably with fili as having practically the same meaning. And drui has, by some at least, been connected with the Indo-European root (*weid-) which gives, among others, the Latin videre, and Greek οἶδα to see or know.[2] Faith too is the Irish for both a prophet and a poet; it is cognate not only with Latin vates (seer) and vaticinor (foretell, sing, and rave), but also with Welsh gwawd (prophetic verse, later satire or ridicule) and old English wōp (sound, melody, song) and wōd (possessed, mad).[3]

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1. Williams, 1944, p. 7; Buck, IE dictionary sv. poet.; cf. the famous German prophetess Veleda (Tacitus Germania 8).
2. Buck, 22. 18 on priest; used interchangeably with poet: Knott, 1957, pp. 7-8.
3. Williams loc. cit.; cf. also "wit", "wise". Buck, 18.67 on poet; Williams loc. cit.; used interchangeably with poet: Murphy, 1940, p. 200; cf. also O.N. óthr (poetry, eloquence) and prob. A.S. Woden, O.N. Othinn: Chadwick, 1952, p. 13.

Altogether the associations with prophecy, insight, inspired song are striking in the case of the poets of Ireland. Before Patrick "prophecy had governed ... and the poets who had the gift of prophecy".[1] Indeed there is scarcely any distinction between poets, seers and soothsayers in Ireland, and the filid had the power of prophecy, mystic vision and divination. "The poet was the man who saw ... and was a seer .. he sees and then sings", as Ifor Williams writes. And, as so often, seeing is associated with the form or shape of others - again the idea seems to be that of the poet carving out shape from chaos, and creating form through his insight.[2] This faculty of insight and creative power gave control over the matter, before formless, that he saw.

Such an attitude is not perhaps surprising. We know from the work of N.K. Chadwick in particular how widespread are the ideas both of the poet as seer and prophet, with insight into past, present and future alike, and of the high social position given to the poet - the "lofty status accorded to those who can compose and chant poetry which will put men into communion with the spirit world and reveal things which are past, and present and to come". As often, it is not just

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1. AL. III. 31.
2. Williams, loc. cit.; cf. Buck, 15.51 on see and the common connection between sight and form (e.g. Gk. εἶδος , Latin species; Irish cruth, form, and creth, poetry).

knowledge of the <u>future</u> that is the seer's concern, but also control and insight into the <u>present</u> - indeed N.K. Chadwick thinks that among non-literate people in general in the sphere of "revelation", "perhaps knowledge of the present plays the most important part"[1]. There is, then, no need to be surprised or puzzled by the powers of the Irish poet. What <u>is</u> interesting however in the case of Ireland is the very great stress laid on this aspect of poetry; the mantic associations in Celtic literature, especially Irish literature, are, according to Nora Chadwick, particularly rich and striking, unparallelled even by the Norse. Besides this, in Ireland the power of the poet was explicitly recognised, for there were the institutions of the clear-cut grade of the <u>aes dána</u>, the defined position of the <u>filid</u>, and the legal recognition and control of the power of poetry.[2]

So much for the ideas associated in Ireland with poetry. Their further significance in Irish society will be partly explored later. In the meantime we must consider the importance of the poets as a national order of all Ireland.

The order of poets, with their schools and organisation,

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1. Chadwick, 1952, p.39; 41; 5 and <u>passim</u>; on the power of poetry and knowledge cf. Sjoestedt, 1949, p. 78f; Knoch ZCP 23, 1942, <u>passim</u>, on the power of knowledge in Irish gnomic literature, the idea <u>Wissen ist Macht</u>. cf. below on praise and satire.
2. Below on satire.

may well have descended from that of the druids. These druids were said to have had a systematic order throughout Ireland, with their headquarters at Tara, "the centre of Irish religion and druidery" (cend idlachta 7 druidechta na h-Eirenn).[1] Certainly we hear of a "chief druid" and, later, of a "first poet"; at any rate, whatever may actually have been the case, the later order of <u>filid</u> was certainly sometimes represented as being a closely organised even hierarchical order, with, in some accounts, a chief poet of each province, and of all Ireland. Thus, for example, in one story the <u>ollam</u> or chief poet of Ireland is spoken of: only after the death of the previous holder, in this account, could a <u>fili</u> become <u>ollam</u> in his place, and this situation results in a fierce contest in riddling utterance and obscure poetic expression between the two claimants for the office, Nede and Ferchertne. They weave ambiguities about their own names - the name of Ferchertne is hinted at as being the "inquiry of science, the weft of art, the casket of poetry" - and about their power, like, for example, Nede's power of satire which causes "reddening a countenance, piercing flesh". Finally Nede acknowledges his rival as his superior and worthy to be chief poet of all Ireland, for "I know that Ferchertne is a great poet and prophet". At other times however, <u>ollam</u> is merely

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1. Vit. Trip. 40; on druids in general see Kendrick, 1927; MacNeill, 1935, pp. 81-2; Vendryes, 1948.

used as a title for any learned poet; and the idea of any systematic organisation all through Ireland was probably more an idealisation of how the poets conceived their order to be in theory, than representing any really tight-knit control.[1]

The links in the poetic hierarchy may not have been so clear-cut as they are sometimes represented. But the high status of the fíli throughout Ireland is always evident. An ollam, as has already been mentioned, was equal in honour to the king of one territory; the poet took an important part in the inauguration of the king, and his anger was feared by all, including the king.

What is more, the position of the poet was not confined to his place in just one túath. Admittedly a poet often had a particular place at the court of one lord, to whom he may, especially in later times, have been hereditarily attached; and to him he owed special duties of praise and composition. But he was not just permanently and exclusively attached to the household of a single chief.[2] Ideally he could travel through all Ireland. In the literature, poets are often described as travelling even to Britain and the Isle of Man to learn

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1. Vendryes, loc. cit; p. 300f; Knott, 1922, p. xli; HKS. p. 66f; Chadwicks, 1932, I. p. 602f. Colloquy of the 2 sages: RC. 26 1905.
2. Knott, 1922, p. xli; 1957, p. 8; HKS. p. 68.

divination or poetry, or as journeying, perhaps with a company of followers, around the country of Ireland, threatening those who refused them abundant hospitality with their satires. The poet could be received everywhere: he was equipped with a skill which was everywhere recognised and acceptable and which did not tie him to one tuath, for he could live by his craft and the gifts he received as payment for his poetry. He could impose his wishes in the different provinces of Ireland through people's fear of his anger. And, from his position as peace-maker, not exclusively identified with only one tuath, he could be welcomed anywhere in Ireland. Even in time of war he was considered in the mythical theory to have safe conduct: in the famous Táin Bó Cúalgne during the war over the bull of Cooley, the hero Conall Cearnach was on duty on the borders of Ulster

> "for it was to him that it fell to defend the province that day. For every battle champion of the Ulstermen had to spend his day at Sliabh Fuaid to give protection to anyone who might come with poetry or to fight with a man, so that nobody would go to Eamhain Macha without being observed".[1]

So those who "came with poetry" could travel freely, and in this were in vivid contrast to the other classes of society, closely associated with their own tuatha. Unlike others, the poet had an assured social position wherever in Ireland he went.

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1. Quoted Greene, 1954, pp. 84-5; TBC. (Dunn), p. 65.

This position was further fortified by the special privileges and powers of the poets. Besides their safe conduct in time of war, the poets' possessions were regarded as safe from plunder; and even in much later times this immunity of poets - and clerics - was still recognised. In a 15th century elegy there is reference to the special fortune of the poet's possessions amidst the general disaster "twice have I seen the Plains of the Boyle - such is the world - left by him without a single cow save that of a cleric or poet".[1] In addition to his general immunity, the poet's power gave him standing in all <u>túatha</u>. It was felt as a specially great dishonour, danger indeed, to keep a poet fasting and to kill a poet might result in the murderers' death - "that is a poet's miracle".[2] The poet had always the possibility of refusing his praise - a strong sanction - or threatening satire. Besides this was the special and rather odd prerogative which

> "the <u>filid</u> exercise in regard to anyone who refuses them. Namely he rubs the lobe of the ear between both of his fingers, and regards the person to whom he performs the prerogative".[3]

So, in addition to his special safe conduct, the poet, with this custom of "rubbing the earlap", and the more commonly used power of satire, had means of coercion wherever he was.

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1. Knott, 1922, p. xxxiii; Binchy, 1954, p. 64.
2. AU. 1024; cf. An. Inisf. 1119.2. after description of murder of a poet: "the curse of God on those who did the deed".
3. <u>Brimon smetrach</u> in Corm. Gloss.; V. Hull in ZCP. 21, 1939, p. 324.

The national character of the class of poets was further marked by the existence of a special learned language, peculiar to the learned classes.[1] Just as much of the legal writing seems to be not only technical but also often deliberately obscure, so the specialised language of the poets may have been to some extent removed from that of the ordinary people - but, to that very extent, common to the whole class of poets throughout Ireland. This specialised knowledge of the poetic order is represented in the story that the people at one time actually complained about the obscurity of the learned language, and it was as a result of this that the right of jurisdiction was removed from the filid. Moreover it was the poets who, as learned men, knew the traditional lore connected with the various social gatherings and festivals, and with the famous places all through Ireland - the places they passed through or heard of in their travels; they knew too the history attached to the different parts of Ireland and the sanctuaries where, in time of war, people could gather for safety. So it was the knowledge held by the poets of the poetic language, of legal precedent, myth, history and geography, that made social life in a wider context possible through all the different túatha of Ireland.

The class of the "men of art", with special emphasis on

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1. Binchy, 1943, pp. 209-10.

the *filid*, was a class like any other - like that of the nobles or of the commoners. But with the craftsmen there was special stress laid on the acquired *learning*. Certainly there was a tendency for poetry to be hereditary, and birth was part of the qualification. But a poet was *made* not just born. Thus we hear of the famous national schools of poetry where the poets learnt not only the esoteric and occult powers of insight and divination, but also, in close connexion with these, the objective learning of the Irish traditions - historical, mythical, or political: they must know about the *dindshenchus*, or history of places, about the privileges and prohibitions of kings, tributes and stipends, contracts good and bad, as well as language and versification, and mastery over the famous sagas and stories of Ireland.[1]

The poet's training was long and rigorous.[2] Up to twelve years might be spent in the poetic schools, and the poet would progress through the seven grades that were distinguished, with clear-cut promotion between each. Each grade had a specific number of sagas associated with it which the aspiring poet had to master, until he finally reached the top grade, of master poet or *ollam*. There are detailed lists of the knowledge

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1. Chadwick, 1952, pp. 42-3; Knott, 1957, p.43; MacAirt, 1958, p. 152.
2. Training for 7-12 years: Dillon, 1948, p. 73,149; MMS. p. 67; Bergin, 1915.

necessary for each grade, but there is no clear early description of these schools (unless we include Bede's famous reference to the teachers of Ireland in the 7th century, who, when travellers arrived, "welcomed all kindly, and, without asking for any payment, provided them with books and instructors."[1]) However the description of a bardic school of the early 18th century in the Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde is usually taken to represent at least to some extent the practice of earlier times. Here there is mention of the poet's custom of composing in the dark, a custom which recalls the druidic practice of divination and the vision of the seer. The poet's composing took place, according to the account, in a darkened hut in some secluded place, with

> "no windows to let in the day, nor any light at all us'd but that of candles, and these brought in at a proper season only. ... A subject having been given over night, they work'd it apart each by himself upon his own bed, the whole next day in the dark, till at a certain hour in the night, lights being brought in, they committed it to writing."

The members of the schools were well entertained by those who lived nearby,

> "nor was the people satisfied with affording this hospitality alone; they sent in turns every week from far and near liquors and all manner of provision towards the subsistence of the academy, so that the chief poet was at little or no charges, but on the contrary, got very well by it." [2]

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1. Bede, HE. III. 27.
2. Quoted Bergin, 1913, pp. 156-7.

In the earlier period many of these schools of traditional learning were famous all through Ireland, and the national aspect of the poetic order was very marked.[1] Indeed, as David Greene writes "the importance of this learned professional class in early Ireland cannot be over-estimated, for, in the absence of towns or any centralised political system, they were the only national institution."[2] It is not surprising, then, that their position and influence should have continued even after the Norman Conquest of Ireland. Indeed even the English were aware of their power though not, perhaps, of its significance: they thought it worth while for example to try to enlist the services of the later bards against their own Irish patrons, and, as well, took special punitive measures against the Irish literati as "rebels, vagabonds, rimers, Irish harpers, bards and other malefactors";[3] the English in Ireland in the 14th century were forbidden to receive any of the Irish minstrels who visited them or any of the other Irish "tympanours, pipers, story-tellers, babblers, rhymers, harpers".[4] The riches and powers of the poetic tradition continued from the early period right up to the 17th century. In the 9th century Triads the three coffers "whose depth is not known" are "the

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1. Kenney, p. 6; MacNeill, 1935, pp. 82-3.
2. Greene, 1954, p. 85.
3. Quiggin, 1911, p. 91. O'Rahilly, 1922, p. 86.
4. Irish Statutes, I, p. 447 (1366 A.D.).

coffer of a chieftain, of the Church, and of a privileged poet".[1] And the very same theme is evident in the 17th century description by Thomas Smith of Dublin, a description which we can take as "on the whole accurate".[2] It exemplifies in addition to the power of the poets the traditional close connexion between poetry, prophecy, history and law. Smith is writing of the "Rimers in Ireland".

> "The firste of them is calleid the Brehounde, which in English is calleid the Judge ... The second sourte is the Shankee, which is to say in English the Petigrer (i.e. pedigreer) ... the thirde sorte is called the aesdan (i.e. aes dána), which is to saye in English the bards or the riming septces .... The fourth sort of Rymers is called fillis (i.e. filid), which is to saye in English a poete. Theis men have great store of cattell and use all the trades of the others with an adicion of prophecies".

The tradition and position, then, of the poetic order were both strong and long-lasting. Like the druids whose heirs they were the poets were conceived of as having an organisation all through Ireland ideally under the leadership of a chief poet. Like the druids too, they had national schools where their art was learnt, and they inherited the special privileges and functions of the druids. Thus, like the druids,[3] they were, ideally, men of peace who by their art could reconcile the warring sides, and even when they

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1. TR. 255.
2. Quoted in Knott, 1957, p. 9.
3. Cf. druidic practice of drawing a line between 2 contending parties, and the "druidic fence".

were inciting the king to his own proper function of making war, or praising his exploits and glory, the proper duty of the poets was not the military defence of their own tuatha, but what Eleanor Knott calls "the convention,, of inter-tribal concord"[1] agreed on by the poets. They knew the history and traditions of all Ireland, the learned language, the stories of the different invaders and the genealogies and rights of the kings, and they could travel round the country making "visitations" to the various courts and provinces where they must be entertained. It was the poets, above all, who knew the duties of the king, who could advise and guide him, and could support him by their praises or lower him by their satires. To understand therefore the significance of the national order of poets, we must now also consider the part they took in the life of their own particular tuath or at the court of the king, and the importance, in Irish society, of the poet's function of praise and satire.

IV.

Having seen the national attributes of the poets of Ireland and the way in which they were conceived of as, ideally, a mark of the unity of the whole island through their national

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1. Knott, 1922, p. xlvi.

learning and travel, we can now turn to their social and political functions within the túath and at the court of the king there. In brief they were concerned with providing the knowledge of what was necessary to maintain social order, and with the expression of praise and of blame.

Without a poet, we are told in an Old Irish tract on the Privileges and Responsibilities of Poets, a túath is not a proper túath;[1] and the poet had important duties in the túath to which he primarily belonged and in which he might have his hereditary lands.[2] The chief poet at the king's court had special powers and privileges: like the king he was exempt from certain bonds and accusations, his own "precinct" was inviolable, and, as being of comparable rank with the king, he had a corresponding position and honour-price.[3] In virtue of this position he took a prominent part in the inauguration of the king, and was the one who, above all others, knew the traditional privileges and duties of the king. The conventional "instructions of kings", for example, usually attributed to some famous poet or jurist of antiquity, had to be read or recited to the king at his installation by the poet, and included a necessary part of the poet's learning. Moreover it

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1. Ériu 13, 1942, 31.
2. Knott, 1922, p. xli.
3. Loc. cit.; AL. IV. 229; cf. AL. V. 103; I. 79.

was the poet who had to know and remember the precise details of what tributes and duties were due from sub-kings to overlords, what privileges of cattle or gifts had to be given in return, and what boundaries were assigned to each king. Correct observance of these institutions, often complex and detailed, was necessary for the king if he was to be a true king and retain his authority - the poet was the expert who had mastered this knowledge and transmitted it to the king. It was necessary for both his own position as king, and the poet's as an honoured member of society, that these rights should be known and observed. After a list of the tributes due to the king of Ailech in Ulster, the section is brought to its conclusion:

> These are the tributes of the king of Ailech
> No one is learned who does not well know them
> No king is entitled to reign or rule
> Who does not maintain his right. [1]

The Long Book of Right of the kings in Ireland ends by insisting that "no poet is entitled to the visitation of a province in Ireland who does not know the tribute and stipend of that province." [2] Similarly it was considered essential for the well-being of both king and kingdom that the king should observe his geasa (or taboos), for "it is certain of the kings of Ireland, if they avoided their geasa and obtained their

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1. BR. (O'Donovan, 1847), p. 127.
2. Ibid., p. 235.

prescriptions, that they would suffer neither misfortune nor disturbance, and neither plague nor pestilence would come in their reign". It is not, therefore, surprising that this tract on the gessa should continue "the poet or historian who does not know the lucky things and prohibitions of these kings is not entitled to visitation or reward".[1] The poet then possessed the expert knowledge through which alone the king's reign was possible and the presence of a poet was a necessary part of the order of every túath.

He was also in control of certain specialised skills. For one thing, the poets had, like the druids before them, special responsibility in education. Their learning in general covered the main fields of instruction, and the poetic schools were famous. Besides these the custom of fosterage sometimes took the form of a learned man becoming the foster father of the child he educated. It was in this way, for example, that the famous king of Ireland in the 5th century, Niall of the Nine Hostages was educated and fostered by the poet, Torna Eigeas.[2]

As well, the poets shared with the druids the power of divination[3] by certain special procedures. This could be exercised about particular questions, and was practised by the

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1. Taboos: Dillon, 1951, p. 25.
2. O'Curry, MC. II. 1873, p. 61; Chadwicks, 1932, I, p.604.
3. Knott, 1957, pp.7-8; Murphy, 1940; Chadwick, 1952, p. 42.

poet in his capacity of seer and prophet. In the story of the bull of Cooley - to give an example from one of the sagas - the queen, Medb, is made to ask Fedelm, the poetess (banfhile), for a prediction about her plans for battle. And in the 9th century Glossary of Cormac there is a description of a species of divination practised by the filid and the druids. This was called imbas forosnai or "manifestation that enlightens": it "discovers what thing soever the poet likes and which he desires to reveal". The fili chews a piece of flesh, chants certain incantations, and sleeps: "men are watching him that he may not turn over and that no one may disturb him. And then is revealed to him that for which he was (engaged) till the end of 3 days and nights..."[1] This specialised ritual was said to have been forbidden by Patrick as contrary to Christian practice. But the tradition that it was once so is illuminating as to the function of the poet as seer; and in the Triads, compiled probably in the 9th century, the "three things that constitute a poet" include this process of imbas forosnai: the other two mentioned are obscure: teinm laeda (prophetic marrow chewing?) and dichetal di chennaib (improvisation?).[2]

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1. Chadwick: Imbas Forosnai, Scottish Gaelic Studies 4. 1935, pp. 98-9.
2. TR. 123.

At any rate the mantic powers of the poet seem to have continued to be associated with the office of poet as <u>advisor</u> to the king. The king was expected to consult his poet(s) about important ventures or problems. A king should take the advice of his counsellors - "a king without counsel" is "hateful to God" - and consult the learned men around him, for he should be "a man of enquiring after knowledge".[1] This again is clearly part of the poet's function as the expert in all knowledge of what was necessary for the king's true rule over his people according to the correct precedents - the <u>fili</u> above all was in a position to advise the king.

Again, another duty of the poet to his own king was to <u>record</u> in his verses events in the king's reign. In the Marquis of Clanricarde's description, part of which was quoted above, he continues his account by explaining that

> "every professor or chief poet was dependent on some prince or great lord that had endowed his tribe, and he was under strict ties to him and family, as to record in good metre his marriages, births and deaths, acquisitions made in war and peace .... and to offer an elegy on the decease of the said lord."[2]

The importance of this function of the poet in the personal and non-centralised conditions of the local <u>túath</u> is obvious. The births, marriages and deaths of noble and royal families

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1. Ériu, 5. 141; CG (Binchy) 528; on king's duty to take advice see references in Smith, 1927, p. 441; and below Chapter V, 3.
2. Quoted Bergin, 1913, p. 157.

were kept in memory by the verses and record of the poets, and in a mainly non-literate society with a keen interest in genealogy this was an essential part of social and political life. Moreover in the case of the royal families this might have crucial political implications, for in the system of succession to the kingship, described in the last chapter, a man's claim to be king might rest on the fact that his great grandfather had been king many years before; in any cases of dispute, it was the poet by his specialised knowledge who could decide the issue.

The poet then had real importance in the social and political life of the <u>túath</u> to which he was primarily attached; his knowledge and skill were essential. The <u>filid</u> had special knowledge of the historical and mythical precedent considered so important in Irish society, as if still present and powerful. In conjunction with the brehons with which they had such intimate connexions, the <u>filid</u> had insight into law also and legal precedent. In return for his special privileges the poet had to carry out his duties of educating, advising, recording and divining for the king and people. These he must exercise, for no honour price or compensation, we are told in the tract on poets, would be due for "any <u>fili</u> who does not exhibit his art before the <u>tuath</u>".[1]

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1. Ériu, 13, 1942. p. 17.

V.

The most important part of the poets' rights and duties remain still to be considered - those to do with the expression of praise and blame. "Praise and blame ..... from the beginning these have been the keynotes of Celtic poetry."[1]

The poets could eulogise a good king, or satirise a bad one; they knew the paradeigmatic stories of the past by reference to which a king's claim to praise or blame could be assessed. But before this can be fully discussed we must digress briefly to consider a point of chronology in connexion with the detailed distribution of function within the learned order.

Filid, bards, brehons, historians, druids, and, less important the craftsman, smiths, carpenters, and so on, all belonged in Irish concept to the category that I have labelled as the "druidic" tradition. The first group of these, the learned classes, were all closely connected in thought, with the insight of druidical knowledge, and many of these words can be used interchangeably. However there was also, in pre-Christian times, a strict hierarchy and division of function according to the schematic categories of the law. Thus the

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1. Meyer, 1908, p. 6.

filid seem to have ranked the highest (saer-nemed), whereas the druids were separated off and were counted as lower in grade (daer-nemed) with smiths and braziers. A distinction was also made between the fili, strictly the composer of poetry, with great power and prestige, and the bard who was merely the reciter (or perhaps versifier on a lower level). This three-fold division, of poet, druid, bard, is reminiscent - as has often been pointed out - of the tripartite structure in Gaul at the time of the Roman Conquest: the division was into druids, vates (cognate with Irish faith, a synonym of fili), and bards. However the exact correspondence between the Irish and the Gallic sub-divisions is far from clear and in any case in Ireland the filid seem in practice to have been very close to the other members of the learned professions. What appears to have happened in Ireland, is that with the advent of Christianity the old druidism as a religious and prophetic system was smashed, and, at the same time, some of the more religious powers of the druids and filid were lost in favour of the clerics. The druids appear in the later literature as merely magicians and wizards; whereas the filid, though they lost some of their specific powers, may on the other hand have taken over some of the functions of the earlier bards, insofar as these were separate from the filid's duties; the later poets are not infrequently referred to as "bards".

At any rate, whatever the details of the development, we do hear of the *filid* telling stories as well as knowing them; a repertory of stories was one of the qualifications of a *fili*.[1]

Telling of stories and sagas was, then, one of the concerns of the poet. Sometimes too they were expected to recite on the hills of assembly and exhibit and display their knowledge. It was a part of the obligations of a king to have story telling in his court; over the whole of the winter season, in one account, from November 1st to the beginning of the summer half in May, the king was told a saga every night by the *fili* Forgall;[2] and Eleanor Knott quotes a vivid description, for a later period, of what she calls the "post-prandial relaxation of the Irish noblemen": "Their royal countenances flushed and glowing as they hearken to verses and poetic lays on their ancestors and forbears, eloquently uttered by declaimers and distinguished bards".[3] Here the recitation of the *fili* has a political reference rather like that given explicitly for the very similar duties of the historian or antiquary (senchaid):

> For the antiquary ought to declare and testify, prove and certify the ancient history and family nobility of the princes and monarchs, by specifying their august and noble ancestors; for there are two

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1. For discussion of this problem see e.g. Murphy, 1940; Knott, 1957, pp. 7-8. MacAirt, 1958, p. 139; Chadwicks, I. 1932, pp. 607-14.
2. Voy. Bran, I, 45f.
3. Knott, 1922, p.xl.

reasons for which it is necessary to recount the noble surnames of the good families .... to unite and to connect these families by their veneration for the reigns of the kings who preceded them, and to remind the tribes sprung from those kings of their friendship, by rehearsing their famous stories after them.[1]

The stories and history told by the poet were not - it is clear - just for entertainment, but at once an exposition of the place of nobles and kings from a genealogical point of view, just as might have been done in a law case, and also an illustration from the heroic tales of the background and possible exploits of their own patrons. ("The lay parent of hagiographical literature" as Seán MacAirt calls it).[2] Both these are connected with the poet's praise of his patron; for eulogy and illustration of his ancestors was a way, indirectly, of praising him and demonstrating his place in history.

Eulogy, the specifically praise poetry, was common from very early times, and the same themes recur consistently from about the 6th century right up to the panegyrics of the court bards of the 16th century. They celebrate the generosity, beauty and prowess of their patrons, and the effect on nature of the just rule of the king.[3]

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1. Quoted MacAirt, 1958, p. 150; *sanchaid* very close to the poet, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
2. MacAirt, p. 150.
3. Quiggin, 1911, p. 99f; Greene, 1954, p. 23; Meyer, 1908, p. 6.

One of the oldest complete panegyrics is quoted in part by Quiggin; it is an address to Aed of Leinster.

> Aed great at kindling of brilliance. Aed joyous at increase of hospitality.
>
> Son of Diarmait dear to me, though it be to be asked, it is easy, his praise is more beautiful than treasure, it will be sung in lays by me.
>
> Beloved the name - they are no new fames - of Aed who deserves not reproach: the pure form - renown that is not hidden - to whom lovely Liffey belongs.
>
> Descendant of Muredach at every time, rock of choice for noble dignity: a descendant - no evil person was found - of the kings of the clans of Cualu.
>
> The lordship, this is his heritage, every good to him of gods or ungods: the scion of a family without reproach, of the handsome kings of Morg.
>
> He is the bole of a great tree - noble dignity: for battle he is a pre-eminent stock; he is the sapling of silver - high worth - of the children of a hundred kings, of a hundred queens.
>
> At ale poems are chanted: fine (genealogical) ladders are climbed: melodious bardisms modulate through pools of liquor the name of Aed. [1]

Another typical example is the poem to Cerball who was the king of Leinster from 887 to 909. It concludes with an enumeration of the forty battles in which Cerball had taken part ("the battle of Luachair, it was stubborn, the battle of the Loo on a bare hillside, - the bloody battle upon Fetomair...." etc.). Here are the first 6 stanzas:

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1. Quiggin, p. 99, from Thes. Palaehib. II. p. 295.

Cerball of the curragh of the lovely Liffey, overthrower of battles on Conn's Half - when he beheld his beautiful countenance Cnogba Corr fell dead.

Our friend and our darling of lovely aspect, in his hand a spear; great famous son of Muiregan, with triumphs, with glory.

The triumph of beauty, the triumph of noble race are held by Cerball of Carnsore, the triumph of murderous sword-red battle, the triumph of raiment, the triumph of weapons.

It is the high dark tempest of a deluge to behold Cerball the fair; - generous foundation, succour of justice, lawful prince of Mona and of Moone.

Stately scion, pure, bright, and fair, he will seize mighty Banba (Ireland); fair-sheltering bush, most glorious brave man, that is the description of Donn's descendant.

> The enumeration of his triumphs shall be heard till Doom; his battles and fights, all shall hear them from me. [1]

The praise that was officially institutionalised was the praise of the king. In return for his eulogies the poet was given great gifts as payment - cattle, horses, hounds, cups and chains of silver and gold, mantles, brooches.[2] The special occasions[3] for praise poems were after the inauguration of a king, or on his completion of a successful foray for cattle, when he was well supplied with the means of generosity; and

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1. From Meyer, RC. XXIX, pp. 212-4.
2. Meyer, 1908, p. 5.
3. Knott, 1922, p. xl.

after the death of a king, the poet composed an elegy -

like the dirge for king Niall of the Nine Hostages.

His white teeth, his red lips that never reproved in anger -
His shape like a fiery blaze overtopping the warriors of Erin.
Like the moon, like the sun, like a fiery beacon was the splendour of Niall:
Like a dragon ship from the wave without a flaw was Niall, Echu's son.

Upon Tara's rampart his fair hair shone against his ruddy face:
Like unto the colour of his hair is red gold or the yellow iris.

Darling hero of the white shoulder! whose tribes are vast, a beloved host:
Every man was under his protection when we used to go to forgather with him.[1]

At all times, however, and not just on special occasions, the poet's praises were important, for they were both a cause and a sign of the king's firm rule. It was a part of his position that his possessions, his virtues and his ancestors should be lauded by the poet, and his authority thus validated for all to hear.

Not that there is anything unusual about court poetry - that has parallels all over the world. Nor perhaps is the explicitly recognised position and power of the poet qua praiser of the king in Ireland at all surprising. What is striking, however, about the Irish poet is that, unlike most court poets, he had the power to make his lord fear his

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1. Meyer, 1911, pp. 69-71.

displeasure. His ability to satirise his enemies is central not only to the position of the Irish poet but to the whole order of Irish society.

Áer,[1] or satire, could take away a man's honour, and it could influence natural phenomena, turning back rivers or withering fruit and banishing fish from the streams. The power of the poet and satirist over the natural world will be discussed later. First of all, we must understand the powers the poet could exercise over the honour of his enemies.

A man's "honour" (enech) was subject to satire in two ways. Firstly a justified satire could result in the loss of a man's honour-price, a serious disability in the hierarchical organisation of Irish society where so much depended on the assessment of honour-price. In this way, satire, like distraint and fasting, was one method by which in a non-centralised society legal redress could be successfully claimed. Professor Binchy sums up the legal position with regard to satire:

> "Áer, 'satirizing', is the formidable weapon with which members of the poetic orders (grád fhiled) enforced claims either on their own behalf or on behalf of other persons who employed them. If the áer is 'justified', i.e. if the victim of it has really committed an 'offence', he is deemed to forfeit his honour price unless he immediately gives a pledge in token of his readiness either to discharge

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1. On satire in general see Robinson: Satirists and Enchanters in early Irish literature 1912; Knott, 1957, p.61f. HKS. p. 69f.

> his liabilities or submit the case to arbitration. To satirize a person without legal ground is a delict." 1

There was also a second way in which satire was represented as taking away a man's honour. With the same association of ideas as in English, "enech" meant not only "honour" but, quite literally, "face". One of the powers of satire was to raise blotches on the victim's face. The actual blemish on a man's face was associated with the idea of a blemish to his honour, and consequent loss of standing and honour-price. The most common grounds for satire were lack of generosity in the person satirised or sung against: so it is worth noting that enech, besides meaning honour and face, also means "hospitality" and "generosity".

Satire could take away a man's honour, even his life. There are many stories illustrating the powers of the poet to raise blemishes and blotches by his satire on the face of his victim. The oppressiveness of the poets is pointed out in an old manuscript:

> "for he who was then satirised, if he did not perish at once, poisonous ulcers would grow on his face, so that he was recognisable by everyone, and a blemish was always upon him. And the ulcers would grow on the poet himself and he would straightway perish, if he satirised the guiltless. And the crew of poetry they were grievous, for they had 30 in a single company, and whatever they demanded must be given to them, or

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1. Binchy, 1941, sv. áer.

a glám dichenn ((a particularly virulent form of satire)) was composed against him on whom they made the demand. Three blisters used to rise on the face of him who was satirised: their names were Shame and Blemish and Defect." [1]

The poet's satire could also affect his enemy's face and honour in the more straightforward way of making him blush by his justified satire. The word for "face-reddening" or "causing to blush" (enechrucce) is also used to mean "dishonour", "insult".[2] The list of other synonyms of satire given in Robinson's comprehensive article,[3] gives the same idea: most frequent are references in terms of the physical effects - blemishing, reddening, cutting; further names for satire are disgrace, reviling, dishonouring, speaking ill, laughter, ridicule. In all these ways, then, the poets had control over another's face, honour and, therefore, social position.

The raising of visible blemishes on a man's face and his consequent loss of standing are continually referred to in the Irish literature. But even when this physical and visible sign of the poet's lampooning was not apparent, his words alone were thought of as having the power to bring about dishonour or misfortune.

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1. From Stokes, RC. 20, 1899, pp. 421-2.
2. Binchy, 1941, p. 85.
3. Robinson, 1912, pp. 103-4.

The best example of this exercise of satire and its inevitable result is in the story of Bres. This is further worth quoting in full as it describes the beginning of satire in Ireland; not unexpectedly it is a satire on a king for his lack of generosity. In the story of the "Battle of Moytura" (Cath Maige Turedh) in the mythological cycle, Bres, the king of the Fomorians was in the sovereignty of Ireland, ruling over his enemies the Tuatha Dé Danann, but ruling oppressively and unjustly.

> "The chiefs of the Tuatha murmured greatly against him for their knives were not greased by him and however often they visited him their breaths did not smell of ale. Moreover they saw not their poets or their bards or their lampooners or their harpers or their pipers or their hornblowers or their jugglers or their fools amusing themselves in the household. They did not go to the contests of their athletes...
>
> Once upon a time there came a-guesting to Bres's house, Cairbre son of Etain, poet of the Tuatha Dé. He entered a cabin, narrow, black, dark, wherein there was neither fire nor furniture nor bed. Three small cakes, and they dry, were brought to him on a little dish. On the morrow he arose and he was not thankful. As he went across the enclosure, he said:
>
> Without food quickly on a dish:
> Without a cow's milk whereon a calf grows:
> Without a man's abode in the gloom of night:
> Without paying a company of story-tellers,
> let that be Bres's condition....
>
> Now that was true (ba fír on dno). Nought save decay was on him from that hour. That is the first satire that was made in Ireland."

Bres loses his kingdom, and admits his failure: when his father asks him what brought him out of the land he ruled, he

replies that "Nothing has brought me out save my own injustice (m'anfhir) and arrogance. I stript them of their jewels and treasures and their own food."[1]

A justified satire then was a powerful weapon that could take away honour-price, sully a man's face and honour, blight crops and bring disaster. It was dangerous to annoy a satirist for "no man of sense ventures his fist in hot coals round which spring up flames"[2] and there are frequent illustrations in saga of how greatly satire was feared. The hero Ferdiad, for example, is persuaded in this way to fight against his dearest friend and foster-brother CuChulain even though he knows it will lead to his death; for he is threatened by the "satirists and cheek blisterers .... to raise three blisters on his face, Blame Blemish and Disgrace. (So) Ferdiad came ... for the sake of his own honour ... and for fear of shame ... and deemed it better to fall by the shafts of valour and bravery and skill than ... by shafts of satire, abuse and reproach".[3] When, in his turn, the hero Cuchulain comes to die he is prepared, rather than hear his family, his people or himself satirised, to give away his weapon - thus disarmed, he is fatally wounded.[4]

Besides their power over honour the poets by their satires

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1. Trans. Stokes, RC. 12, 1891, 36-45 (=AIT 33-4).
2. Ériu, 13, 1942, p. 21.
3. TBC. tr. Dunn, p. 219.
4. AIT. p. 334f.

could control nature. Of Ferchertne it was said that "before him lakes and rivers sink when he upraids", and after the killing of another poet's son, "for a whole year the poet kept satirising and lampooning the men of Leinster and cursing them, so that neither grass nor corn grew with them, nor a leaf, to the end of the year".[1] In another story the possible power of poet over king is illustrated: as a result of an argument with the king, Mongan, "the poet said he would satirise him with his lampoons, and he would satirise his father and his mother, and his grandfather, and would sing upon their waters, so that fish should not be caught in their river-mouths ... upon woods so that they should not give fruit, upon their plains, so that they should be barren for ever of any produce". To avoid this Mongan is willing to give a third, half, then all of his land, and, finally, to give the poet his own wife.[2]

By thus threatening the well-being of his kingdom, which was so intimately bound up with the position of the king himself, the poet had a means of coercing the king; he could, in effect, curse the king who defied him, and this curse, if rightly used, could cost the king his kingdom. In this way, in the mythical theory, the king was represented as subject to the poet's control.

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1. TBC. tr. Dunn, p. 333; AIT, p. 514.
2. Voy. Bran. I. p. 49 (=AIT 549).

That this power of the poet to curse and satirise was not just an imaginative fantasy thought up by later romantic writers is clear from the many references to satire in the laws. The general legal position has been outlined above - satire was a recognised procedure by which claims could be enforced. The different kinds of satire are described and discussed in the laws,[1] and the whole subject taken very seriously. Unjustified satire, for instance, is treated together with assault, or as analogous to stealing a man's cattle or violating his wife.[2]

The power to satirise attributed to the poet was significant enough to outlast even the Norman Invasion. As late as 1414 a satire was said to have caused death; for according to the annalist, after the satirising of Sir John Stanley, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, "he lived only 5 weeks till he died from the venom of the lampoons".[3] An indignant poet in one of the mediaeval court poems speaks of his anger against his lord and the satire he "will unloose on him .... I will spare neither Gael nor Gall, woe to him who crosses me; poetry is a poisonous serpent to you, a fire which has been kindled to a satire".[4] In a treaty made as late as 1539 between two Irish lords, representatives of the Church promised to excommunicate

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1. AL. III. 93; V. 229; II. 157.
2. II. 157; Robinson loc. cit.
3. An. Conn. 1414. 16.
4. Mac Brom in Eigse 5. 1945, p. 230.

O'Conor if he broke his pledges, and, in an analogous way, representatives of the poets promised on behalf of the poets of Ireland that O'Conor would be satirised if he broke faith.[1] Even the English were aware of the respect in which the Irish held their poets and "their libels in dispraise; thereof the lords and gentlemen stand in great awe".[2] Spencer too, writing in 1596, describes the power of the bards whose

> "profession is to set foorth the praises or dis-praises of men in their poems and rymes, the which are had in so high regard and estimation amongst them that none dare displease them for feare to runne into reproach through their offence, and to be made infamous in the mouthes of all men".[3]

The poetic order, then, formed a powerful section of Irish society : partly through the general respect in which they were held, partly because of their power to satirise. But, as so often, power called for control. For the poets were disliked and feared as well as respected: "satirist" is sometimes used in a pejorative sense, and the fabulous etymology given for *fili* is significant enough - the *fili* is so called from the poison (*fi*) in satire and the splendour (*li*) in praise.[4]

Certain checks against the exercise of the poet's satirising abilities are to be found in the laws. For, though the

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1. Carney in Dillon, 1954, pp. 73-4.
2. Stanihurst quoted Knott, 1957, p.61.
3. Spencer, p. 120.
4. Cormac's Glossary on *fili*.

theory was that only justified satire had effect, the Irish do not seem to have been quite convinced above the theory: besides the question as to the justice of any particular satire was partly a subjective one. So it is not surprising to find in the laws that a "satirist" is often condemned, and satire treated as a misdemeanour. Distinctions are made between lawful and unlawful satire, and penalties laid down for its abuse.[1] "To satirise a person without lawful ground is a delict which entitles the victim to recover the full amount of his honour-price as a penalty".[2]

The oppressiveness of the poetic order is frequently mentioned. The poets, people complained, went round Ireland with great companies of their followers demanding hospitality and exacting gifts which people were afraid to refuse them. There are several stories about attempts to reduce the poets' powers or drive them out. The most famous was the historical Convention of Druim Ceatt in the 6th century when the poets were accused by the people of Ireland: their satires had become too sharp and their order too powerful. Banishment was again threatened. But St. Columba (Colmcille) himself a poet, came blindfold from Iona to defend them, and the Convention was content to restrict their powers. The occasion is often referred to, and, whatever its historical exactitude, the fame itself

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1. Robinson, 1912, p. 105; AL. I. 59; V. 169; IV. 307.
2. Binchy, 1941, p. 69.

is significant. For though the poets could abuse their power and suffer accusation, this same power was important enough to be defended by one of the most revered saints of Ireland.

To sum up this section on the significance of the filid of Ireland - the poets played an essential part in the life of the local túath and at the court of the king; they were important as a national order, at least ideally, of all Ireland; and they were the seers and prophets of Irish society. I will conclude the chapter with a brief reconsideration of these three main points.

Within the local túath the poets had the duty of exercising their specialised skills - education, divination, recitation - and maintaining their traditional expert knowledge. Their power of satire could be used, in a non-centrally organised society, as one way of expressing, in stylised form, the main force of public opinion (for "unjustified satire" was to be penalised); satire was also a way of enforcing the legal claims of either poets or those who employed them. The poets, or, more strictly, the brehons who were closely associated with them, had the function of mediating between contending parties.

The poet could be attached to the court of a local king or chief, in the area where he had his hereditary estates.

As such he had duties to perform for his patron. He was one of the king's retinue, and had to provide odes and verses when required, as an expert at the service of the king. He also had the special role - and an important one - of supporting and validating the king's authority by his poems praising the king's noble birth, his right to the kingship, the virtues with which he exercised his power. The poet could show how the local king's position was a part of the history and right order of all Ireland. He was the most important supporter of the king on whom he depended for his own position, and it was his function to guard and support the king through his poetic art.

But, as well, the poets were thought of as forming an independent and powerful order that was a national force as opposed to the local king. The power and arrogance of the great poets had to be taken seriously - an arrogance said to be unequalled even by that of the Welsh and Icelandic poets, their nearest parallels.[1] In this power of theirs, they acted as real checks on the king's power. They could satirise and curse him if they chose; for satire is often regarded as the function of the poet. Satire is an important element to be considered in assessing the position of the king, and cannot merely be dismissed as "primitive magic" or a subject which

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1. Quiggin, 1911, p. 116.

"leads far into folklore and magic".[1] Its force is recognised even by the perfect king Cormac: "I never was hard lest I be satirised, I would not ask but I would give"; and among the three "shouts of discomfiture for a prince" are "the satires that wound him, far or near".[2] Moreover the poets could not only satirise a king, but also threaten to withhold their praises, the praises that were such an important part of his authority. Finally it was the learned order, above all the poets, who knew the duties of the king, and what he must do to avoid injustice and escape being satirised, with the automatic blemish and disqualification that would follow. The poets had to be consulted and referred to, for they were the judges of the king's exercise of his authority, and they watched over his behaviour.

For we must remember the respect attached everywhere in Ireland to the national learned tradition, and the power that followed from art and knowledge. The filid were not just pedagogues or versifiers. They had the insight of seers and prophets. They could see into the depth and order underlying the superficiality of events. They understood the true order of Irish society and history. The utterance too of the truth they perceived and formed had its own power, whether expressed

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1. As Knott, 1957, p. 62.
2. TC. 7; AP. 10.

as praise, the validation of the king's authority, or as a satire, a curse on his falsehood. To this we must return later. For the moment what is clear is that in Ireland the poets, endowed with the near-supernatural authority and functions which they took over from the druids, both instructed the king in the virtues he should aim at and the duties he should exercise, and in this way, shared the sovereignty with the king.

THE VIRTUES OF THE IRISH KING

There was a definite theory of kingship that applied, in theory, to the ruler of each little *túath* anywhere in Ireland, and laid down the virtues and duties of the ideal king. This was, of course, a learned theory. In other words, it was the creation of the learned and artistic class of Ireland, who had formulated and preserved it to be communicated to each king throughout his reign, and explicitly referred to at his inauguration; it was the poets, historians and jurists who expressed the theory of kingship.

We can therefore gather what were the virtues of the ideal Irish king from several different kinds of literary sources: the obituary notices or other stock descriptions of the virtues of great kings in the Annals; praise songs of the kings; various references in the laws; the list of the *gessa* (ritual prohibitions or "taboos") of the kings of Ireland; and, finally, the *tecosc* or instruction literature.

This last category is the most interesting and useful. There are specialised collections of proverbs, maxims and

sententious sayings dealing specifically with the virtues that the king should manifest. These Tecosca Rígh,[1] Instructions of a King, are numerous and seem to have been popular at all times; some are quite early, and all compiled in, apparently, the same basic tradition. They are usually attributed, in the Irish sources, to some famous judge and/or poet of antiquity; sometimes they take the form of instructions given by a father to a son who is about to succeed him.

Among the many different examples of the tecosc literature three stand out, both because of their size and their continuing popularity later. The Audacht Morainn,[2] or Testament of Morand, was said to be the most ancient of them all. Morand was, in the tradition, the foremost judge of Ireland at the time, famous for ever afterwards for his just judgments; he had a collar, it was said, which tightened round his neck if ever he judged falsely. As a revered judge he sent his instructions and advice to the new king Feredach, describing the blessings that would flow from his rightful rule if he

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1. In general see R.M. Smith: Speculum Principum in early Irish Literature. Speculum II 1927. Particular examples are: AM (Audacht Morainn. ZCP. XI); AP (Advice to a Prince. Ériu IX); AC (Aibidil Cuigni maif Emoin. ZCP. XVII) BC (Briatharthecosc Conculaind. ZCP. XV); CC (Cert cech ríg co réil - Meyer Miscellany p. 258) CA (Cath Airtig. Ériu. VIII); TR (Triads. TLS. XIII); SF (Senbrathra Fithail - RC. XLV) TC (Tecosca Cormaif TLS. XV.).
2. AM. Smith, pp.415-9; c. 8th century.

observed the due virtues of a king - peace and happiness, health, fine weather, success in battle, corn, fruit and good harvests. Another famous collection was the Senbriathra Fithail,[1] also said to have been composed by one of the jurists, for Fithal was the chief of King Cormac's brehons, and had the "truth of nature so that he pronounced no false judgment".[2] Thirdly, the Instructions of Cormac[3] (Tecosca Cormaic), a series of sayings attributed, this time, to a king - but a king who had much of the poet and jurist about him. For Cormac was the wise and good king of antiquity. "It is Cormac" according to the Annals of the Four Masters

> "who composed the Teagusc na Rígh (O. Ir. tecosc rig) to preserve manners, morals and government in the kingdom. He was a famous author of laws, synchronisms and history, for it was he that established law, rule and direction for each science and for each covenant according to propriety; and it is his laws that governed all that adhered to them to the present time." [4]

These three famous collections, attributed either to members of the learned orders or to a king closely associated with them in tradition, provide the material from which can be extracted the Irish idea of an ideal king. The picture given there coincides very largely with what can be gathered from the other sources.

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1. SF. Smith, p. 429.
2. AL. I. 24.
3. TC. Smith, p. 424f.
4. FM. 266.

First of all here is a typical passage from one of the best examples of Tecosc literature, the 9th century Tecosca Cormaic.

> "O grandson of Conn, O Cormac" said Carbre, "what is best for a king?"
> "Not hard to tell" said Cormac, Best for him:
> "Firmness without anger, patience without strife, affability without haughtiness, taking care of ancient lore, giving truth for truth, hostages in fetters, hosting with reason, truth without addition, mercifulness with consolidation of law, peace to tribes (thúathaib), manifold sureties (rátha), true judgments, fasting upon neighbouring territories, exalting privileged persons (nemed), honouring poets, worshipping great God, fertility during his reign, taking cognizance of every wretch, many alms, mast upon trees, fish in river mouths, earth fruitful, inviting barks into harbour, importing treasure from over sea, forfeiture of sea-waifs, silken raiment, a sword-smiting troop to protect every tribe (túaithe), raids across borders, let him attend to the sick, let him benefit the strong, let him possess truth, let him chide falsehood, let him love righteousness, let him beat down fear, let him crush criminals, let him give true judgments (fír bretha), let him foster every science, let him consolidate every peace, let him buy treasures, let him improve his soul, let him make known every clear judgment, abundance of wine and mead, let him utter every truth (fír),
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> For it is through the truth of a ruler (tria fír flaithemon) that God gives all that." 1

Another instance is the advice given to Cuscraid, after he had been proclaimed king and had "bound them with pledges" (a gíalla):

> "Let thy assemblies be frequent concerning the right of borders, for meeting of nobles who go to (?) an act of hospitality and generosity (?) for bestowing of kine and horses.... Be a follower of sovran law. Fulfil the

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1. TC. 1.

word given on oath. Let the law of thy rule be consolidated, lest thy misdeeds ruin the heavy fruits of the people that increase under thy protection. Be thou skilled in every tongue, so thou be not ignorant in any art that one will speak in argument with thee. Be just and righteous in judgment, not suppressing speech between the tethra of the strong and the weak. Be a zealous and mighty champion, holding assemblies, ardent, warlike, contending against foreign lands for the protection of thy great territories." 1

The perfect Irish prince, it would seem, must possess all virtues. Certain aspects however do emerge as specially significant.

I.

Most striking of all is the stress on the military and forceful side of kingship: the king is represented as, for example, striking terror into his foes, conquering or raiding his neighbours, binding hostages, calling out hostings against other túatha, crushing subjects or criminals.

This emphasis on the violent and military aspect of the king, as opposed to the peaceful and uniting "men of art", is evident at all periods . In the Annals of Ulster for example the death of Maelfimnia, the King of Bregh, is noted under the year 902, and his praises are sung:

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1. CA. 3.

The son of Derbhail, battling over Bregh-magh
Would scatter every ... band
Maelfinnia the generous, great and fierce,
Most illustrious, most valiant hero.

He was a king whose career was without danger;
Chief over the "fair" of Emain;
A man, I assert, without fear,
Who was alone worthy of Ireland.

Maelfimia, a man without haughtiness,
Lord of Bregh, a torch over fortresses;
A well-shaped king, select, noble,
The famed prince of battalions of Crinna.[1]

This is not an isolated instance; we are continually told in the Annals of the admirable courage, prowess and success in war of famous kings: of "fierceness against enemies", "exaction of hostages", kings who are "the most warlike and valiant", "the hero of every clash of arms"; or of the warlike king (Aed, King of Connacht, 1265-1274) who was "the destroyer and healer of Ireland; most dreaded and triumphant of the kings of Ireland of his day".[2] Valour or prowess (engnam) is, with generosity, the stock virtue attributed to dead kings, whether, one supposes, they deserved it or not; again and again it is announced that a king was renowned for his "generosity and valour" (enech 7 engnam).[3] We may connect some of this emphasis on the military prowess of kings with

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1. AU. 902.
2. AU. 918; A. Conn. 1274. 2.
3. E.g. A. Conn. 1224. 2; 1230. 9; 1281. 3; 1291. 2; 1293. 2.

the later changes in Ireland after the disruptions caused by the Norse raids and founding of coastal towns, followed later by the 12th century Norman Invasions. The powers of the kings were increasing as against the influence of the poets and the learned orders. Nevertheless the military aspect of the king's virtues is noticeable at all times, before as well as after the Norman Conquest. Murphy gives an example of a pre-8th century eulogy: "Indrechtach from the lands of Brion, battling far, with mighty deed, a red flame of the family of hundreds of kings, lofty hero, lovely wolf able for many hounds, valued descendant of Muirne".[1] "Der König ist in erster Linie Führer im Kampf und hat also vor allem tapfer und kriegstüchtig zu sein" writes Thurneysen.[2]

In the legal and mythical writings too, the military attributes of the king are represented as important. The battle field for instance is regarded as one of the ordeals by which the king's truthfulness could be tested; thus in the proverb attributed to Morand "there has not been found, nor will there be, a juster judge than the battle field";[3] the king's truth was said to bring debility on (his enemies') hosts; and one of the seven signs of a king's "falsehood" given in the laws is his "defeat in battle".[4] His forceful

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1. Early Irish Lyrics 1956, pp. xiii-xiv.
2. HKS. p. 78.
3. Aodh Ruadh life, p. 95.
4. AP. 37; AL. IV. 55.

binding of hostages is continually mentioned too as among the praiseworthy virtues of a king, though we may well doubt whether this was in practice such a common occurrence as is implied by the picture we are given of the ideal king as forceful triumphant warrior. "Best for a king" said the Instructions of Cormac "is ... hostages in fetters, hosting with reason .... a sword-smiting troop to protect every tribe, raids across borders".[1] A famous king was "a valiant chief of hostage reign",[2] while one of the most renowned of all Irish kings was entitled "Niall of the Nine Hostages". The duties of royalty as against those of other elements in society are made explicit in another example of "Advice to a Prince" - "let the abbot's son enter the church ... carpenter's son follow the adze, harper's son carry the harp, poet's son take to poesy, buffoon's son to sharp satires", but "let the king's son bind hostages".[3]

One of the first virtues praised in a king by the poets - who were, above all, those who upheld and guarded the kingship - was his success in battle, due to his skill and courage. When St. Columba (Colmcille) had to defend the poets of Ireland against their accusers he gives as his main argument the

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1. TC. 1.
2. AU. 918 (on Niall Glundubh, king of Ireland).
3. AP. 27-33.

praises they gave to Cormac, the king, so that his fame was enduring, in - this is the example he gives - the poem beginning "Cormac well broke battle".[1] Many of the praise poems emphasise the king's valour, like the early eulogy of King Labraid's prowess - "a red wall of fire; 30 princes died in suffering. The fierce champion, Labraid, crushed them burned them, Ireland's hero, grandson of Loegaire Lore".[2] Here, finally, is a "sword-song" attributed to Dallán mac Móre, the chief bard to King Cerbhall of Leinster at the beginning of the 10th century: it takes the form of an address to Cerbhall's sword.

"Hail, sword of Cerbhall! oft hast thou been in the great woof of war, oft giving battle, beheading high princes.

"Oft hast thou gone a-raiding in the hands of kings, oft hast thou divided the spoil.

"Many a shield hast thou cleft in battle, many a head, many a chest, many a fair skin.

"Fourty years, without sorrow Enna had thee, who gave thee (t'was no niggard's gift) to his own son, to Dunlang" (.... then follows a list of the different kings who in turn possessed the sword..)

"Who shall henceforth possess thee? or to whom wilt thou deal ruin? Now that Cerbhall is departed, with whom wilt thou be bedded?

"Thou shalt not be neglected. Come to Naas, where Finn of the feasts is - there they will hail thee with 'Welcome!'."

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1. O. Ir. life of Columba; in Skene II. App. 1. p.499.
2. Quoted Dillon, 1948, p. 72.
3. Tr. Meyer, 1908, from 909 A.D.

The king, then, should be personally brave and skilled in battle - this was represented as one of his essential virtues. Closely connected with this was the idea that, as well as being brave, he should also be strong, physically perfect, for this too was part of his military virtue.

It is specifically laid down in the laws that no king with a blemish should be allowed to rule, and this is made clear by precedents drawn from myth or antiquity. The famous king Cormac was, through no fault of his own, blinded in one eye, and as a result he had to resign his kingship for "it was a prohibited thing that one with a blemish should be king at Tara".[1] Another king, the demi-divine Nuada, led his people, the Tuatha Dé Danann, to victory in one of the triumphant battles associated with their first invasion of Ireland, but in doing so he lost an arm and was deposed in favour of Bres ('The Handsome'), until a new arm was made for him by the craftsmen, "a silver arm with full activity in both finger and joint".[2] This was the theory: occasionally it was got round in practice - even in one of the stories, the saga of Fergus mac Léti; his mouth was twisted backwards after a terrifying encounter with a dreadful sea-monster, and the elders of Ulster had to decide what action to take "since

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1. AL. III. 85.
2. LG. 362.

it would not be proper to have a blemished king (rí co nainim) in Emain Macha"; they decided to keep him as king and conceal the blemish from King Fergus himself. For seven years, the conspiracy of silence was successful; but - of course - it ended in discovery and disaster.[1] This story of the avoidance of the rule only serves to re-emphasise the importance in which it was, in general, held - no person with a serious physical blemish could hold the kingship and if a reigning king suffered such a blemish even through no fault of his own he should be compelled to resign.[2]

One way in which a king could suffer such a blemish was if he was satirised by one of the poets for having committed some deed unfitting for a king; then, if the satire was justified, blotches and blemishes were raised on the king's cheeks, so that he had lost, not only his physical perfection, but also his honour. The same effect of blotches that appeared on the face was said to come from an act of falsity by the king, for example an unjust judgment. Either way he was no true king, and, so ran the theory, a king with a blemish should be deposed.

It is not surprising therefore that in both the earliest praise songs and the later Annals so much emphasis should be

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1. Ed. Binchy, Ériu, 16, 1952, esp. 7 (=AL. I. 71-5).
2. Cf. also on Nede and Caier HKS, p. 523; Conall Caech was removed from his kingship after being blinded by a bee AL. IV. 179; cf. Binchy in Dillon, 1959, p.47.

laid on the physical perfections of the king - he should be striking in form and comeliness, he should be well-shaped and beautiful. A typical list of the king's attributes is that of Domnall Ruad Mac Carthaig (ardrí of Desmumu) in 1302: he was trusted for his "good sense and for subduing enemies, who had surpassed everyone of that time in generosity, prowess, comeliness, form, ... prosperity, conquest, nobility, urbanity .. and youthful leadership";[1] another king, as late as the 16th century, is said by the Irish annalist, to have been not only warlike and victorious, but also "the biggest and most handsome man of his age".[2] The Annals throughout abound in references to the form and beauty of kings or those eligible to succeed them.[3]

The importance attached to the king's physical perfection helps to explain the really remarkable number of cases given in the Annals of kings being blinded by their opponents (often their own kin) or of taking the early precaution of blinding their possible rivals. Of as late a date as 1540 we read of a king (Fergal) going blind and resigning his kingship.[4] In 1092 "Ruaidri Ua Conchobuir, King of Connacht, was treacherously blinded by Ua Flaithbertaig, and Muirchertach Ua Briain

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1. An. Inisf. 1302. 2.
2. A. Conn. 1533. 10.
3. E.g. A. Conn. 1291. 2; 1309. 2. AU. 1124, 1188, 1342, 1343.
4. FM. 1540.

took the high-kingship of Connacht" - the same sort of story crops up everywhere in the Annals.[1] Clearly a king who was - of all things - blind could not possibly carry out the military functions of a king. A poet, harper or seer could perfectly well continue his craft whether blind or sighted - indeed these men are not infrequently represented as blind[2] - but a king had to be endowed with full physical vigour and perfection.

In the traditional theory of kingship, therefore, great emphasis was laid on the military attributes of the king, his forcefulness, compulsion, exaction of hostages, violence and victory, and, as well, the physical strength and form connected with this. The importance of the military virtues of the king is clear from the way he is represented in the legal and traditional lore, the Annals, the praise songs, and the tecosc literature; in the sagas too kings and nobles are depicted as heroes and conquerors.

This theory that the king should be forceful and militarily inclined is clearly not an arbitrary one or unrelated to the actual practice of either the king of a little túath or one of the great nobles who were kings over a whole province of Ireland. In each case, the regular raiding of neighbouring

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1. A. Inisf. 1092, 3; cf. also A. Inisf. 1166. 5 & 'blinding' in Index. AU. 996, 1008, 1018, 1092, 1036 etc.
2. E.g. Ṫadhg Dall; the idea of the blind poet or prophet is of course common elsewhere too, e.g. Greek Homer and Teiresias.

kingdoms under the leadership of the king himself would result, if successful, in the capture and distribution by the king, of numbers of cattle for his people - more power for the king himself, more possibility to be generous to his followers, more grants in clienrship. The king's relationship with his people was expressed partly in these relationships through cattle, partly through his right to call a hosting and have his people follow him in war, which, in turn, it was his duty to lead. The delivery of hostages was one of the acknowledgements of overlordship, and one of the claims to rule was made by the exaction of hostages, or in the military foray that might follow the installation of a king. A possible heir to the kingdom might prove his valour as above that of the other eligible heirs by leading raids on his neighbours, thus both demonstrating his military skill and gaining cattle through which to acquire his own supporters. Altogether the military virtues of the king had a real connexion with his social, economic and political position.

The emphasis on the military nature of the king also marked him out as in clear distinction to the poet and the other "druidic" men of learning: he fought, represented his own <u>túath</u> against others, exhibited his own personal bravery, whereas they, ideally, were anchored in no one local community but belonged to all, they travelled through all the <u>túatha</u>

and reconciled them to each other, their persons and possessions were apart and safeguarded even in time of war, they did not take part in fighting. They could practise their art and win honour and wealth even when blind or feeble; but the king could only be king when he was physically unblemished, strong, well-formed and courageous: his duty was the military art. This special virtue of the king in the learned theory of kingship is represented indeed as the special prerogative of the king; but, at the same time, as in some ways subordinate to the powers and will of the poets, who expressed the standard of what the king should be like, supported or attacked him in their verses, or cited the precedents. Nowhere perhaps is this subordination of military to poetic made more clear than at the point in the inauguration ceremony when the king lays aside his sword, the mark of war, and is given instead a white wand by the poet.

II.

Another quality of the king that is continually referred to in the sources is his <u>generosity or hospitality</u>. In the obituary notices in the Annals it is consistently mentioned, in conjunction with his military virtues. The typical list goes - this example refers to King Domhall O Domnaill of

Ulster and Connacht - "best of all Irish Gaels for generosity, valour, lordship and nobility at that time" (enech 7 engnam 7 oirechus 7 uasli);[1] this sort of reference comes again and again - "eligible to be king of Ireland for his nobility, valour, generosity, and form", "most distinguished of the Gael for sense and prowess .... for bestowal of treasure and of food", "candle of championship and hospitality of the north of Ireland", "tower of hospitality and valour".[2] Later a poet praises a king's son who has died

> "Brian Mag Tigernain of the contests,
> With his hospitality comparison were not just:
> He practised hospitality without reward,
> Heaven was the end of his battle-career." [3]

Generosity (enech) was the virtue which maintained honour (enech) and the unblemished face (enech) that was a sign of honour. Lack of generosity or hospitality was, above all, the vice for which one could be satirised by the poets, with consequent loss of honour and position. This is exemplified in many of the stories about satire, in which, often enough, a king is satirised for refusing some request made him by a poet. Thus King Eochaid Aontsula (the One eyed) was asked by a poet for his only eye as a gift, for this king was famous for his generosity - and Eochaid gave it.[4] The account of the

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1. A. Conn. 1281. 3.
2. A. Conn. 1309. 2; AU. 1121, 1251, 1252.
3. AU. 1365. cf. also on generosity e.g. An. Conn. 1224. 2; 1291. 2; 1293. 2; 1306, 4.
4. Keating. II. (3) p. 69.

first case of satire in Ireland connects it with lack of generosity in a king: when Bres, the king of Ireland at the time, did not entertain his chiefs as was his duty, "their knives were not greased by him, and however often they visited him, their breaths did not smell of ale..." His failure in hospitality naturally costs him his kingdom, and results in "the first satire that was made in Ireland".[1]

The importance attached to a king's giving the gifts he was asked for is brought out very clearly in the story of Caier, where a violent satire (glám dichenn) is made on him if he refuses a demand for a certain gift which it was, in fact, impossible for him to give.

> "Evil, death, short life on Caier!
> Let spears of battle wound him, Caier!
> Caier..! Caier...! Caier under earth,
> Under rampart, under stones be Caier!" 2

The general attitude that a king should be generous and, above all, hospitable to poets is expressed again in the partly satirical story of "The Great Visitation to Guaire". Guaire was a king of Connacht in the seventh century who was especially famous for his hospitality; because of this great reputation he was visited by a huge company of poets.

> "They debated as to where they should go on a visitation, and Senchán (the chief poet) proposed that they should visit Guaire son of Colmán, for he had never

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1. Tr. Stokes, RC. 12. 1891.
2. Qu. Robinson, 1912. (from Cormac's Gloss. sv. Gaire)

> been satirised for refusing gold or treasure. .... Guaire made preparations to receive them. A house was built for their comfort with eight sides .... Then he sent messengers to invite them. But Senchán said that he would not bring his whole company lest it should be too much of a burden on the province of Connacht, so he brought only a hundred and fifty poets, a hundred and fifty minor poets, a hundred and fifty hounds, a hundred and fifty servants, a hundred and fifty women, and three times nine of every craft....(1) Guaire made them welcome and lodged them in the great house. Food was put before them, and the king told them only to ask for anything they wished and they would get it".

Though they stayed for a year and a month and made impossible demands, Guaire was able to meet their wishes and protect his honour.[1]

It is not just in the sagas that the king's virtue of generosity is emphasised. In the laws one of the reasons for which a king could lose his honour price is if he "refuses every shape of person without having his lawful company" or "the king who eats stealth and robbery".[2] It is also made clear that the king should have the wealth necessary for generosity. "A king without property is no king",[3] for he must have clients and cattle. "A king shall not be deemed such without property ..... a poet shall be deemed no poet without ... if he be of the true stock of the clans of poets. They are entitled to largess from kings and chieftains".[4]

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1. Dillon, 1946, p. 92.
2. Heptad XIII = AL. V. 173.
3. AL. IV. 381.
4. Ériu 13. 1942, p. 31.

Ideally a king should be rich with plenty of property to be generous with: "the beginning of hospitality is plenty" and "generosity is better than blistering (of cheeks)".[1] The king's truth or justice was often said to increase the abundance and fruitfulness of his kingdom, so that in this way too he was represented as contributing to the wealth and property of his subjects.

Thus the ideal king was rich, generous and hospitable to all but especially to poets. This is one of the first virtues of the true king in the sagas ("a young generous king is no reproach" says Conaire),[2] for lack of which he was liable to satire and loss of face (honour), and in the didactic writings - not to hold a festival as was due could result in "kings without wit, without wisdom, without generosity, without truth",[3] and "A prince" says Cormac "should light his lamps on Samain day (1st November) and welcome his guests with clapping of hands and comfortable seats, and the cup-bearers should be active in distributing meat and drink".[4] Entertaining was one of the king's duties, and his responsibilities as patron of poets are of course continually mentioned in the praise poems in the bardic tradition, right up to the time of Tadhg Dall in

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1. SF. 1.8; 4.33; cf. CA 3.
2. Quoted Dillon, 1959, p. 110.
3. Carman (MacNeill Celtic Relig. p. 27).
4. Quoted Joyce, I. p. 58.

16th century who speaks hopefully of the generosity of his patron with "no ebb-tide in his riches",[1] Similarly we hear in the Annals of grief among the bardic bands for the death of a king who had maintained them; "orphaned are wisdom and science without a man to support or foster them after that deed": this was after the murder by his brother of the King of Tírconaill in 1342, a man "fit to be king of Ireland for shape, sense ... generosity, preeminence, magnanimity, great bestowal, courage, battle vigour, nobility".[2] Even higher praise is given to Toirdelbach Húa Conchobair, who was king of Ireland in the 12th century. Again the virtues that are picked on are on the one hand his military attributes and success in war, and, secondly, his generosity and hospitality (this time to clerics): Toirdelbach was

> "a flood of glory and princeliness and veneration for churches and clerics, head of the prosperity and wealth of the world, one who, so long as he was alive, never lost a battle or hard conflict, the one man ... whose mercy and bounty, charity and generosity were best". [3]

As in the case of the attribution to the king of success in military conflict and of forceful power, the picture of the ideal king as of one who was wealthy, possessed of many cattle,

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1. Tadhg Dall 20. 7; Knott, 1922, p. 11.
2. AU 1342; cf. 1345; 1460; 1461.
3. An. Tig. RC. XVIII. pp. 181-2.

giver of feasts and entertainments, generous, bountiful, hospitable, was no arbitary or incidental representation of how the king should, in theory, be. It is easy to see how these qualities would fit with the position and powers of the king as ruler of his own <u>túath</u> or overlord of others.

In the first place it is closely connected with the military aspect of kingship - the king should lead raids against his neighbours and, by his leadership and courage, bring back numbers of cattle, the terms in which all wealth was ultimately reckoned. By his success in war therefore the king could increase the real wealth of his people and have a fund from which to give generous grants of cattle, and entertain his poets and people - the "winter food" of the law tracts was meat from the cattle slaughtered in the autumn, the time of feasting. It was necessary that as well as being successful in his raids of cattle, the king should be generous in distributing the fruits of this success; his economic and his military virtues were interdependent.

It was the right of the king to receive "food rent" and tribute in kind from his people, or, in the case of an overlord, from his sub-kings, for early Irish society was not based on a cash economy nor was there anything of the "depersonalisation of institutions"; as so often in such circumstances, loyalty was personal, the ruler was the centre of the society,

and nothing of the "state" intervened. Thus it is not surprising that the economic redistribution of goods should have been through the person of the chief: tribute in kind was paid to him, and it was his personal virtue to be generous and entertain with the goods he received from this source. It was the king's duty as well as right to collect the rent and tribute due to him - "Levy strictly your rent and tribute; such is due to the king both of a country and of a tribe".[1] It was his right as well as duty to dispense wealth in entertainment and feasts.

His clients in particular had a special relationship with the king as patron: they were committed to helping him with building and with labour at the essential times in the agricultural year - at seed time and harvest. In return they had their grant of cattle from the king and entertainment in his house. It was at the time of harvest that tribute of agricultural produce was ceded to the king, and this again was the time of feasting and hospitality.

The king's virtue of generosity had also connexions with his specifically political relations. It was his duty to entertain his chiefs and sub-kings - it was failure in this that had annoyed Bres' chieftains in the example given above. It was also the king's right that his sub-chiefs should attend

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1. CC. 12.

his feasts and not absent themselves from the king's hospitality. In this way two purposes were served simultaneously: the king had a check on his chiefs who could not avoid this contact with him; and their presence at his feast was an expression of their continuing loyalty and acknowledgement of him as king. The feasts and festivals given by the king were in this way a means of reuniting a people who for much of the year lived either among the hill pastures or in their dispersed family settlements through the rural hills and plains of Ireland, a country without towns.

So much for the practical implications of the king's virtue of generosity. As far as the poets were concerned this virtue should primarily be exercised for their benefit, and this comes out very clearly in many of the stories that were told in illustration of the king's generosity: he should entertain, and accede to the requests of, the poet or poets who visited him - whether the poet was represented as a great and famous personage travelling with his company through Ireland, or was, in practice, a quite minor figure living within the king's realm and dependent on him for his bounty. The frequent connexion of satire with generosity, or rather lack of generosity, makes explicit the association of this virtue with poetry. In the learned and traditional theory of kingship the duties of the king to the members of

that learned tradition are made quite clear - he must be generous and full of hospitality.

There is a further point that we can notice here. One of the ways in which the king increased the wealth of the túath, and brought abundance of cattle and crops was by his "truth" or justice. This could be taken as one more way in which the king - indirectly - could achieve the same result as by the direct exercise of his generosity. It is necessary therefore to discuss next the virtue of the king that is referred to as his "truth".

III.

In the specialised tecosc literature about the duties of kingship, the absolutely central quality demanded of the king is fír, truth or justice. This is insisted on over and over again, and is the virtue that lies at the heart of all the instructions to kings - "Best for a king is .... giving truth for truth ... truth without addition, true judgments .... let him possess truth, chide falsehood". "By the Prince's Truth great kingdoms are ruled". "Enduring is every ruler by whom justice (fír) is achieved". "Worst for a king's honour are straying from the truth and adding to the false".[1]

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1. TC. 1; AM. 10; AC. 2. 68; AP. 8; Smith ZCP. 17, 1927, on AC. 2. 68.

The stress on truth as the all-embracing virtue of the king is unmistakable in the traditional instructions; but it is also very noticeable in the sagas and myths where the fruitfulness of the land is constantly attributed to the king's truth, and disaster to his falsehood. It has close connections also with the concept of the gessa (taboos) of the kings, and the truth or falsity of a ruler is explicitly taken into account in the law tracts. In the later sources like the Annals there tends to be relatively rather more stress on the military virtues than on truth (as indeed we should expect), yet even then we are told of the importance of the king's quality of truthfulness. Even the English are assumed to subscribe to the same doctrine, for according to the Irish historian they approved of the 14th century King Eoghan because of "their knowledge of his truth and hospitality ... he taught truth to its chieftains".[1] In the Annals of Inisfallen, Domnall Og Mac Carthaig reigned for 31 years, and there was none "of greater generosity, prowess, kindliness or truthfulness".[2] A time of disaster and invasion, followed by the reign of an unlawful king, is characterised by saying that "falsehood and famine and homicide filled the country".[3] The king's duty to give truthful and unbiassed judgments is

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1. O'Donovan, 1843, Hy Many, p. 140.
2. A. Inisf. 1390.
3. A. Conn. 1318. 8 - Cannibalism too!

connected with the fruitfulness of his kingdom "Judgments in favour of truth (fír) are due from him (the king of the Ui Néill) and the pacification of claimants, corn is due and milk and mast and salmon".[1]

The significance of this association between the truth of the king and the fruitfulness of his kingdom, its crops, cattle, woods and sea produce, will be further explored in the next chapter on some of the symbolic associations of the king's position in Irish society. In the meantime however one or two points can be made about the meaning of the king's virtue of fír, truth or justice.

As is evident it has some connexion with the king's right to judge or see that justice was declared or kept. As we have seen the king's power to judge was, in the nature of Irish society, only limited. Nevertheless there were certain circumstances in which he had himself to give judgment - at the festivals, in cases of the violation of his own "precinct", in battle.[2] There was also the special brehon who had jurisdiction, representing the king, in cases where the king's rights were involved (treason and taxation); and the king, of course, had also the right to issue ordinances at the assemblies. There were then several instances in which

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1. Airgialla poem Ériu, 16, 1952, 22.
2. Op. cit. 31-2.

it was relevant to insist that the king should be just or truthful in the sense of being impartial and giving a fair and correct decision.

But there was more to the king's truth than this. Though there were cases in which his direct decisions had to be "truthful", more important was the sense in which, just by his existence, the king made any kind of truth or justice possible. The fact that there was a king over the túath (or group of túatha, or province, or Ireland) was a guarantee of order and the possibility of keeping contract, accepting arbitration, observing the law. A túath could not be a túath without a king - ni ba túath túath gan ... ríg[h].[1] It was not just that each túath needed its king to negotiate treaties with other kings for them, or that he "swears away from them" so that his oath cleared them.[2] He was also the guarantee and mark of the possibility of any negotiation at all, and of the social existence and unity of the túath; its members were all united by their common loyalty to their king. And without the king society was not possible - "tribes (túath) who have lost their king" says the Advice to a Prince "are like a cauldron without a cover, a harp without a string (? céis)",[3] and in one old prophecy about the horrors to be

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1. Ériu, 13.31.10.
2. CG. 1. 496 and Binchy's note ad loc.
3. AP. 22.

expected at the end of the world the list runs

"Summer without flowers,
Kine without milk,
Women without modesty,
Men without valour;
Captives without a king ....."[1]

This gives point to Gormlaith's famous lament for Niall Glundubh, the king of Ireland in the early 10th century, for without the king the just order is impossible. "The cold sea rages; the wind is from the west; generosity sinks to her knees; a rudderless ship is Ireland without Niall".[2]

King Aed who died in 1004 is lamented in the same terms:

From the day that great Aed was slain
Few men on earth but are in want;
Since he has died that was another Lugh,
It were right to shed tears of blood.

Tara is deprived of her benefactor,
A blight is upon his kindred,
Torture is put upon the rays of the sun,
Glorious Erin is without Aed.

Fair weather shines not on the mountain side,
Fine clustering fruit is not enjoyed,
The gloom of every night is dark
Since earth was put over Aed.[3]

If the king was the standard, through his manifestation of truth, for the truth and justice of his kingdom, as seems to be the significance of the continual stress on the king's truth in the gnomic writings, he was not by himself sufficient; his authority had to be supported and verified by the poets

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1. Battle of Moytura, quoted Dillon, 1959, p. 34.
2. Ériu, 16, 1952, p. 196.
3. Tr. Meyer, 1911, pp. 75-6.

and their associates; and his duties as upholder of truth had to be communicated to him by those whose virtue it was to know the traditional theory of kingship - these again were the poets, historians and jurists, the members of the druidic tradition of Ireland. But this will emerge more clearly in the following chapter.

Much the same applies to another attribute of the king - his quality of bringing peace. That is, the king was the general upholder and bringer of peace just by the very fact of holding his position.

He is, however, also represented as bringing peace by - paradoxically - his military qualities, the courage and war-like valour that marked off the ideal king as opposed to other elements of society. Descriptions of his military forcefulness are often combined with references to his contributions to peace. "Tower of valour .. peacemaker of Cenel Conaill" goes one eulogy, and, of a king of Connacht "the man of the Gael for making peace and war that caused most terror and triumph, and was best in hospitality and benevolence in his own time."[1] Another king of Connacht, Cathal Crodeg, is praised for his "fierceness against his enemies, peace and tranquillity; he established hospitality; on whom God most

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1. AU. 1252; 1293.

bestowed fruit and increase and crops";[1] in a different version he is described as a "punisher of the guilty and of outlaws; destroyers of robbers and of evil doers; general battle-victorious maintainer of the righteous law".[2] "Counsellor in war" writes the bard Tadhg Dall still later "and chief of peace of the host of the Gael; ... from the wrath of the king ;, peace is made in five countries".[3]

Thus the ideal king was represented as bringing peace, often by manifesting his complementary virtue of success in war. His just rule was also, in the theory, the cause of peace. From the king's truth and justice there was "peace and quiet and 'gentle meeting'", or "abundance of peace so that no one slew the other in Ireland in his reign".[4] In the Audacht Moraind peace is one of the results prophesied from the king's truth, and "the four things that a prince should have" according to the Advice to a Prince are "peace among his tribes, protection of churches, reproof of treason, help for the weak".[5] The king is even reminded sometimes that peace is ultimately preferable even to warring "better is peace than prudent goodly warfare", "peace is better than easy warfare", "joyful every lasting peace".[6]

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1. A. Conn. 1224. 2.
2. AU. 1224.
3. Tadhg Dall 9.52; 10. 6.
4. Da Derga's Hostel 17; qu. Draak, 1959, p. 653.
5. AM. 13; AP. 17.
6. AP. 18; SF. 4. 15; AC. 2. 67.

As representative of his <u>túath</u>, the king should bring his people peace: he represented them in negotiating agreements with other <u>túatha</u> just as he did, in other circumstances, in making war. One of the king's virtues, then, was that of peace-bringing. Yet even so as king, (and thus in contra-distinction to the poetic elements) he is still distinct from them even in his peace-bringing aspect; for he is often represented as achieving peace through his characteristic virtue of military forcefulness or personal responsibility for his <u>own túath</u>, as opposed to the men of art who ideally belong to all <u>túatha</u>, and are, by their very nature, reconcilers and mediators. As opposed to the poetic aspect the king represents himself only one aspect of society. Nevertheless when he has the support of the poets he transcends the divisions, and, as such, is the guarantee of <u>all</u> peace in his kingdom: peace can be described as even higher than warfare. Thus in the learned theory of kingship the king is at once opposed to and distinct from the poetic aspect, and also, with the support of the poets, the sovereign.

There remain only two more virtues of the ideal king that I wish to discuss, and in both of these the king's dependence on the poets is very clear. These are his noble birth, and his "wisdom".

A king should have a noble lineage and belong to a royal family that could trace its pedigree back, ideally, to the semi- divine ancestors and founders of Irish society.[1] In the Christian versions their ancestry was recounted back through the famous Irish heroes to Noah and to Adam. Lists of the genealogies and exploits of the previous kings were part of the necessary equipment of a learned person, and were transmitted in the stylised tradition. Each king of course had to belong to a royal family and be qualified by his birth to inherit the kingship; to put it technically he had to belong to the derbfine of a previous king to be eligible to succeed at all. This was the practice. It was the duty of the poets to give exaggerated accounts of their genealogies, tracing them back to the mythical founders of the race, and connecting the ancestry even of a king of a petty túath with the mythical history of Ireland.[2] The kings' descent was part of the validation of his rule, and must be declared and verified by its recitation by the poet: this may even have been an essential preliminary in the inauguration of the king. Thus every king must be represented as being of royal birth and ancestry, and one of the virtues of a king emphasised in praise songs was his nobility.

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1. Cf. genealogies in LG.; Genealogical Tracts etc.
2. de Paor, 1958, p. 15.

"I shall give thee as is due" sings the bard "knowledge of the genealogical branches, of the tribute, taken by thy forbears from the plains of Ireland, the course of their triumphs and their exploits. I shall tell thee, thou slender form, of thy nobility transcending that of the rest of the men of Ireland, and of every homage that were due to thee." [1]

Ideally the king should be <u>wise</u>. Often in the Annals[2] kings are praised for their "good-sense", "intellect", "wisdom", "knowledge in every science"; and there are many examples in the sagas of "poet-kings" (Cormac is the best example, but there are others),[3] who by their wisdom are themselves endowed with poetic and prophetic qualities. The importance of this aspect of kingship should become more evident later; but we can notice now how essential respect for learning was considered to be in Ireland and the king, above all, was therefore represented as both showing such respect for learning (and members of the learned orders) and being himself endowed with wisdom. One particular way in which he should manifest this was by listening to the advice of his counsellors. In the laws the king should be "a man of enquiring of knowledge,"[4] (i.e. he should consult the learned), and the same point is insisted on in the instructions to kings. "Good, lasting,

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1. Tadhg Dall 30, 21-2.
2. E.g. AU. 1121, 1188, 1342, 1425, 1453.
3. E.g. Ollam Fodla; Find Fili.
4. CG. (Binchy), 528f.

long-lived and steadfast is the righteousness of the ruler who listens to wisdom", "Be humble" he is told "when you are instructed by the wise; be mindful of admonition from your elders".[1] "A king without counsel" is "hateful to God". When the young Conaire comes to accept the kingship he insists that he is suitable to become king "A young generous king is no reproach. It is my right from father and grandfather to bind hostages at Tara. I shall enquire of wise men so that I myself may be wise."[2]

The king then must recognise and respect wisdom. "Honouring poets" is one of the things that are "best for a king"[3] and he should be the patron of learning and art. Above all he must take the advice of wise men so that he may become wise himself.

The perfect Irish king, according to the theory, possessed the qualities that belonged to the sphere of war, to the consumption of wealth, and to the calm and ordered aspect of society. He brought peace, observed contracts, was full of wisdom and truth. He was wealthy, consuming the fruit of his country and tribute of his people, giving feasts and gatherings

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1. AM. 3; BC. 25. 26; Ériu V. 142. 1; Smith, 1927, p. 441.
2. Quoted in Dillon, 1959, p. 110.
3. TC. 1. cf. also above on the king as fosterer of learning.

for nobles and sub-kings, he dispensed riches, hospitality and entertainment. Most of all, he was warlike, brave and strong; he was physically perfect, fit to be a great warrior; he was a forceful exactor of hostages, a successful hunter, a skilled leader of raids, in short, a military and aristocratic warlord. These same central virtues coms out even in the accounts of the later kings. The king of Tirconaill who was killed in 1342 was "fit to be king of Ireland for his shape, sense, intellect, high-mindedness, generosity, preeminence, magnanimity, great bestowal, courage, battle vigour, nobility, gentleness, humanity, and good piety". It was after his death that "orphaned are wisdom and science without a man to support or foster them".[1] This fits well with the similar list in the traditional Instructions of Cormac. Chieftaincy, he says, is given over tribes, clans and races "By virtue of shape and race and knowledge, through wisdom and rank and liberality and honesty, by virtue of hereditary right and eloquence, by the strength of fighting and an army it is taken". Finally, the virtues of the mythical king Lugaid:

> "He was a king, he was a poet, he was a seer,
> He was a gentle judge, a hero in battle,
> The grandson of Sidbolg, - peace as far as the strand,
> Whatever he did was an instantaneous deed". 3

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1. AU. 1342.
2. TC. 5.
3. Fianaigecht ed. Meyer, TIS. 16, 1910, p. 31, other examples of a king's virtues: e.g. AL. IV. 341; Meyer, Preuss. Akad. de Wiss. 1919; Vit. Trip. p.507. cf. also significant names of kings e.g. Rory Yellowspear; Hugh Breakspear; Conn of the 100 battles; Muir-Ceartach (Wall of righteousness).

Two main themes have run through this discussion of the virtues attributed to the ideal Irish king, both illustrating the coherence and reasonableness of the conglomeration of qualities he was pictured as possessing: they were not just arbitrary fantasies. For, in the first place, these virtues - idealised and romantic as they were - did have some connection with the actual day to day behaviour of the king (as far, that is, as we can discern it): he did organise cattle raids, receive tribute, take decisions: he was involved in the social, economic and political life of the <u>túath</u>. Secondly, and more interestingly, this theory of kingship found in the legal, mythical and didactic tradition, as well as refracted through the later Annals, was a learned theory, owing its expression to the "learned order" of Ireland: it emphasised the significance of the figure of the king only to indicate, at the very same time, his dependence on the "druidic" aspects of society - on, that is, the poets, historians and jurists.

There is one further theme we can touch on. This follows from the work of Dumézil, in particular from his "<u>L'Idéologie Tripartite des Indo-Européens</u>"[1] where he traces the notion among many Indo-European peoples of a threefold division of society into the categories exemplified by priests (or jurists);

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1. Dumézil, 1958.

warriors; and people (the food-producers). It is obvious how well this fits the case of Ireland. Dumézil himself points this out in his discussion, in the same work, of "les classes sociales chez les Celtes" (druids; military aristocracy; cattle-herding freeman).[1] He further illustrates this threefold classification of the world by showing how calamities are often conceived of as being, likewise, threefold, affecting these three basic spheres of social interest - health or food, violence, and law. In the case of Ireland he quotes the striking example from the beginning of the Senchus Mor: "There are three periods when the world dies: the period of a plague, of a general war, of the dissolution of verbal contracts".[2] We can now add to this the complex of the virtues of Irish kings: for they too can be grouped into the same three categories.

So the king, as well as being represented as one part of society, the warlike aspect, and as such dependent on the druidic side, is also conceived of as uniting in himself in his role of king, the virtues of all aspects, whether the peace, wisdom and justice of the druid and seer, the courage, strength, high birth and violence of the military aristocrat, or the ability to produce food, wealth and prosperity, the special concern of the pastoral or agricultural freeman. Since

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1. Op. cit., esp. pp. 11-2.
2. Op. cit., pp. 20-1 = AL. I. 51.

he thus unites all divisions in himself it is now easy to see why the king should be represented as essential to the good order of his kingdom, even to the possibility of society at all: why he should be so carefully instructed in his duties; why "tribes who have lost their king are like a cauldron without a cover, a harp without a string";[1] and why the death of a king from disease should be described as leading to a multitude of evils "battles, raids, murders, violations of holy places. Woe to him who brought upon us this sickness of the king of Ireland".[2]

And now one last lament for a king (Niall Glundubh) who died in 918.

Sorrowful today is noble Ireland,
Without a valiant chief of hostage reign;
It is seeing the heavens without a sun,
To see Magh-Neill without Niall.

There is no joy in man's goodness;
There is no peace nor gladness among hosts;
No fair can be celebrated,
Since the cause of sorrow died.

A pity this, O Beloved Magh-Bregh,
Beautiful desirable country.
Thou hast parted with thy Lordly king;
Niall the wounding hero has left thee!

Where is the chief of the western world?
Where is the hero of every clash of arms?
Is it the brave Niall of Criucha
That has been lost, O great cantred![3]

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1. AP. 22.
2. An. Inisf. 1114. 2.
3. AU. 918.

IV.

I shall end this chapter by adding some account of the interesting list of the "taboos" of the Irish kings, and, after that, some mention of what has been referred to as the "ritual position of the king". The first of these will involve extensive quotation, but this would seem to be well justified in view of the great interest of the text; there has been a recent scholarly edition and translation.

"The Tabeos of the King of Ireland"[1] is an ancient Irish tract setting out not only the "taboos" (geasa) or forbidden things, but also the corresponding prescriptions or obligations of the kings. There are five main sections apart from the conclusion, dealing with, respectively, the kings of the five provinces of Ireland, beginning with the foremost, the king of Tara, and then, in turn, the kings of Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. The prose text is followed by a poem recapitulating the contents of the prose; the verse is attributed to a poet of the 11th century, but, though the earliest manuscript is not until the 14th century, "the tract doubtless contains genuine old tradition" and the rules described may have continued until the time of the Norman Invasion.[2]

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1. Ed. tr. Dillon PRIA. LIV, 1951.
2. Dillon, loc. cit. p. 2.

I propose to quote the prose versions, with some extracts from the verses, of the first and the fifth sections, dealing with the king of Tara, and the king of Ulster, from the translation by Myles Dillon.

I. "These are the seven prohibitions of the king of Tara, that is to say: that the sun should rise while he is in bed in the plain of Tara, to break a journey on Wednesday in Mag Breg, to travel over Mag Cuillinn after sunset, to strike his horses in Fán Cummair, to enter north Tethba on Tuesday, a scout at Bethra on the Monday after Beltaine, the track of an army on Áth Maigne on the Tuesday after Samuin.

His seven prescriptions, namely: the fish of the Boyne, the deer of Luibneach, the mast of Mana, the bilberries of Brí Léith, the cress of the Brossnach, water from the well of Tlachtga, the hares of Naas (or of Maistiu). All of these used to be brought to the king of Tara on the first of August. And the year in which he used to consume them did not count against him as life spent, and he used to be victorious in battle on every side. And Cúán Úa Lochráin made this song about those things:

Good sir who barrest the house
I am Ua Lochráin the poet:
let me pass into the firm house
where the high-king of Ireland is.

He will get from me
knowledge which will not be false:
his seven powerful lucky things
and the seven prohibitions of the high-king.

Read what the seven prescriptions are:
if they come to the king of Tara,
the ready land will be fruitful for him;
he will be successful in battle and shrewd in affairs..

Read the seven prohibitions - it is no theft -
if they should happen to the king of Tara,
it causes retreat in battle
and luckless disaster."

V. "The five prohibitions of the king of Ulster: the horse-race of Ráith Lini among the warriors of Dál nAraide; to listen to the flight of the flocks of birds of Linn Sailech after sunset; to arrange a feast of the flesh of the bull of Dáire mac Dáiri; to go in the month of March into Mag Coba; to drink the water of Bó Nemid between two darknesses.

His five prescriptions: the games of Cualnge (for despoiling ships); the glory of his army in Mag Muirthemne; to begin his expedition always from Emain Macha; to enforce hostages as far as Dún Sobairchi; the terror of Emain Macha, namely, to spend the night there with weapons for the three nights immediately before crossing the frontier...

Let the king of Ulster hear his lucky things,
a prescription has been made for him:
the game of Cualnge, despoiling of swift ships;
the glory of his armies in Muirthemne....

Here are, let it be firmly told,
for the five kings of Ireland
including the king of Tara, as it is,
their lucky things and their prohibitions.

He is not entitled to the circuit of a whole province
nor to be ollam of Ireland,
the poet who is found without
whatever you demand, no slight requirement."

At first sight this list of detailed prescriptions may seem a meaningless jumble of idle superstitions. Indeed they have been more or less regarded as such by many of those who have discussed them: they are analogous to "primitive magic, and ... may be beyond explanation" or "partly counterfeit religion, the concoction of a caste of shamans, designed to increase their power";[1] many of them "rested on deep seated

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1. Dillon, loc. cit., p. 2.

primitive beliefs and ideas";[1] or else they can only be understood in the light of what Draak considers the basic religious idea among the pagan Irish that "Fate works with the dangerous regularity of a well-set trap,"[2] so that many of the gessa were in order to avoid risking again some calamity undergone by a remote predecessor at some particular time and place. The concept of geis became a common motif in later literature and romance, as an external injunction or sanction laid on a hero, and as such has attracted interest and comment:[3] it was really a primitive "tabu" or a precaution; or due to "early ideas of morality" or "primitive notions of honour".[4]

However all we are concerned with here are the prohibitions and prescriptions attaching to kingship; to an office, that is, rather than to an individual. And in fact when we examine the list, it emerges how closely connected it is with the king's virtues and duties as they have been described above. The prescriptions are over-detailed and ritualised no doubt - but the principle underlying the collection is quite intelligible. His military aspect is referred to again and again - he must enforce hostages as far as Dún Sobairchi, begin his expedition from Emain Macha, desplay the "glory of

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1. RIA. dict. sv. geis.
2. Draak, 1959, p. 662.
3. v. Reinhard: 1933; Vendryes' review Et. Celt. I. 164.
4. E. Hull: Old Irish tabus. Folklore XI. 1901.

his army", not make "the track of an army" at the unprescribed time. If he observes his prescriptions, he will be "victorious in battle on every side", if not "retreat in battle and luckless disaster". The king, as we know, must also be generous and give his due feasts and games: part of his virtue of generosity and wealth was that he should be given the tribute and gifts due to him - token examples of these are mentioned "the fish of the Boyne .. the bilberries of Bri Leith .. water from the well of Tlachtga". He should hunt, display his pomp and his army, act as king in the right order for a king, not, that is, after sunset or between two darknesses, or going widdershins; he should be up with the sun, not sleeping on into the day. He should settle boundary disputes, be successful in battle, represent his people. If he fulfils his duties, the whole land will be prosperous and fruitful, an evident sign of the king's truth.

The prohibitions are perhaps more obscure than the prescriptions. Some of them at least are connected with mythical events said to have occurred at the places specified, although, since so many places in Ireland had mythical associations, as exemplified, above all, in the Dindshenchus, it seems rather crude to suggest that these prohibitions "may have had their origin in misfortunes".[1] For why some misfortunes should

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1. Dillon, p. 4. (my underlining); on mythical assocs. see Dillon throughout.

lead to <u>gessa</u> and not others is not explained.[1]

But whatever the details, the main picture gives us in outline a representation of the virtues and duties of kingship as put forward in learned theory of the poets or historians. The forceful, the economic and the contractual aspects of kingship are all adverted to. If we go through the five sections of the obligations of the different kings we find, for example, continual references to the king's military virtues, displayed in his forceful coercion of others, even his hunting expeditions and display of booty and glory: thus we find mention of "the track of an army" and his victory in battle (1), of his prescriptions to despoil, burn, and "go with a dark grey army" (3), hunting, booty and taking of hostages (4), expeditions, terror with weapons, and, again, enforcing hostages (5). The king's generosity, wealth, holding of feasts, pomp, and gathering of his due tribute are also brought out: he must be given, on the 1st of August, his dues of fish, mast, water (1), of deer, mast and ale (2); he should hold the games of Carman (2), the feast of Loch Léin (3), the games of Cualnge (5), he must "drink hot ale in Mag Muirisce" (4).

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1. Almost all the lists of prohibitions have some references to <u>horses</u> (the king must not, in certain circumstances specified, "strike horses", "ride a dirty black-heeled horse", a "dappled grey" horse, attend a "horse race") - but I do not know whether this is of any significance.

Finally he must manifest right order - he should protect against oppression (3) and organise a boundary meeting (4). But, more than this, he himself must symbolise the right order and truth of the course of the year or of the day - many of the prohibitions are concerned with what must or must not be done after or before sunset, or at the times of the great festivals of Ireland, Beltany on May 1st, and Samain on 1st November. The significance of this aspect of the king's virtues will emerge, it is hoped, in the following chapter in the discussion of the king's truth - for, as Dillon has pointed out, it was part of truth to observe one's gessa.[1] It is in the same connexion of a stylised representation of the king's right virtues that we can quote the description of the ideal week that should be followed by the king:

> "the seven occupations ... of a king, viz.: Sunday for drinking ale, for he is not a lawful chief who does not distribute ale every Sunday; Monday for judgment, for the adjustment of the people; Tuesday at chess; Wednesday seeing greyhounds coursing; Thursday at marriage duties; Friday at horse racing; Saturday at giving judgments." 2

"The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland," therefore, are not to be regarded as meaningless or arbitrary magic: in spite of their over-emphasis on detail and specialist reference to mythical or esoteric knowledge, typical of the theory of a

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1. Dillon, PBA. 1947, p. 252.
2. AL. IV. 335.

specialist learned class, they do bear a real relation to the learned theory of the ideal king, referring throughout to his virtues and his duties as binding on him if he is to be successful in his kingship. This is clear in the Conclusion:

> "It is certain of the kings of Ireland, if they avoided their gessa and obtained their prescriptions, that they would suffer neither misfortune nor disturbance, and neither plague nor pestilence would come in their reign, and they would not fail with age before ninety years.
>
> "The poet or historian who does not know the lucky things and prohibitions of these kings is not entitled to visitation or reward." 1

Finally a word about the "religious" or "ritual" position of the king. It is particularly relevant to introduce this topic here, for the existence of set "taboos" for the king has seemed to support the theory that magic or divine powers were attributed to the king. Furthermore, the list of gessa is in fact given by Frazer (in a summary fashion and without specific comment) in the Golden Bough; this is in a chapter, entitled "The Burden of Royalty", that is concerned with the supernatural powers of kings or priest, often an "incarnation of a deity."[2]

Frazer's general analysis has therefore been followed by many who have referred to Irish kingship: in particular

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1. Probably a later addition, but "nothing in language to indicate a date later than the 10th century". Dillon, 1951, p.25.
2. Ch. XVII, pp. 228; 221.

by Macalister in his book "Tara". There he asserts that "the divinity of the king is unmistakably written over every page of Irish legend and history" as "a living incarnation of one of the deities".[1] The idea of the king's divinity or sacredness is assumed by most writers on Ireland - he was "semi-divine", "quasi-divine and sacred", "bound by magical tabus", "possibly .... chief priest";[2] a recent writer considers that "the ritual functions of the king were of as great importance as were his executive ones in the assembly or on the battle field".[3] There is also the further suggestion by some that the king was "ritually slain".[4]

This last point can be dealt with briefly first. The Irish kings, like any others, all died one way or another, some, so far as we can see, from natural causes, and many of them violently, killed either by their kinsmen or in battle. So it could not be <u>disproved</u> that such deaths were in some way "ritual"; the evidence <u>could</u> always be so interpreted if one were determined enough on the <u>a priori</u> likelihood of some kind of ritual killing of the king. In general however it now appears from the comparative anthropological data that regular king-killing is not anything like so widespread or

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1. 1931, p. 125.
2. Dillon, 1951, p. 1; Binchy, 1958, p. 135; de Paor, 1958, p. 31; MacNeill, 1935, p. 60.
3. Powell, 1959, p. 75.
4. E.g. Powell loc. cit. p. 121; RC. XLVI, 1929, p. 176; Macalister, 1931, p. 127ff.

indisputable as was once assumed. And further, in the particular case of Ireland, a negative answer must apparently be given to each of the two questions one could ask about the deaths of kings. First, whether there is evidence that the kings were in fact <u>automatically</u> killed at some specific point in their reign, by, for instance, the people when crops failed, or their successors at the precise time when they were thought to have become old and feeble: - such a practice does not seem to be indicated in the sources. Secondly, was it part~~pass~~ of the theory of kingship that ideally he should be killed or sacrificed instead of dying naturally? There seems no hint of this in, for example, the literature of instructions to kings, nor in the laws and sagas. Indeed so far as the <u>theory</u> went, anyone who was guilty of killing one of his own kin was, ideally, debarred from being king. The terrible effects of kin-murder (fingal) by a king are described in the stories, and, in the laws, it is laid down that a king guilty of <u>fingal</u> is not entitled to his honour price.[1] Therefore in conditions where <u>in practice</u> many kings were in fact killed by their kinsmen but also were very often succeeded by one of their kin, it seems in general unlikely that it should be part of the ideal <u>theory</u> associated with kingship that a king should be killed, "ritually" or otherwise, by his successor

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1. E.g. LG. 211; MacDarec's Hostel in MacNeill, 1921, p. 67. BR. 111; TR. 186.

The problem of the king's religious or ritual status is more complex. Here we must disentangle some of the different strands of meaning that are implied when the religious aspects of kingship are referred to. It is not enough just to label him as "sacred" and leave it at that. The Irish king could be described as "semi-divine" (and so on) either because, as king, he represented the whole of society, transcending in himself all divisions; or because he had specific duties as priest or mediator; or because there were so many symbolic and ritualistic associations tied up with the position of king that we could in some sense speak of its being a kind of "cosmic" kingship.

In the first of these senses the Irish king clearly had a symbolic and therefore, in a way, a religious status. For, as has been outlined in this chapter on the virtues of the king, he was conceived in the learned theory of kingship as ideally possessed of all the basic virtues necessary to society, and as uniting in himself the specific qualities of all the different aspects of his kingdom: as being both king in the sense of warrior, specifically opposed to the druidic aspect, and, as king, transcending all oppositions and being at once poet, warrior and producer of food and wealth. Thus the king could symbolise the whole society.

Secondly, did the king have specified duties as a priest?

MacNeill thought that he may have been the chief priest of his people.[1] But in fact there seems to be no evidence of this. And insofar as we can speak at all of a priestly class or priestly functions, these are certainly to be attached to the "druidic order" which was explicitly distinguished from the kingly.

There remains the third sense, and it is this that is both most interesting and most perplexing. For what are we to say of the frequently occurring themes of the king's truth, and the results of this truth in his kingdom - the fertility of the land, fruitfulness of the woods, health of cattle? Of the idea that the weather in some way depended on the king, and the apparent references to a mystic marriage between the king and his land? Or of the magical ordeals that the king was described as undergoing as a necessary test of his true kingship? These problems cannot be answered by any glib attribution of divinity to the king, or assertion that he was the incarnation of a deity - he was not. An understanding of how these qualities of the king fitted in with the other aspects of Irish society - the law, the idea of contract, the position of the poets - involves some discussion, however tentative, of the special symbolism inherent in Irish kingship and Irish society. This will form the subject of the next chapter.

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1. 1935, p. 60.

IRISH KINGSHIP. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER OF IRISH SOCIETY

"By the Prince's Truth great kingdoms are ruled ... by the Prince's Truth fair weather comes in each fitting season, winter fine and frosty, spring dry and windy, summer warm, with showers of rain, autumn with heavy dews, and fruitful."

(from Irish Instructions to a King)

"By means of truth the sun is warm, by means of truth the moon shines, by means of truth the wind blows, by means of truth the earth is stable"

(from a Hindu text)[1]

I. Cosmology and Poetry

There is no Irish myth about the origin of the world. We do not have any description of the origin or creation of matter, nor of the beginning, once and for all, of Irish society. Rather the earth is represented as taking form slowly and gradually under the eyes of the different peoples who in turn entered the land of Ireland. The invasion motif has "taken the place of the cosmological speculations of other lands", so that in the stories of the successive invaders of

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1. qu. Dillon, 1947, pp. 250-1.

Ireland we hear of the gradual adding and shaping of lakes or rivers of plains, and of the instituting of the various customs and values of Irish society.[1]

This invasion motif, then, goes deep in the Irish representation of the world; this is not without significance in our analysis of Irish society. But there are further points to notice here too.

The "gods" of the Irish differ from those of many other peoples. This is perhaps partly due to the nature and period of our evidence; but even so the attempts to fit the Irish mythological figures into some clear-cut Indo-European pantheon, with precisely differentiated gods each with specialised function, have failed. For one thing, the system of specialist spheres belonging to separate gods that we assume from a rather superficial acquaintance with the gods of Greece and Rome, does not apply to the Irish. "We must dismiss the notion of one deity who is titular as it were, of a particular function" writes M.L. Sjoestedt "in favour of the notion of diverse realisations of a single religious idea".[2] Furthermore to ask, as did Rhys, who <u>really</u> was the "supreme deity of the Celtic race",[3] the Celtic Zeus or Jupiter, is, in the case of

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1. Chadwick, I, 1932, p. 326; d'Arbois, 1903, p. 16.
2. Sjoestedt, 1949, p. 25.
3. Rhys, 1886, p. 49; cf. 122.

the Irish, a meaningless question. What Hocart says of India applies as well here: "We must get rid of the late rigidity if we would understand earlier notions of divinity. Gods are not placed in a fixed order of superiority any more than men are: the leading part may be taken by different gods on different occasion"[1]. We must not impose our ideas and prejudices on the Irish stories, and assume that we can have a precise answer to the not very pertinent question of who the real gods of the pagan Irish actually and originally were; which of the invading peoples in Irish story? Some are indeed more important than others. If we must call some "gods" and not others then, it is clear, we can fix on no others than the leaders of the mythical Tuatha Dé Danann, on the Dagda, the "Good god", on Lug, possessing many skills, on Goibniu the smith, and the king Nuada. Here and elsewhere they can be called "gods" and their divine and supernatural qualities recognised. But to assume further that here precisely and here alone we have delimited "the supernatural" of the ancient Irish, would be quite wrong. Just as the land of Ireland was not created once and for all but grew gradually as the mythological and historic peoples of Irish legend came to its shores, so we cannot delimit one group alone and say "those and those alone are the gods of

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1. Hocart, 1936, p. 194.

the Irish"; rather we find the natural and supernatural shading into one another, as too the historic into the mythological. The Irish had not, in our sense of the word, any systematic theology; Celtic religion, Eoin MacNeill writes, had "neither temple, idol, nor priest".[1]

However there are the stories of the different invading peoples, coming in turn with their leaders and their skills. When the people of Partholón landed, for example, they found in Ireland only three lakes and nine rivers; but seven new lakes formed in his lifetime, and four plains were cleared; in his time too were the first guest-house, and the first adultery and the first judgment that were made in Ireland. Then followed the race of Nemed (in their time there erupted four lakes, and twelve plains were added to the land of Ireland) and the Fir Bolg who brought weapons and the rule of justice. But all this time a continual struggle went on against the Fomorians who "like the powers of Chaos, ever latent and hostile to cosmic order"[2] oppressed and resisted each people who invaded Ireland. So when at last the Tuatha Dé Danann (the people of the goddess Dana) reached Ireland their greatest test was at the mythic battle of Moytura (Mag Tuired) when the Fomorians were finally defeated

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1. MacNeill, 1910, p. 6.
2. Sjoestedt, p. 6.

by the skill and art of the Tuatha Dé.

The Tuatha Dé were the epitome of druidery and art and knowledge. They came to Ireland in a cloud of mist "by the might of druidery" from the cities in the east where they had learnt "wisdom and magic, for wisdom and magic and déviltry (fis ocus druidecht ocus diabaldanacht) were of service to them"[1], and it was by their skill and art (dán) that the Tuatha Dé, the people of the goddess Dana, defeated the Fomorians. It was said among the Irish that those individuals who were noted for their skill and knowledge, for music or magic or medicine, were descended from them "for every darkness of art, and every clearness of reading and every craft of cunning that is in Ireland, they are of the Tuatha Dé Danann by origin".[2] We can recall the druid Amairgin's song

"I am the wind on the sea
I am the wave of the ocean...
I am a hawk on a cliff
I am a dewdrop in sunshine"

and finally "I am the strength of art".[3]

In the tradition of the Tuatha Dé is expressed the victory of art and knowledge over chaos and disorder.

Now we can understand the significance of the statement

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1. LG. 358; The 4 jewels of the TDD. in ZCP. 18. 1929.
2. Genealog. Tracts A. 39. LG. 371.
3. qu. Sjoestedt, p. 12 =LG. Poem, LXIX.

that for the Irish there was no one creation of their land, but it grew up gradually under the eyes of the successive invaders of Ireland. Rivers, wells and plains took on form as each people came with their own arts, and as the land was shaped and ordered out of formlessness. This reminds us of the poet, whose song has form, shape "the beauty of the shaped thing: it is not a formless, shapeless chunk of wood, but a carving ...."[1] This forming power of art (dán) is above all symbolised in the Irish invasion stories by the victory of the Tuatha Dé Danann, with their druidic skill and power through their formative art, over the Fomorians, the representatives of darkness and chaos and disorder. The complex of Irish associations makes this even clearer. The Celts are known to have reckoned time by nights, and not by days; thus night precedes day. In the Irish year, winter precedes summer. The 1st of November is the day of the new year - darkness precedes light. In the same way the Fomorians precede yet are defeated by the Tuatha Dé; for the Fomorians come from the north, the side of darkness, night and blackness, the Tuatha from the east, endowed with art and learning and justice.[2] D'Arbois considers that this sort of dualism is basic to Celtic thought; the two principles, one negative and evil, and one positive and good, are continually

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1. Williams, 1944, p.7.
2. d'Arbois, 1903, pp. 58-9; 79.

at war with each other; yet the second is sprung from the first.[1]

One thing at least is clear (whether or not, that is, we wish to accept d'Arbois' "fundamental dualism") - as symbolised in the mythic battle of Moytura, art had a power to shape and control what was before formless chaos; and thus it was that the land of Ireland grew up gradually and took shape. And, in this sense, we can now find intelligible the druidic claim, which before would have seemed nonsensical, that "it was they made heaven and earth and the sea ... and the sun and moon".[2] We can see too some point to the druid and poet Amairgin's other song when the last invaders reached Ireland; for besides singing of "the strength of art", he also called on the land of Ireland

> "I invoke the land of Ireland
> shining, shining sea!
> fertile, fertile mountain!
> gladed gladed wood!
> abundant river, abundant in water!
> fish-abounding lake!" 3

The Irish "men of art" (aes dána), sharers in the druidic tradition, formed by their art what was before disorder or meaningless. The musicians and historians and lawyers could give shape to things by their skill and knowledge; the filid,

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1. Ibid., pp. 219-20.
2. AL. I. 23.
3. Qu. d'Arbois p. 141 =IG. Poem LXXII.

the poets, could "see" into the depth and form below the superficiality of things, and this seeing gave control. Thus their powers of divination were not just conducive to foretelling or prophecy of isolated or contingent future events, to, as it were, the mere surface kaleidoscope of arbitrary and disconnected facts, but involved insight into the present nature of things, their true form.[1] Those who could perceive this form had power over it.

This moulding art of historian, poet or lawyer gives further point to the position in Ireland of the "men of art". History, mythically conceived, was under the control of the man of art; the poet, composing in the dark, could "see"; a legal judgment, too, might follow meditation in the dark that precedes insight.[2] The effective force of satire and praise now becomes more meaningful. And the whole idea of the power of knowledge is summed up in the common Irish concept of a "powerful story", described by Dillon in his article in 1947: those, for example, who hear the great Irish epic of the Cattle Raid of Cooley (Táin Bó Cúalgne) gain a year's protection; the famous hymn of St. Patrick (Lorica Patricii), with its invocation of the forces of nature, has, through its recitation, the power to preserve

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1. Cf. Chadwick, 1952, p. 41.
2. AL. I. 25; MacAirt, Eriu, 1958, p. 140 on Cormac.

from dangers to soul and body; and in the satirical "vision of Mac Con Glinne", the "30 chief virtues attending this tale" are referred to, though, as the author puts it, "a few of them are enough for an example ... the married couple to whom it is related on their first night shall not separate without an heir .... the king to whom it is recited before battle or conflict shall be victorious".[1] This is a motif that recurs again and again, and, however fancifully it may sometimes be used, it reflects the basic Irish idea of the power of art.

The land of Ireland was a present sign of its own history. All land perhaps is so; and writings on mythology have made us sensitive to the mythical and historic connections of noted places and landmarks. But in Ireland it was especially so. The land took on form as the different peoples reached it; and it was the poet by his art who could see this form in history, poetry and the land around. For in Irish tradition, an important part of the knowledge necessary for the poet, was the dindshenchus, the lore of places. This was worked out, collected and handed on in a quite systematic and detailed way. The stories about the origins of particular festivals or sanctuaries, and the legends surrounding the various wells, lakes and hills of Ireland, fill several volumes of intermingled prose and verse, crammed with detail - history, myth,

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1. Qu. Dillon, 1947, p. 249.

legend, legal precedent, and rules for feast days and fairs.

The knowledge, held by the poet as man of art, of the history and legends of Ireland was what gave it its meaning and significance. And the conservation of the stories as to how all the natural phenomena, wells, plains, lakes, and rocks, came into being and what happened near them, gave a certain command over them.[1] Further, we remember, the Irish concept of "the supernatural" was not of a separate domain with defined and separated spatial or temporal delimitation. It was part of, a dimension of, the land, the history and the lore of Ireland, a world "which is indeed our world, but pregnant with many 'otherworlds'."[2] MacNeill too describes what has been so often called the "Celtic Otherworld" in these terms; "coexistent in locality with the world of human and mortal life, somewhat as one triangle is supposed by Euclid to occupy the place in which another, equal and similar, has already been drawn".[3] To be able to see this second triangle, as it were, was to know the land and the lore of Ireland - and this was the duty of the poet.

To know the truth about the land of Ireland, then, and about its stories, was to know its history. To tell these

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1. See esp. van Hamel, 1934.
2. Sjoestedt, p. 92; cf. p. 1.
3. MacNeill, 1910, p. 12.

stories was to recreate the history and formation of Irish society; to re-enact, say, the battle between the people renowned for their art, the Tuatha Dé, and the forces of disorder and darkness.

The re-enactment of the history, indeed of the existence, of Ireland is found too in the festivals of the Irish year. In the Dindshenchus are described the legends surrounding the places of festival and fair, who first founded the gatherings, what heroes from the past are buried there. And many of the great events in the story of the invasions of Ireland are narrated as having taken place on the date of one or other of the four great festivals; the Fir Bolg, for example, arrived on the feast of Lugnasad, the 1st of August. But it is the twofold character of the Celtic year that is most noticeable, cut by the two celebrations of Beltany on the first day of May, when summer began, the day when the first invaders, the sons of Partholon, landed, and, most important of all, of Samain marking the start of winter and of the new year, on the 1st of November - or rather (for here too night precedes day) on the eve of November 1st, the night still celebrated as Hallowe'en. Samain is the date round which clusters mythological story, the ritual duties of the kings (gessa) are, as Baudiš[1] pointed out long ago, concerned above all with this date, and it was at Samain that the tribute, in story, had

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1. Ériu, VIII, 1916.

to be paid to the oppressing Fomorians, and that the battle of Moytura took place; Samain is the night that "belongs neither to one year nor the other, and is, as it were, free from temporal restraint. It seems that the whole supernatural force is attracted by the seam thus left at the point where the two years join."[1]

Now what have been called the "political functions" of these festivals have been referred to before now, and their importance in a land without towns or centralised power is obvious, where people of different groups met at the festivals, made contact, exchanged goods, arranged marriages, and under-kings paid homage and brought tribute and gifts. But what it is more important to emphasise here are the mythological connections of the festivals, their connection, that is, with the growth and creation of Ireland. It was at the festivals too that one very important procedure was said to take place - the verifying of the histories. Thus we read one description of the feast of Tara "to preserve laws and rules, and to clarify the history of Ireland, and to write it in the Psalter of Tara". In those days, continues the same (late) author the history was kept with truth "for they had order and law by which they were unable, without immense detriment, to commit untruth or fallacy (breug na fallas)."[2]

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1. Sjoestedt, p. 52.
2. Genealog. Tracts A. 11, 21.

The history and very existence of Ireland was thus symbolically recreated at the festivals by the knowledge and recitation of the historic, mythic and geographic lore of Ireland; and the actual land all around was a witness to the truth of this creation and recreation. That we should find this concept among the Irish need not surprise us, nor is there any need to explain away as fanciful and late, or, alternatively, pre-Celtic. It is, in one form or another, not uncommon-in India for example.[1] We need not then dismiss as meaningless the analogous, though far less explicit, idea in Ireland that a knowledge of the land and its history in some sense involved control over it. It was the poet, the "man of art", who had this power.

What emerges from this discussion is the deep importance in early Ireland of what I have called the "poetic" aspect of

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1. Hocart has, as usual, something penetrating to say on a similar point - "The idea of men creating the world, or even an island, by means of a ceremony, is so incompatible with our notions of the universe that it may at first seem impossible that such ceremonies should ever have existed. Yet what the Fijian and the Rotuman merely suggest the Indian boldly proclaims, so boldly as to shock earlier generations of Sanskritists who had not that vast range of information and that truer appreciation of ancient beliefs which has fallen to the lot of their successors ..... The Satapatha describes at great length the method to be followed for the creation of the world .... the officiant spreads the clay to form the bottom of the pan 'for the bottom part is that earth' .... creates the universe .....Thus it would appear that by creating the universe a man gets control over it". Hocart, 1927, pp. 190-1.

society. To speak here of "poetry" and "the poet" is to over-simplify; for his significance was due to the way in which he was the representative of the "druidic tradition" and of the "men of art" (aes dána) in general, whose arts included those of medicine, smithery, or carving as well as, more especially, law, history, divination and poetry. The high position in Irish society of what might almost be called "spiritual authority" is a constant theme in all Irish writing, historic, mythic or geographical. It is also explicitly recognised in the institution of the class, in the law tracts, of the Aes Dána, and in the special powers and functions of the poets. It was they who knew and held Ireland, and they who had as their special province the knowledge and utterance of Truth.

Poets and the power of poetry and truth ..... but was this element <u>all</u> in Irish society? Must anything be added to the "spiritual authority" represented by the poet?

Ireland was always represented as 5-fold.[1] This goes deep in all Irish literature, even that referring to times when, if there <u>was</u> any set number of "provinces" it was certainly not <u>five</u>; even now the modern Irish word for province is <u>cuigi</u>, a fifth, and all Ireland (all 4 provinces) is still expressed as "the five fifths of Ireland" (cuig cuigi na hÉrenn).

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1. O'Rahilly, 1946, p. 171f.

Ireland was pictured as made up of five parts - four, and the central province, the Middle one, Meath (Mide). In Meath was the stone of Uisnech, said to mark the centre of all Ireland, "the stone of the division" where, so it was said, the great roads radiated to all the provinces of Ireland. We need scarcely try to find a historic or racial explanation of this 5-fold conception of Ireland, in view of the well-known comparative evidence for this representation of the divisions of city or country - four and the centre.[1] Even if historical evidence <u>was</u> found, it would not be relevant here. For what <u>is</u> relevant is that it was in the Middle province in the centre of Ireland that the highest king of all was supposed to reign - the king at Tara. The poet indeed had Truth and, with it, control over the land of Ireland - but in the centre of that land, as he himself has presented it to us, was <u>the king</u>. We must consider then, as well as the authority of the poet, the position of the king and how it comes about that <u>he</u> too can be endowed with truth, the sphere of the poet, and that he

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1. E.g. India, Java. cf. Jung and Kerenyi: Introd. to Science of Mythology, London, 1951, p. 13ff. Cf. l'Orange on <u>Cosmic kingship in the Ancient World</u>; he stresses the correspondence between the king's titles and his place in the cosmic city, which is divided into "four quadrants which reflect the four quarters of the world. At the very point of intersection, in the very axis of the world wheel, the palace is situated, here sits the king." The Sacral Kingship, 1959, p. 482.

can be conceived as being at the centre of society. For there is yet another text which speaks of the partition of Ireland - "Knowledge in the west battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, kingship in the centre".[1]

II. Truth

The quality that the Irish king was most frequently exhorted to have was that of Fír. But fír means truth: and truth came within the special competence of the poet, historian and man of art. Fír can also mean justice or right: but justice belonged to the sphere of the brehon, the jurist or lawyer. What then had the king to do with fír?

The answer to this question will take us to the heart of the Irish concepts of authority, and of Irish symbolism.

Fír[2] (mod. Irish fíor) is usually translated "truth", but it also often has the meaning of "justice" - in fact the two ideas are really one. A false judgment is an unjust one, so that a judge only possesses truth so long as he judges justly. Fír also means a pledge or guarantee, a test or ordeal in law as well as in reference to the ordeals, which,

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1. Ériu, IV, p. 147.
2. sv. fír in RIA dict.

in myth, the king had to undergo as witness that he was true king; an attestation, the king's word, the just cause in battle, a right or due, and fair play in a duel; it is also closely connected with the ideas of geis, a special prohibition, and of the fruitfulness and good order of a king's territory. I shall here in general adopt the most usual translation of fír as "truth", even though this may give a rather misleading impression; for it was not just literal or "factual" truth that was meant, but truth as part of the cosmic order, of the form and depth in nature and society that was "seen" by the poet. "The three candles that illumine every darkness: truth, nature, and knowledge". (fír, aicned, ecna).[1]

The Irish gnomic literature, especially the Instructions of Kings (Tecosca Ríg), gives us a picture of the virtues that should be practised in Irish society, and of the ideal of the perfect prince. Now the virtue constantly mentioned, emphasised and reiterated in these instructions is that of the king's truth (fír flaithemon). - "the idea which lies at the heart of all tecosca ríg, the constantly recurring fír flaithemon which is considered essential for a successful prince."[2]

> "Best for a king," we read, "is ... taking care of ancient lore, giving truth for truth, hostages in

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1. TR. 201.
2. Smith, ZCP, 17, 1927 on AC. 2.68.

fetters, truth without addition, true judgments, honouring poets, fertility during his reign, let him attend the sick, possess truth, chide falsehood .... for it is through the truth of a ruler that God gives all that." 1

Or again -

> "Three things that are best for a prince during his reign are truth mercy and silence; those that are worst for a king's honour are straying from the truth and adding to the false .... a prince's truthfulness - it is known - is a conflict which brings debility on hosts; it brings milk into the world, it brings corn and mast." 2

The most famous of the Instructions was that written by the first judge of Ireland, Morand, to the new king of Ireland, Feredach, in whose reign, we are told, there was especial fruitfulness and happiness; and this whole work (Audacht Moraind) is built up on the framework of the truth of the king

> Announce the word to him before all men. Bring the word to him before all men. Tell the word to him before all men. Reveal the word to him before all men.
> Let him magnify Truth, it will magnify him.
> Let him strengthen Truth, it will strengthen him.
> Let him preserve Truth, it will preserve him.
> Let him exalt Truth, it will exalt him.
> For so long as he preserves Truth, good will not be lacking to him, and his reign will not fail.
> For by the Prince's Truth great kingdoms are ruled.
> By the Prince's Truth great mortality is warded off from men
> By the Prince's Truth the great armies are driven off into the enemies' country.
> By the Prince's Truth every right prevails and every vessel is full in his reign ....
> By the Prince's Truth fair weather comes in each fitting season, winter fine and frosty, spring dry and windy, summer warm, with showers of rain, autumn with heavy dews, and fruitful. For it is the prince's falsehood that brings perverse weather upon wicked peoples and dries up the earth. 3

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1. TC. 1. 2. AP. 8. 37.
3. AM. 4-12; 25. tr. Dillon, 1947, pp.250-1.

In the legal writings too we find frequent references to the king's obligation to manifest truth. The law was founded on "truth and law and nature" (fír, dliged, aignead), and for the proper honour to be due to a king he must be "free from falsehood" (gen gae); a chief's bad qualifications are accounted sufficient cause for his subjects' separation from him, and this is explained by the commentary as referring to a false judgment or false witness.[1] 7 proofs are given which attest the falsehood of a king, a king is "bound to truth" (fírinde) as a bishop is to purity, and a poet to fairness in his compositions, and there are frequent mentions of the awful consequences to king or judge of a "false judgment".[2]

The myths and sagas give, as we would expect, more details still about the importance of the king's truth. When the Fir Bolg came to Ireland their king was Eochu - "there was no wetting in his time, save only dew: there was no year without harvest. Falsehoods were expelled from Ireland in his time. By him was executed the law of justice in Ireland for the first time."[3] Lugaid Mac Con, on the other hand, after a prosperous reign of 7 years delivered a false and unjust judgment "for a year after that he was in kingship in

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1. ALV. 3; I. 259; IV. 51; II. 323.
2. AL. IV. 53; V. 459; 353; IV. 15.
3. IG. 280.

Tara and no grass came through the ground, nor leaf through trees, nor grain into corn. Then the men of Ireland rejected him from his kingship because he was a false prince".[1] And it was because of his lack of justice and truth (anfhir), we remember, that Bres was driven out by his subjects and satirised by the poet - and he himself admits that his expulsion was justified because of his lack of truth.[2]

A king's truth or untruth could thus affect his legal position. In the same way as a justified satire, a false judgment could take away his honour, and the mark of his dishonour would appear on his face. False judgments caused blotches to rise on his face.[3] And a blemished king, of course, was no true king. "It was a prohibited thing that one with a blemish should be king at Tara."[4]

This association of justified satire and dishonour, with blemish of face, fame and truth, is thus here connected with the Irish concept of fír, with truth and falsity. But there is more to this than is indicated by any label like "primitive magic" or "the magic power of Truth". For "truth" here has a cosmic rather than a literal sense - this is what lies behind the Irish ideas about satire, blemish, falsity. A

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1. qu. Dillon, 1959, pp. 117-8.
2. Moytura, 45 in RC. 12. 1891.
3. AL. 25.
4. III. 85; I. 73; IV. 179.

king's truth was a manifestation of the right order of the world, in nature and in society; his fír was a necessary part of the form and order of the universe.

Just as the King's truth was a sign of the right order of the cosmos, so prosperity and success in his kingdom were a sign of the truth of his rule - the land of Ireland was well ordered and fruitful

> "acorns and nuts up to the knees in every autumn, wealth on the rivers Bush (?) and Boyne in the middle of the summer-month of every year, abundance of peace so that no one slew the other in Ireland in his reign. And as sweet as lute strings was the voice of the other to everyone in Ireland during his reign. The wind did not toss the tail of a cow from the middle of spring to the middle of autumn. His reign was not thundery nor stormy". 1

For wisdom and insight Cormac was said to have been among the greatest kings of Ireland; and his truth too was manifested in the fruitfulness of the land of Ireland.

> "It was not possible to drink the waters of her rivers on account of the spawn of her fish; it was not possible to travel her forests easily on account of the amount of their fruit; it was not easy to travel her plains on account of the amount of her honey, all of which had been granted him from heaven through the truth of his princedom". 2

It was not just the fertility of land and cattle that was bound up with the king's truth, but the general peace and harmony of his kingdom altogether. In the famous Instructions

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1. qu. Draak, p. 653.
2. qu. Dillon, 1947, p. 251 from Birth of Cormac.

of Morand, it is not only good weather, health of cattle, abundance of fish in the waters, corn and milk and mast that are promised through the king's truth, but also peace and victory, health and happiness.[1] In Conchobar's kingship "there was peace and quiet and 'gentle meeting' ; there was mast and game and sea-produce".[2] As for the true king Cormac "of Ireland he made a land of promise: she being then free of theft, of rapine, of violence, exempt from all necessity of watching, of herding and without perplexity in the matter of either meat or raiment to affect any man".[3]

All these blessings were bound up with the virtues and truth of the king. The decisions of his brehons, too, might affect the good order of nature and society; but ultimately the guarantee of their judgments was the truth of the king.

> "If you be a just prince (firen flaith) all will be well during your time.
> Purchase the goodly mast, and heat from the sun;
> purchase corn and milk, as every famous king has done
> giving no false judgment (gubreith) on the bad nor the good,
> but (finding) the true facts, that is fitting for a prince."[4]

The falsehood of the king was reflected in the world around him. The whole world, after all, was a sign and

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1. AM. e.g. 25, 28, 13.
2. qu. Draak, loc. cit.
3. Silv. Gad. p. 96.
4. CC. 15-7.

witness, as well as the result, of his truth or falsity.

So in the law tracts we find, quite explicitly stated, the signs of a king's falsehood.

> "the seven proofs which attest the falsehood of every king
> to turn a synod out of a ...fert
> to be without truth, without law (cen fír, cen dliged)
> defeat in battle
> dearth in his reign
> dryness of cows
> blight of fruit
> scarcity of corn
> these are the seven live candles which expose the falsehood (gae) of every king." 1

These signs of the king's falsehood recall the idea of the "ordeal". This again, like "oath", was fír. Oaths, attestations or ordeals were also part of truth.

In Irish Law there were various set ordeals by which innocence or guilt could be seen. We have descriptions of various ordeals said to have been used in deciding on the truth of an accused man - and, incidentally of his judge too; for arbitrator or brehon was as subject to fír as either plaintiff or defendant. He too would suffer from a false judgment.

Ordeals are not in any way unusual. But in Ireland[2] they were spoken of as specifically to do with the king - the twelve "truths of sovereignty" (fír flatha) were merely part of his truth and justice in general. These twelve were laid

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1. AL. IV. 53.
2. On Ordeals Hennessy PRIA X. 1867, p. 34f.

down, according to tradition, in an assembly held by the famous king, Cormac, and "the 12 fír flatha were publicly proclaimed ... These were used by them to distinguish between truth and falsehood"[1] .. "Moramn's collar" was perhaps the most famous - described sometimes as worn by the judge, so that when he gave a false decision, it would tighten round his neck and choke him; at other times we hear of Moramn's collar being worn by the accused, and choking him if guilty; it is clear that these are merely two aspects of the same concept of truth and falsity. Different methods of casting lots are mentioned too - in one three stones are selected, a white one to signify innocence (fír), black for guilt (go) and a speckled one for "half-guilt". There are also tests involving heat (a hot iron, or putting a hand in a cauldron of boiling water) drinking water (in the ordeal called "waiting at an altar" water was drunk afterwards "druidical incantations having been uttered over it"), and a famous cup which "broke with three false words" but came together again with three true ones.

It is with such examples, surely, that we must class what have been called "Acts of Truth"; fasting too can in some ways be regarded as a kind of ordeal. It was by something resembling such ordeals that Cormac's true claim to

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1. Ibid., p. 36.

kingship against the usurper was recognised. Mac Con, in the story, made a wrong award of a widow's sheep -

> "'No' said Cormac 'The shearing of the sheep is enough in compensation for the grazing of the woad, for both will grow again'. 'It is the true judgment!' said all 'It is the son of the true prince who has given judgment!' The side of the house on which the false judgment had been given fell down the slope. It will stay thus for ever". 1

In this story the falling of part of the house was a sign of the falsity of the usurper and his judgment; it was a kind of "ordeal". In a more general way, the seven tests of the falsehood of every king, quoted above, can be seen to be connected with the same idea. Again this exemplifies the interdependence of natural and social law. The king's truth is exhibited in the ordeals (fíra) and in the evident signs of the prosperity of his kingdom. Thus battle, for example, is clearly conceived of as a kind of ordeal; a people's success in war is part of the truth of the leader. Defeat in battle is one of the seven signs of a king's falsehood; a king who is defeated in battle is not entitled to honour-price; for, as a well-known proverb, attributed to Morann, put it "There has not been found, nor will be found, a more truthful judge than the battle-field".[2]

Many of the legal ordeals would seem to be merely trivial,

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1. In.Dillon, 1946, pp.24-5.
2. AL. IV. 53; V. 173; Aedh Ruadh 95.

arbitrary and magical. Yet when they are considered in connection with these general signs of the King's truthfulness it is clear that they have a part in the whole complex of ideas concerned with the "king's truth". For, like praise and satire, they are not only marks of this truth, but also a part, indeed a reinforcement of it; they form the grounds as well as the signs of the right order of the cosmos, which is upheld by the king.

This is perhaps more obvious in the case of the ordeals or tests by which, in story, the king was said to have been chosen and approved as the true king to succeed. This of course has many parallels: all kings are, in a sense, divine or mystical, and are thus considered as in some way or another divinely approved. Where the succession is by primogeniture the birth of the heir can be taken as a divine judgment; it has the same sanctity attached to it as the ordeal or lot.[1] Where, as in Ireland, the choice is between several eligible members of a royal family, some explicit manifestation of his truth is called for.

The Irish king, it is said, had to face several tests; only the true king could undergo them with success, and thus his truth was both seen and established. However in practice the choice was made, the idea that his truth was validated

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1. Cf. Figgis, 1922, p. 36.

in this way is essential.

> "There was a king's chariot at Tara. To the chariot were yoked two steeds of the same colour, which had never before been harnessed. It would tilt up before any man who was not destined to receive the kingship of Tara, so that he could not control it and the horses would spring at him.
>
> And there was a king's mantle in the chariot; whose might not receive Tara's sovereignty the mantle was ever too big for him.
>
> And there were two flag-stones in Tara: Blocc and Bluigne; and when they accepted a man, they would open before him until the chariot went through. And 'Fal' was there, the 'stone penis' at the head of the chariot course; when a man should have the kingship of Tara, it screeched against his chariot-axle, so that all might hear. But the two stones Blocc and Bluigne would not open before anyone who should not hold Tara's kingship, and their usual position was such that one's hand could only pass sideways between them; also he who was not to hold Tara's kingship, the Fal would not screech against his axle." 1

That was one way of verifying and establishing the true king. An alternative possibility was to <u>see</u> the true king by divination, and for this, we are told, a "bull-feast" was declared -

> "then the king, even Eterscele, died. A bull-feast is gathered by the men of Erin (in order to determine their future king), that is, a bull used to be killed by them and thereof one man would eat his fill and drink its broth, and a spell of truth was chanted over him (no chants or firindi fair) in his bed. Whosoever he would see in his sleep would be king, and the sleeper would perish if he uttered a falsehood (gai)." 2

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1. Ériu, VI, 130ff.
2. Da Derga's Hostel 11 in RC. XXII, 1901.

In the story, the sleeper sees a young naked man carrying a stone coming along the road to Tara at nightfall; and they go out to greet him as king.

If divination and the other ordeals were part of the truth of the kingdom, so, in the same way, were praise and satire, the functions of the poets. Both were effective only if true; for wrongful praise was of the same order as unjustified satire.[1] But true satire could be made by the poet against the king, and it marked the lack of truth in the kingdom - thus it could have the same effect as a king's falsehood, indeed it was part of the same thing. We hear of the famous satirist Ferchertne that lakes and streams sank when he blamed them, and in "The Voyage of Bran" the king contradicts the poet so

> "the poet said he would satirise him with his lampoons, and he would satirise their waters, so that fish should not be caught in their river-mouths .... upon the woods, so that they should not give fruit, upon their plains, so that they should be barren for ever of any produce." 2

One description that we have of the application of the particularly virulent form of satire called glám dícend shows very clearly the ordeal-like nature of the satire.

The king has refused to give a reward that was due for a poem;

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1. "Satires of over-praise". Ériu, XI. 1932, p. 45.
2. Voy. Bran, p. 49.

"There is fasting on the land of the king for whom the (unrequited) poem has been composed and counsel is taken with thirty warriors and thirty bishops and thirty poets about making a satire afterwards. And it is unlawful for them to hinder the satire once the reward has been refused. It only remains for the poets accompanied by six who have respectively the six degrees of poetry to go before sunrise to a mound where seven territories meet, and the chief poet faces the land of the king he is about to revile and they all have their backs to a thorn which stands on the summit of the hill, and there is a north wind, and each man carries in his hand a stone and a spike from the thorn and speaks into both of them a stanza .... The chief poet says his stanza first and then the other poets chant theirs in unison, and each puts his stone and his stick at the base of the thorn, and if it is they that are in fault the ground of the hill swallows them up; if it is the king, however, that is in fault, the ground swallows him and his wife and his child and his horse and his weapons and his clothing and his hound." 1

If a king's falsity could result in the failure of the crops and the order of his kingdom, or in a satire by the poet who in a sense had control over the land of Ireland, we can see how it was that guarantees were given, as between king and subjects, from the natural phenomena of the world; and fír, we remember, can also mean a pledge. One king swore by the sun and the wind not to exact tribute and when he broke his word, "it may be," says the annalist "that it was his guarantees to the Leinsterman, sun and wind, that killed him".[2] In another case after the murder of the rightful king, the earth refused its produce to the men of

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1. Qu. Knott, 1957, p. 64.
2. AU. 462.

Ireland, so that, at last, the three true heirs were sent for "to be made kings, and the sureties of sea and land and sun and moon and all the elements are given them".[1] Finally here is what Petrie refers to as a "pagan oath sworn by the Irish chiefs". It speaks of the pledges to be observed between the king Tuathal, and his subjects.

These are the sureties which Tuathal took,
Might at exacting,
Heaven, earth, sun, pure moon,
Sea, fruitful land,
Feet, hands, mouths with tongues,
Ears, eyes,
Horses, javelins, shields, valient swords,
With their hardness,
Countenances of men, dew with colours,
Strand with flood;
Corn, milk, fruit, each good likewise
Which men doth.
These sureties all were given,
According to law,
To Tuathal's children, to his race,
And to his tribe,
While the sea exists round Erin,
Insulated, solitary 2

The various kingly virtues too - rights and duties - were part of the king's truth; so an infringement of them could lead to satire, and to failure in the natural order and blemish of honour. Incest, for example, by the king with his sister is said to have led to adversity and crop failure;[3] the murder

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1. Qu. MacNeill, 1921, p. 67.
2. TRIA, XVIII, 1839, pp. 34-5; cf. Dillon, 1946, p.57; on oaths and sureties cf. O'Rahilly, 1946, p.298.
3. Keating, I. 44 (3. p. 315).

at the hostel of Mac Dareo has already been mentioned "the vassals did a massacre upon them there .... It was hideous and horrible in the hostel at that moment. The red ravenous vulture was gleeful, and the womanfolk were mournful at that fray". Although a new king was appointed after this the effect of the crime remained and he could not be true king -

> "Then the earth refused its fruit to the vassals after the great murder they had done on the free races of Ireland, and there was a great famine for twenty years so that there was no corn on the earth nor fruit on the trees, nor fish in the rivers, and the cows had no milk, and there was no good weather, and no peace for that reason". 1

The kingly virtue of hospitality too was part of the general order of the realm ("inhospitality will destroy the flowers, and through false judgments the fruits will fall")[2] and various possibilities were given in the laws where misdeeds by rulers (e.g. revoking grants) could mean that "produce is destroyed (as penalty) on every chief, so that there is destruction of corn, milk and fruit".[3]

Indeed all the king's rights and duties were part of his virtue, and that is why it was so important that they should be clearly known and understood - hence the place of the poet. The history of Ireland had to be verified at the assemblies

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1. MacNeill, loc. cit.
2. Coll. of 2 sages, 198-9 RC. XXVI.
3. AL. V. 451.

called by the king; the festivals had to be held and the right dues and tributes must be exacted.

> No one is learned who does not well know them;
> No king is entitled to reign or rule
> Who does not maintain his right." 1

The precedents invoked in the kingdom too must be true and just, and - more particularly - the king's word must be kept and fulfilled - it must be <u>true</u>. "Fulfil the word given on oath" the king is told, and, in later times we hear a eulogy of "A king who never broke his kingly word .... who will promise nothing under heaven save that which is certain to be done."[2]

For the King's reign to be truthful and prosperous, then, histories must be verified, assemblies and fairs held, dues paid, and the king's hospitality and word established. What is more, the brehons under him had to deliver just sentences - for in spite of all the powers of the brehons, it was ultimately the king who upheld the possibility of justice and made their judgments valid; it was the king who was finally responsible for the truth of the kingdom. In this connexion we hear again of blotches on cheeks and loss of honour price as the result of untruthful judgments. "When the brehons deviated from the truth of nature, there appeared blotches upon their cheeks" says the commentary to the first book of

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1. Bk. Rights, p. 127.
2. CA. 3; Tadhg Dall, 7.24.

the laws; "Seancha Mac Aillilla never pronounced a false judgment without getting three permanent blotches on his face for each judgment" and "when Fachtna had passed a false judgment, if in the time of fruit, all the fruit of the territory in which it happened fell off in one night; if in time of milk, the cows refused their calves; but if he passed a true judgment the fruit was perfect on the trees".[1]

The specialised and detailed duties of the king are represented in a stylised rigorous form as "The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland". I have already pointed out that, in outline, these have reference to the king's chief virtues - hospitality, holding assemblies, receiving his dues. But there is an additional point to make here. As Dillon puts it in his penetrating discussion. "It was a part of Truth to observe one's gessa".[2] This indeed gives meaning to the whole list of prohibitions and obligations, so full of complicated far-fetched detail. They were a part - over-ritualised no doubt and niggling but still a real part - of the king's truth. For

> "it is certain of the kings of Ireland, if they avoided their gessa and obtained their prescriptions, that they would suffer neither misfortune nor disturbance, and neither plague nor pestilence would come

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1. AL. I, 25, cf. AL. V. 353; here failure in crops is directly attrib. to the lawyer's rather than the king's falsity.
2. Dillon, 1947, p. 252.

in their reign, and they would not fail with age before ninety years". 1

But perhaps we can venture to go further in comment on the list of the geasa of the kings of Ireland - in the light of this discussion about the Truth - the cosmic truth - of the king. The king's truth was a manifestation and effective symbol of the right order of nature and society. Now to this we can add two points made by Irish scholars. First Baudis, writing in 1916, of the geasa of the king: what is centrally important in the whole list, as he says, is the stress throughout on sun and sunset, midsummer (Beltany or Mayday) and new year (Samain, the 1st November) so that "the movements of the king are brought into a nexus causalis with the movements of the sun". 2 And now, added to this, we have some remarks in the recent scholarly book on early Irish history and mythology by T.F. O'Rahilly: here is what he says (though writing, admittedly, of another problem).

> "The daily course of the Sun, bringing about the alternation of light and darkness and the regular succession of the seasons, was the most striking example ... of that divine order of the universe which served as a model for order and justice in terrestrial affairs. Hence to go dessel or right handwise, thus imitating the course of the sun, was not only the right way to make a journey, but was likewise beneficial in other affairs of life, and was likely to lead to a prosperous result..." 3

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1. In Dillon, 1951, p. 25.
2. Ériu, VIII, 1916.
3. O'Rahilly, 1946, p.296.

The sun was a sign of the regularity and order of the world; this was part of fír.[1] So too was the king a mark and guarantee of this order, and, in this, was like the sun. He must go sunwise round his territories in his progress as king; it was forbidden "that the sun should rise while he is in bed in the plain of Tara" or "to travel over Mag Cuillinn after sunset"; the order of his day or of his household had, like the course of the sun, symbolic and cosmic force. Thus in his weekly order the king manifested in his person the different aspects and departments of social life "the weekly order in the duty of the king - Sunday for drinking ale, Monday for judgment, Tuesday for playing chess, Wednesday for watching deer hounds at chase, Thursday for the society of his wife, Friday for horse-racing, Saturday for judging cases". This recalls the position of the king as at the heart of the different aspects of Irish society - "knowledge in the west, battle in the north, prosperity in the east, music in the south, kingship in the centre".[2]

The actual detailed obligations and prohibitions in "The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland" may still remain puzzling and apparently arbitrary. But when we have compared passages such as those quoted above, and the comparative material on

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1. Coir (order) is a compound of fír (= co + fír); Buck, p. 1180.
2. Taboos, 1; AL. IV. 335; Ériu, IV, p. 147.

the widespread association of king-sun-justice-order,[1] and when we think of the king as in some sense the symbol of his people, and the upholder and manifestation of order, then the principle at least behind the Irish geasa is no longer obscure or irrational. We need not explain it away as primitive magic or "no doubt partly counterfeit religion, the concoction of a caste of shamans, designed to increase their power".[2]

However that may be, we can at least accept Dillon's point that it was part of truth to observe the geasa.

We can see that the idea of truth goes deep in Irish society so that the different aspects of social life are connected together in this one concept of moral, natural and cosmic order. We find it in the early law tracts (the law is founded on "truth, nature and knowledge") in the sagas, and also in the specifically Christian stories.[3] Among the things that are hateful to God are "a lord without truth (gan fírinne), a country without control, a people without law",[4]

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1. E.g. Hocart, 1927, Ch. V, esp. pp.55-6; cf. O'Rahilly, op. cit. p. 297 on Hindu concept of rta, as compared with Irish coír.
2. Dillon, 1951, p. 2.
3. E.g. the young man who told a lie to St. Ciaran of Clonmacnois, and died forthwith; cf. Keating's story of Abacuc - "It was about this time that his head fell off Abacuc at the fair of Taillte, for having sworn falsely by the hand of Ciaran; and he lived thus headless for four years, amongst monks". Keating, II. 6. (3. p. 53).
4. Ériu, 5, pp. 141-3.

and in the "original blessing of the angel on the kings of Cashel", the blessings from truth are enumerated

> "A blessing of prosperity south upon you all, kings of Cashel: blessing of rule, blessing of cattle, blessing of victory, blessing in battle, blessing of wealth, a blessing for the plain, a blessing for the world, a lasting blessing. Blessing of heaven cloud-blessing, blessing of earth fruit-blessing, blessing of sea fish-blessing, blessing of sun rank-blessing ..... A life-blessing is the firm blessing of the mighty Lord so long as you keep Truth with the divisions of mercy". 1

The idea of truth and right order is not only a <u>persistent</u> one in Ireland; it also goes deep in another way, for (as, indeed, we should expect) the extremes of both good and evil are represented in terms of truth. The Land of Promise is sometimes called the "isle of truth" and there is a romantic tale of an island where "whoever set sole on it would tell no lie so long as he was therein" because of its "truth-revealing sod" (its grass turned down if ever there was a false judgment).[2] When on the other hand the end of the world is prophesied, or complete disaster, it is associated with the usual results of lack of <u>fír</u>. There will be "kine without milk, captures without a king, false precedents of brehons" and "righteousness (firinni) will be removed, false judgments will be manifested".[3] Absence of right order was pictured as fatal - thus,

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1. Finding of Cashel 2, in Ériu 16, 1952.
2. Voy. Bran. p. 217.
3. Moytura 167 in RC. 12; Coll. 2 sages 225 in RC. 26.

we are told, in the chaotic days before the compiling of the great law book, there was disorder in Ireland with equality among all, before, that is, the different ranks and their duties were clearly formulated and differentiated. Equally, if certain forbidden suits were to occur "great disasters would come to pass for these rules were established from the beginning of the world to the end".[1] The evils of a breakdown in natural or social order are vividly described in the Senchus Mor "there are three periods at which the world dies: the period of a plague, of a general war, of the dissolution of verbal contracts".[2]

A consideration of the concept of fír has involved mention of almost all the various aspects of Irish society - the position and virtues of king, poet, jurist, the basis of Irish law, the right order of nature and of the sun, ordeal, satire and guarantee. For fír is the central theme which unites and explains the different aspects of Irish society.

The king, in virtue of his truth, unites and symbolises his people; he brings fruitfulness and peace to his land, and, in his practice of fír, is prosperous in battle, fulfills his word, sustains himself and his kingdom. But if he violates

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1. V. 481.
2. AL. I. 51.

his gessa (part of fír, as part of the natural order) or sins against his kingly virtues, if he gives a false judgment or allows one to be given, if he is physically blemished (a sign of his lack of honour and truth) - then he is no true king, and he loses his kingship. The marks of lack of order in the land show the king's falsehood - defeat in battle, lack of fruit, dryness of cows. And all these things can be marked out and formulated by the poet, either as eulogist of the king's truth or satirist through his falsehood. It was by fír that the king was chosen and tested in the first place, and about fír that he was instructed by his counsellors at his inauguration and throughout his reign, it was as a consolidation and establishment of fír that the feasts were held and the history recited. Truth and justice are a re-current theme in the laws too - and here too closely bound up with the natural order; the fíra, the ordeals, are merely evident signs of the right order of things, they too are the "truths of sovereignty" for the king is the ultimate upholder of truth. Sun and moon, earth and sky are signs of the right order and truth of king and people; and when contracts fail or falsehood replaces truth "the world dies".

> Justitia regis pax populorum est, tutamen patriae, immunitas plebis, munimentum gentis, cura languorum, gaudium hominum, temperies aeris, serenitas maris, terrae fecunditas, solatium pauperum, hereditas

> filiorum, spes futurae beatitudinis, segetum habundantia, arborum fecunditas. 1

Like the sun, the king is symbol, symptom and cause of truth in the natural and the social world, of cosmic order.

The king upholds and manifests truth. But how his position and truth are distinguished from and opposed to those of the poet, and of what I have called the "druidic" side of society is still not clear. Certainly the <u>king</u> was a guarantee and token of truth; but that it was the poet and diviner that had insight into truth, and that really possessed truth in this sense, is unmistakable - even from a consideration of this section which, primarily, was intended to be about the <u>king's</u> truth: thus poets and druids play a part in many of the ordeals described above; and reference to the importance of the brehons, who were part of the "druidic tradition", is very frequent - their judgments too had to be true, they advised and had knowledge of true precedents. Finally it was the poets and seers who gave praise and satire, knew the truth and the history of Ireland, and had in their power and knowledge, the land and the traditions of Ireland.

That truth, which the king upholds and manifests, is indeed in the possession of poet and druid, is brought out

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1. Vit. Trip. 507.

further by some of the associations of fír, and the symbolic classification in which it is included.

In Ireland the winds all had colours[1] - the wind from the north was black, from the south white, with east purple, and west pale. The standard orientation was to face the east: thus north was upon the left and túath in old as in modern Irish means both north and left; south and right, correspondingly, are also expressed by the same word, deas (mod. Irish deas - also meaning pretty, expert, convenient).

Ireland, it can be seen, fits into the general scheme of symbolic classification outlined, in particular, by Hertz in "The Right Hand". The black, north, left side is that of cursing, evil and unluckiness; as Whitley Stokes[2] pointed out long ago, in Ireland the north is always regarded as the bad side, with storms and cold, the Devil's point of the compass, that which represents the outer darkness of heathenism. The cruel Athirne's damaging circuit round Ireland was lefthandwise (tuathbel)[3] and the powerful satire called glam dícend was to be made with a north wind blowing. But to go righthandwise or dessil[4] was the lucky and right way - that was the way

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1. Joyce, II, 521-2.
2. Ériu, III, 1907.
3. RC. VIII. 49.
4. O'Rahilly, 1946, p. 296.

the king should make his circuit of Ireland; right, south, white, all had the associations of goodness, knowledge, dexterity; the right hand was the hand of blessing (lam bennachtan)[1], and in the angel's blessing of the kings of Cashel it was "a blessing of prosperity south upon you".

Art, knowledge and learning too were connected with concepts of light and whiteness, as against the darkness of lack of learning, formlessness, chaos, the unskilled. "Every ignorance is dark".[2] Battle was in the north, like the Fomorians in the stories of the mythical invasions of Ireland, who represented the forces of chaos, disorder, night and storm; coming from their home in Tory Island in the north of Ireland, they engaged the invading peoples in constant battle and oppression. But in the end, we remember, they were defeated by the power of art, by the skill and poetry and knowledge of the Tuatha Dé Danann. Here again, then, we have the association of light, knowledge, poetry and truth.

Indeed the whole of the "druidic tradition" can be brought in here. The druids were connected, in particular, with the Tuatha Dé and with the power of art and insight into the truth and depth of things. The colour of the druids was represented as white - this we are familiar with from Dumézil's work on Indo-European ideas in general, where the priestly colour

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1. Stokes, loc. cit.
2. AC. 2, 18.

associated with brahman and flamen was likewise white.[1] The druids wore white clothing we are told (albis induti vestimentis), and this fits what is said about some of the "men of art" in general; in the description of the sage Sencha the repetition of this colour is striking "A fair bright garment about him, with borders of all-white silver. A beautiful white shirt next to the surface of his skin; a white-silver belt around his waist ... the sweetness of melody in his voice".[2]

Truth too, into which the men of art had special and formative insight, is explicitly associated with whiteness. In one of the ordeals when three stones are used, the white one signifies innocence (fír) and the black guilt or falsehood; Keating specifically says that "whiteness is likened to truth (fírinne), blackness to falsehood";[3] and in the Triads, "the three candles that illumine every darkness: truth, nature, knowledge" (fír, aicned, ecna).[4] In the useful list compiled by Johanna Pollak,[5] the stock similes using white are mentioned: as white as snow, foam, milk, swan - but these are precisely those used in a eulogy of truth "as bright as the foam cast up by the mighty wave of the sea, as the sheen of a swan's

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1. Dumézil; 1948, p. 30.
2. Vit. Trip. II. 325-6; AIT. p. 230.
3. Keating 3. p. 13.
4. TR. 201.
5. ZCP. 27. 1959.

covering in the sun, as the hue of snow on a mountain".[1]

Truth, then, and the whiteness associated with truth, were specially held and seen by the men of art; above all by the brehon who discerned true judgments; and by the poet who had insight into truth. The "druidic side" possessed this truth and knowledge - perhaps, we could even say, the spiritual insight and authority in Irish society. Thus - to sum up - on the one hand we have the dark wind, the north, the left, blackness, falsehood and guilt, ignorance, chaos, battle, and death, winter, night; this was the side of cursing, evil and ill luck. On the other was brightness and whiteness - the south, the right, music, light, prosperity, the arts, knowledge, truth, form, innocence, the "white language" of the gospels and blessing, as well as life, day, summer; on this side were grouped the druids and all their associates - poets, jurists, historians.

These then are some of the associations of the Irish fír. They will come in again - and most significantly - at a later stage of the discussion. But they are, of course, only associations and analogies, even though they do give insight into Irish society. These analogies are to be taken as relations rather than social actualities. By this I mean that the whole series of oppositions - in 2 parallel columns as it

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1. AP. 15.

were - was not necessarily envisaged as such by any one person; they were not rigid and irreversible divisions in the social structure; and, further, different aspects might be regarded as relevant in different contexts. Since it is a case of relationships rather than substantial position, we need not be surprised, for example, to find the poet associated at once with wisdom, truth and rightness in his aspect of praiser and diviner, and with evil and left-handed circuit and the north wind in his role of satirist. This remembered, a schematic list, as here, may be illuminating.

These two different sides may be opposed and distinguished, but they are not mutually exclusive; or, at any rate, they are interdependent. Night precedes and must necessarily precede day; summer is only possible after the winter that preceded the year; and, to complete the analogy, the chaos and lack of form in Ireland came, in the myth, before the victory of the formative power of art and the growth of the natural and social order.

More important still for our study of Irish Kingship is another combination and interdependence of two different aspects, symbolised especially at the king's inauguration. To understand this, some (not all) of these associations are crucial - I mean the union of king and poet, of, to change the terminology, kingly power and spiritual authority.

III. The Inauguration of the King

The evidence on the rituals of inauguration of the Irish kings is full of complications and, indeed, in some ways embarrassingly detailed. However it is possible to pick out two main themes, one of them a matter of current interest in contemporary Irish scholarship - this is the literary and recurrent motif of the marriage between the king and his territory personified as a hag later transformed into a beautiful maiden; with this theme I shall also include the now famous (once notorious) evidence of Giraldus Cambrensis. The second group of descriptions are those we find primarily in later sources, in which details of the actual procedure are given, including the part taken by the poet. The ordeals described in the last section (the chariot drive and so on) I am not going to refer to here; for although they have significant affinities with the accession ceremonies, they are not technically part of the inauguration ritual. I intend therefore to concentrate on the two themes which can be characterised as, respectively, the union of the king and the land, and of the king and the poet.

1. The King and the Land.

In the Metrical Dindshenchus, there is an Irish poem describing the vesting of the kingship in one, out of several possible lines. It is a stock example of the Irish theme of the king and the hag or maiden, and is used here to show how the choice of succession was made between the seven sons of Daire - all of whom were called by the same name, Lugaid.

> When the men were in the house, sitting over by the fireside, there entered a hag, a loathly offence; she was hideous, unsightly.
>
> Taller was she than a mast upright, bigger than a sleeping-hut her ear, blacker than any visage her form, a weight on every heart was the hag.
>
> Broader her row of teeth - what portends it? - than a board set with draughtsman; her nose stood out far before her, it was longer than a ploughshare.
>
> Bigger than a basket full of sheaves was each fist of the misnatured woman; bigger than rough-hewn stone in rampart each of her black bony knees.
>
> A paunchy belly she bore, I trow, without rib to the armpits: a scabby black crown with a crop of wens, like a furzy hillside upon her.
>
> She sat upon them in the strong house where sat the King of Erin's sons; dire the dazzlement she cast upon them from her eyes - alas the deed!
>
> A change fell on the nature of the tender youths before that obese lustful horror; sooner than look upon her they had chosen to be buried under earth alive.
>
> Their spirit and senses turned, with a throb sorer than stark combat: the sons of Daire gave themselves over to a death of shame.
>
> She addressed them with an evil saying; "One of you must sleep with me tonight, or I will devour you all, unaided, hound and strong man alike".
>
> When he saw the danger plain, Lugaid Laigde spoke: "I will sleep with her - unwelcome task: enough for you to lose me only".

> As the firelight fell dim, she changed to another wondrous shape: she took on a radiant form, beyond praise: rosy she grew, round bosomed.
>
> Such were her eyes (they were no tricks of cheating craft) - three shafts of sunlight in each of them: where her glance fell all was bright.
>
> Down slid the crimson mantle from her breasts untouched by age, till the flesh-worm might be crushed in the room by the light of her lovely body.
>
> Then the young man asked her "Fair maiden, whence comest thou? name thy race, tell it now, speak to me, hide it not from me!"
>
> "I will tell thee, gentle youth; with me sleep the High Kings: I the tall slender maiden, am the kingship of Alba and Erin." 1

The theme is continued and elaborated throughout Irish literature - Ireland (or the kingship of Ireland) is a maiden, or Ireland is a widow deserted by her true spouse through whom alone she can find happiness: "Raise the veil from Ireland; long hath she sought a spouse, finding no mate for her couch"[2] writes the 16th century bard Tadhg Dall; later too the Stuarts were pictured as the rightful mates of an Ireland subject to foreigners' rough rule.[3]

But to return to the earlier period - for the continuity of this tradition can be assumed, and it has frequently been described. There is a parallel story about the famous 4th century king Niall of the Nine Hostages, from whom descended the northern and southern Ui Néill ("descendants of Niall")

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1. TLS. XI. 1924, pp. 139-43.
2. Tadhg Dall, I.l.
3. On theme in general see MacCana esp. p. 60 in Et. Celt. 8.

who held the High Kingship in alternate succession for over six hundred years. Again the true king is chosen from among several brothers; in this case the choice of the maiden is preceded by a test organised by a man of art, a smith.

Eochu Muigmedon, king of Ireland, had five sons, Brian, Ailill, Fiachra, Fergus and Niall. Mongfhind .. was his queen and mother of four sons, but Niall was the son of Cairenn ... Mongfhind hated Niall and his mother, and inflicted much hardship upon Cairenn, who was compelled to draw water from the well ..... Niall .. was born in the open as she lay beside her pail .... Then Torna the Poet came by and took up the child and he foresaw all that was to come. He took him and reared him, and neither he nor the child came to Tara until Niall was of age to be king....

Mongfhind was angry and called upon Eochu to judge between his sons as to who should succeed him. He referred the matter to Sithchenn the smith, who was a prophet. Sithchenn set fire to a forge in which the five sons were at work. Niall came out carrying the anvil, Brian brought the hammers, Fiachra brought a pail of beer and the bellows, Ailill brought the weapons, and Fergus a bundle of kindling with a stick of yew in it. Sithchenn greeted Niall as the victor, and appraised the others according to their merits.....

One day the five sons went hunting and they lost their way in the forest and were enclosed on every side. They lit a fire and cooked some of their game and ate till they were satisfied. They wanted water, and Fergus set out in search of it. He found a well, but there was an old woman guarding it. She was as black as coal. Her hair was like a wild horse's tail. Her foul teeth were visible from ear to ear and were such as would sever a branch of green oak. Her eyes were black, her nose crooked and spread. Her body was scrawny, spotted and diseased. Her shins were bent. Her knees and ankles were thick, her shoulders broad, her nails were green. The hag's appearance was ugly.

"You are horrible," said the lad. "Ay" said she. "Are you guarding the well?" said the lad. "Ay," said

she. "May I fetch some water?" said the lad. "Ay", said she, "if you give me one kiss on the cheek". "No!" said he. "You shall have no water from me," said she. "I give my word," said he, "that I would rather die of thirst than kiss you."

Fergus returned without water, and each of the brothers went in turn. Only Fiachra spoke temperately to the hag, and she promised that he would visit Tara. And that came true....

At last it was Niall's turn to go. When the hag asked him for a kiss, he consented and lay down with her. Then, when he looked upon her, she was as fair a girl as any in the world. She was as white as the last snow in a hollow. Her arms were full and queenly, her fingers long and slender, her legs straight and gleaming. She had two golden shoes on her bright little feet, and a precious purple cloak about her, held by a silver brooch. Her teeth were like pearls, her eyes large and queenly, her lips of Parthian red.

"You are fair, woman," said the boy. "Ay," said she. "Who are you?" said the boy. "I am Sovranty," said she. And she said this:

"King of Tara, I am Sovranty. I shall tell you its virtue. Your seed shall be over every clan. There is good reason for what I say".

She bade him return to his brothers with the water, and told him that he and his race would be kings of Ireland for ever.

The brothers returned to Tara .... and answered that they had given seniority to Niall, and the first right to the kingship. Sithchenn announced that they had forfeited it for ever, for Niall and his descendants would ever hold dominion over Ireland. 1

So runs the story of Niall of the Nine Hostages, and his winning of the kingship of Ireland. His success is foretold

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1. Dillon, 1946, pp. 38-41.

by a poet, approved and ratified by the smith and prophet Sithchenn. But most striking here as throughout Irish writing on Ireland and her king, is the sexual motif. Ireland is taken to be a woman waiting for the true king to sleep with her and make her his queen. Without the union it is impossible either for him to be king or for her to be young and beautiful.

This motif is further brought out by references in the Irish sources to the "marriage feast of kingship" (banais ríghi) in descriptions of the inauguration ceremonies of various kings. In the Annals of the Four Masters, we read of a king, who, in 1475, died when his inauguration feast (his wedding feast) was already prepared.[1] The same terminology is used of the investment of a provincial king, the king of Connaught, in 1510. He was, in fact, installed by his foster-father and by force - all the more reason for a strict adherence to the formal traditional ceremony:

> "And he brought him to Carnfree, and made him king on the Carn .... after the most regal and noble and full fashion in which any man of his kin had been made king from the time of Brian, son of Eochaidh Muighmheadhoin, down to that day. Then, when Feilim son of Aedh, son of Eoghan, had espoused the Province of Connacht, his fosterer ministered to him that night according to the traditions of the elders and the old books; and that was the most royal and most noble king's wedding feast that had ever been made for the King of Connacht until that day." [2]

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1. FM. 1475.
2. An. Conn. 1310, from Breatnach, 1953, p. 327.

This side of the ceremony is also evident in the sexual connotation of the word <u>feis</u> which besides meaning "feast"- in this context the feast with which the ritual was ended - is also used of "coition", hence "espousal".[1] Further the theme of giving water to drink, which occurs both in the story of Niall, and possibly as a symbolic libation in the installation ceremony, has also been interpreted in this way. Receiving a drink from the girl is taken to be equivalent to winning her herself, in accordance with the moment in the normal marriage ceremony when the acceptance by the bridegroom of a cup handed him by the bride signifies their mutual consent to the marriage.[2]

But whatever the truth in the case of these detailed correlations, the main outline here is clear. The Irish were no strangers to ideas common also to many other peoples. Any movement from one social status to another is analogous in some ways with marriage - both are recognised as <u>rites de passage</u>. In a more particular form, the representation of the inauguration of a king as a kind of marriage is very common; in the chapter where Hocart cites some of the evidence on this in his book on <u>Kingship</u>,[3] he also speaks of the

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1. Cf. also O'Rahilly, Ériu, 1946; Draak, p. 657; MacCana Et. Celt. 7, p. 84; Binchy, 1958, p. 134.
2. O'Rahilly, <u>loc. cit.</u>
3. 1927, Ch. VIII.

widespread analogy between queen and earth, both equally regarded as the consort of the king. It is satisfactory that the Irish evidence - which he did not consider - does in fact support his thesis. So we can bear in mind this main theme as certain when we go on to discuss some of the interpretations that have been drawn from this evidence in detailed study. True or false they are all at least illustrations of the same theme.

Theories on the subject are manifold. "The temptation to venture a few steps amongst the shadows cast by the human imagination is strong. Let us take up the challenge of the darkness then" writes one - very moderate-speculator.[1]

The figure of Medb (Maeve), for example, has attracted interest. The frequent marriages of this famous queen of saga led first to comments on the "moral looseness" of the epoch; but it then emerged that her marriages had, after all, a function! For only through marrying her could a man become king. Thus the famous Medb of Cruachan was mated successively to at least three kings of Connacht who were kings only after becoming her husbands, and with her consent. There was another Medb too, Medb Lethderg, and she cohabited in turn with nine of the kings of Ireland; she would allow no one, it was said, to be king in Tara who did not have her as a

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1. Breatnach op. cit., p. 334.

wife. Here then we have the familiar idea that possession of the kingship depended on the marriage of the king - indeed upon a mystical marriage, for Thurneysen followed this up by identifying Medb as originally a goddess, whose husband became king. Comparing a Sumerian inscription on the same theme, Thurneysen concluded that this sacred marriage was the original way by which the kingship was settled on the king. In this case of course the emphasis was on the idea of marriage, rather than on that of the change in the woman, as in the story of Niall quoted above.[1]

The two ideas (i.e. of marriage with a goddess, and the change to beauty of the girl after the union) have been brought into conjunction by the other writers who have built on this earlier work. The most cited theory is perhaps that by T.F. O'Rahilly, published in 1946.[2] He identifies Ériu, the common name of Ireland, as the designation of a goddess, "the Earth-Mother" who is identified with the land of Ireland. This "belief that Ériu was a goddess has left an abiding impress on Irish literature and thought", and it is she who is the hideous hag in the stories, and later becomes a beautiful woman. This is specifiesally connected with the "wedding-feast of kingship", where the goddess, under the name of Medb,

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1. On Medb: O'Maille ZCP. 17, 1927; MacCana 1955-9 esp. 1958, p. 59; Thurneysen ZCP. 19, 1933, p. 353.
2. O'Rahilly, Ériu, 14, 1946.

hands the symbolic cup to the king. Sometimes the heroine called Etain takes part, according to O'Rahilly - Etain "who (as could be shown) is the sun-goddess .... is ultimately the double of Medb". Ériu, (or Medb, or Etain) was therefore, he concludes, the sun-goddess, who was also the goddess of earth, and its springs and rivers; and the kingship ceremony and traditions have "roots in the time when man regarded the material earth as a Mother and when the ruler of the land was inaugurated with a ceremony which professed to espouse him to this divine mother, with the intent that his reign might be prosperous and that the earth might produce her fruits in abundance".[1]

The main outline of this theory about a "primitive fertility ritual" is followed, with some differences of detail, by many of those who have written on the subject since (some identify a few more goddesses, Mugain, for example, the ancient goddess and personification of Munster).[2] D.A. Binchy[3] would associate the famous feast of Tara with the same motif - as a symbolic fertility rite resurrected by the later pseudo-historians, which, though a kind of inauguration, marked the culmination rather than the beginning of a reign; the earth mother is mated with the king. (One difficulty about this

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1. Op. cit., p. 21.
2. MacCana, op. cit., Carney, 1955, p.334ff.
3. Ériu, 18, 1958.

last point is that if this version of the feast of Tara is supposed to have taken place not at the accession of the king but later on in his reign, the very correspondence with the stories of Niall etc. that could be cited as evidence, vanish - for they are certainly connected with the start of a reign.)

The general theme, as I suggested before, remains clear - the idea of marriage is connected with the king's inauguration and his relationship with his land sometimes described in these terms; this has been rightly emphasised in the writings I have referred to. But I think this wholesale identification of goddesses can be very misleading; and the nature of this "archaic fertility rite" with Mother Earth is not really described or explained. The whole theory rests on a priori presuppositions. For I do not find that - for me - the word "primitive" throws any further light on the subject whatsoever.

It is now time to cite the famous passage of Giraldus Cambrensis, for in some ways it might seem to support the conjectures mentioned above. He was in Ireland in the 12th century, and gives a lot of space to description of the barbarous and sensational customs of the Irish. He gives a shocked account of their abominable method for inaugurating kings, from an example in the north of Ireland. A white mare is brought before the assembled people, and the king, dressed,

> "not as king but as an outlaw, comes before the people on all fours, confessing himself a beast with no less impudence than imprudence. The mare being immediately

killed, and cut in pieces and boiled, a bath is prepared for him from the broth. Sitting in this, he eats, of the flesh which is brought to him, the people standing round and partaking of it also. He is also required to drink of the broth in which he is bathed ..... These unrighteous rites being duly accomplished, his royal authority and dominion are ratified." 1

For long, this account was naturally put down to Giraldus' hostility and lack of understanding - and he is, indeed, consistently prejudiced. But the present position among Irish scholars seems to be that such a detailed description was beyond "Giraldus' imaginative repertoire". Besides, now that an apparent parallel has been noted in India, it does not seem nearly so discreditable to the Irish: they were good Indo-Europeans after all (even if archaic)! For the Irish rite seems to have interesting analogies with the Hindu Aśvamedha; in this, "the king of sacrifices", a monarch ratified his dominion over his neighbours by an important

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1. Here is the complete passage: Est igitur in boreali et ulteriori Ultoniae parte, scilicet apud Kenelcunnil, gens quaedam, quae barbaro nimis et abominabili ritu sie sibi regem creare solet. Collecto in unum universo terrae illius populo, in medium producitur jumentum candidum. Ad quod sublimandus ille non in principem sed in beluam, non in regem sed exlegem, coram omnibus bestialiter accedens, non minus impudenter quam imprudenter se quoque bestiam profitetur. Et statim jumento interfecto, et frustratim in aqua decocto, in eadem aqua balneum ei paratur. Cui insidens, de carnibus illis sibi allatis, circumstante populo suo et convescente, comedit ipse. De jure quoque quo lavatur, non vase aliquo, non manu, sed ore tantum circumquaque haurit et bibit. Quibus ita rite, non recte completis, regnum illius et dominium est confirmatum. Giraldus. Top. Hib. III. 25.

religious ceremony. A stallion was allowed to roam freely for a year, and at the end of that time, was sacrificed; the wives of the king circled the victim ceremonially, then the chief wife submitted to a simulated union with the dead horse, and the meaning and symbolism of the ritual was explicitly recited by the priest in his liturgical commentary. It marked the high point in imperial and heroic power in the reign of a king.[1]

It has been suggested, therefore, that the Giraldus account represents the western counterpart of the ancient Indo-European rite.[2] I think, however, that in the excitement of discovering the apparent parallel, its importance has been much exaggerated. That the sexes are interchanged, does not, perhaps, matter much (a mare instead of a horse; the king himself, not his wife); but an inauguration, as Giraldus clearly calls it, is different from a consolidation of imperial and expansive power. Also he does not actually <u>say</u> that there was really any simulated union between king and mare in the Irish example; we may think that he implies it (bestialiter ... impudenter), but he does <u>not</u> state it clearly, even though it would have been a good accusation against the disgusting Irish.

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1. On <u>Aśvamedha</u> see Dumont, 1927; J. Gonda in Sacral Kingship, 1959, pp. 176-7.
2. Drake, p. 657; Sjoestedt p. xviii, Schroeder ZCP. XVI.

What his account really represented it is not possible to say - and we know how misled hostile travellers can be!

But, quite apart from all these points, if we really want an Indian parallel, there is a much better one!

For, as was mentioned above, the land of Ireland was in some respects considered as the queen and mate of Ireland. So to connect the Giraldus account with this idea would be interesting. Here is what Hocart writes of an Indian rite in his discussion of the analogy observed between queen and earth: it is

> "further confirmed by the rite of earth-touching in the pravargya sacrifice. The sacrificer 'touches the earth and mutters, "Thou art Manu's mare"; for this earth in the shape of a mare carried Manu, and he is her lord Prajapati, with that mate, his favourite abode, he thus completes him.' The earth .. takes the place of the queen in the king's consecration, and is united to the king as his consort directly without the intervention of a human representative".[1]

So, if we must have comparative Indian evidence on this point, this parallel in fact supports far better the general Irish association of earth - marriage - queen - kingship - inauguration. The earth, here in the form of a mare, is represented as the mate of the king.

Amidst all the discussion, controversy and detail, the general theme, as I have said, remains clear. Ireland, the land of Ireland, and the kingship of Ireland, are all represented

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1. Hocart, 1927, p. 105.

as a woman to whom the king is mated; in a sense his kingdom is his true queen. Nevertheless, though all this is incontrovertible and the Irish evidence on the general theme is certain, I think <u>too</u> much emphasis has been laid on this. Of course the idea of a sacred marriage is widespread; of course we find this idea in Ireland too; and of course the various embellishments of this theme by Irish theorists, ancient or modern, do not invalidate or supersede the main outline. But we need not after all interpret the Irish as being more literal-minded even than we are ourselves. The analogies between marriage and inauguration, and between queen and land, both subject to the king, are there in Ireland, as elsewhere too - but they are <u>analogies</u>; and perfectly sensible ones too; symbolic representations of relations conceived as existing in the natural and social order. Just because the language and some of the symbolism used of the inauguration of the king and of the relationship conceived of between the king and his territory, were those of marriage and sexual union, we need not therefore be driven to postulating these much cited fertility rites as the centre of the inauguration of the king, with no further explanation, as if all was then clear; nor need we speak of the king's being the cause of his realm's fertility as if this was a simple one-to-one causal relation; the king (cause) therefore fertility (effect).

The relationship was a more complex one than that, part of the whole series of ideas and analogies that I have tried to suggest earlier in this chapter.

There are very few other comments that I want to add myself, partly because the evidence is after all not, in general, so very puzzling at all in the light of comparative anthropology. In some ways the inauguration of the king is thought of as like the sacred sky-earth marriage, though much less explicitly in Ireland than in, say, India. It does not follow of course from this that Ireland was believed to be in all respects and in all contexts like Earth, and the king exactly like the sun; nor does it follow that this and this alone was symbolised in the inauguration ceremony. From the little that has emerged here of the actual rite, it seems to be, as we should assume in any case, a classic <u>rite de passage</u> and, as such, with some analogies to that of marriage: the king is withdrawn (in the Giraldus account he is "<u>exlegem</u>", an outlaw) and the whole procedure ends with a feast; this, we know, is a common form of "aggregation". And, finally, in all the discussion about king - marriage - Ireland, the main point that has come out most clearly is that the union is essential to the well-being of <u>both</u> king and kingdom. In the story with which we began Niall and Lugaid cannot be king until and unless they sleep with the hag, kingship; and she cannot recover and assume what we take to be her natural youth

and beauty until united with the true king. The true status of both comes only from their union. For Niall or Lugaid are not kings automatically and in virtue alone of any <u>personal</u> qualities - they must first be tested and chosen from among their brothers to succeed to the kingship (this of course represents the normal Irish practice of succession, and choice, in the case of a particular office, between those equally eligible by birth); and the king must be approved as true king, an approval which, in the stories, is symbolised in the union with the maiden who stands for kingship, or for Ireland. From the other point of view too, the union is necessary. The kingdom, that is, can flourish only in conjunction with the king; for Ireland too, for the girl, it is represented as a kind of <u>rite de passage</u>, from a state of age and ugliness to youth and beauty. And here I think the emphasis should not be laid, as is the usual practice, just on the associations of <u>earth</u>, its fruitfulness and fertility, as when it is suggested that it is because of the waning powers of the old King that the earth is arid and unproductive, so that fresh vegetation and vigour can only be restored by a new and vigorous king. The <u>whole</u> order of the kingdom, social as well as natural, was connected with the presence of the king. When not united with the king, when, in fact, there was no king, the kingdom, in all its aspects, was black, ugly and disordered;

the true order was only possible with the union - a union approved by poet or man of art - between king and kingdom, symbolically expressed in Irish story.

2. Poet and King

It can now be seen that what we have discussed already is (with the one questionable exception of the Giraldus passage) concerned rather with some of the ideas and analogies associated with kingship and the king's inauguration, than with the actual procedure in the accession ceremony. I will now give a brief outline of what I consider to have been the course of this ceremony. Some of this may be a matter of detailed controversy, which I cannot go into; besides we have no <u>early</u> sources describing the inaugurations. Nevertheless the later descriptions we have can be treated, I think, as reasonably accurate in outline; for they not only make very good sense in the light of Irish institutions and concepts in general as well as illuminating some of the problems referred to in the previous section, but they also fit remarkably well with the comparative evidence on the enthronement of kings.[1]

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1. E.g. Hocart, 1927, Ch. VII; Coomaraswamy, 1942; Heesterman, 1957; Woolley, 1915.

Here then is a schematic outline of the inauguration ritual of an Irish king.[1]

1. Place and Occasion. The sub-kings, chiefs, members of collateral lines of the royal family, the poets and other men of art, and also many of the ordinary people, are gathered at the traditional place of inauguration. This is on a hill, at a special stone, perhaps said to be the burial place of one of the early kings, sometimes bearing the marks of "their first Captains's feet"[2] - at any rate with special associations in Irish history and myth as transmitted in the Dindshenchus (the lore of place names).

The king at one point is separated from the people (probably). Anyway the ordinary people are not with him on the hill, only the specially appointed officers are near him.

2. The King's Genealogy and the exploits of his family are recited by the poet or other member of the "druidic tradition".

3. A summary of the laws and history, and the Instructions

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1. Following account based mainly on: O'Donovan: The Inauguration of Irish Chiefs, in Hy'Fiachrach, 1844, p. 425ff; Here, Ulster Jo. of Arch. V. 1857; Keating II. 1 (S. p. 8ff); O'Conor inaug. tract Kilk. Arch. Soc. II, 1853; Hogan PRIA, 1932. Acc. Hogan, p. 195 the king was not always inaugurated, but apparently on the most solemn occasions it was according to this procedure.
2. Spencer, p. 11; list of inaug. places in Hogan, p. 196.

<u>of kings</u> are read or otherwise conveyed to the king by the poet or historian. Sometimes this is only symbolically represented by the poet's bringing the book containing the Instructions (Tescosc Ríg). This moment in the ceremony was clearly regarded as an important one (mentioned in all the sources), and is obviously closely connected with the next stage.

4. <u>An oath by the king</u> to observe the laws and customs; probably administered by the poet and sworn in his presence.

5. <u>The king lays aside his sword</u>, and gives up his horse and weapons. Perhaps it is at this stage that he relinquishes his old clothing, which is, like his horse and weapons, given to one of those present at the ceremony.

6. <u>The king is given a white wand, the sign of truth, by the poet</u>. This, in one form or another, is reported by all sources as at the heart of the ritual.

7. <u>Homage by chiefs and sub-kings</u> in various ways, for example by putting on (or replacing) the new king's shoe for him. Certain ritual duties are performed or recognised by the different chiefs.

8. <u>The king's new name is proclaimed</u> by poet or herald, and by the chiefs; this is taken up, and the new king thus acclaimed, by all the people present.

This too is central; the usual reference to the inauguration of a king is to his "calling", or "entitlement" (gairm).

9. <u>The king turns round three times to view his territory and people</u>, (the Christian interpretation is "in honour of the Trinity"). Later, in accordance with the same idea, he may make a ceremonial circuit (sunwise of course) round his kingdom, and/or a military expedition as sign of his power, receiving tribute and hostages.

10. <u>A final feast and general rejoicing</u>, perhaps preceded by a procession from hill to place of feasting. The many references to "feast" in the last section may be connected with this point in the ceremony; an animal is killed and the king and people recognise the king's new status in the festivities following his inauguration.

In outline this is a classic <u>rite de passage</u> from one status to another. The king is withdrawn, and he changes his dress and his insignia, which are given away, and his name. His new status is marked by his new name, insignia, and homage, by his ceremonial turns as king, and in the feast following, which marks his "aggregation" as king.

The form of the ceremony throws light on the king's political position, and his relationship to chiefs and people.

He is not automatically king. Birth, military prowess, popularity are none of them enough; something more is needed. In theory the ordeals the king traditionally had to undergo constituted tests and affirmations of his fitness as true king. But an inauguration, the investment of the king with his authority, was also necessary. And just as his power was <u>not</u> arbitrary and in the inauguration he was symbolically shown to be dependent on the cooperation of poet, chiefs and peoples, so in theory his deposition, if he failed to be true king, lay with those who had inaugurated him. It was not a case, then, as it was in the developed form of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, of an appointment direct from God so that only God and no other had the right of deposition.

The king, then, must be invested with his authority. His dependence on other sections of the community is emphasised in the ceremony. He listens to instruction on how he must behave and about the history and customs of Ireland. He swears an oath, administered by the poet, to observe these duties of his position. The contractual element in the ceremony is thus brought out by the oath, and also by the idea, apparently connected with this stage of the rite by Keating, that the king gave sureties to his people for his right behaviour and truth, just as "sureties were given to the Tuatha Dé Danann by Bress when they gave Bress the

sovereignty".[1] This recalls the idea of giving guarantees for just behaviour from the natural elements, sea and land and sun, and the tests of the king's falsehood, according to which he could be deposed. His dependence on others is also symbolically expressed by the part taken by his chiefs: he cannot be inaugurated without them. They must proclaim him, pay homage, put on his shoe, smooth his path, ride his horse. At the centre of the inauguration he is dependent on the poet, subject to truth, when he is handed the wand.

His political position is thus validated. He is inaugurated at a spot connected with the traditions and history of his kingdom, and this is further emphasised by the poet's reference to the history and customs of the land. His genealogy is recited and his descent from the royal families of tradition is demonstrated. The poet or historian too is seen to support him; and his chiefs must come to be present at the ceremony and pay him homage, their positions and duties thus recognised. The same applies to members of the same lines of descent with the king (i.e. of collateral lines). He takes possession of his kingly power by various signs - he places his foot in the traditional marks; his shoe is put on by his subject chief; he is acclaimed by the people; and he turns round in survey of his new kingdom.

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1. Keating, 3, p. 11.

Thus in the inauguration are represented both the king's subjection to his subjects and to the truth and laws of the kingdom (his power is not arbitrary) and his superiority and power over them. The poet's words have a real meaning:

> "Thou at the service of all, and all submitting to thee; thou above everyone, and everyone above thee; thou at the pleasure of every man, and, for all that, the Gaels at thy mercy." 1

Most interesting of all is the part taken by the poet,[2] above all his handing to the king the white wand of truth and justice. This after all was the heart of the inauguration and calls for consideration.

We must remember the position of the poet in Irish society. He is part of the "druidic tradition" with special formative insight into the true form and order of things. It was his duty to satirise the king if false, praise him if true, keep and verify his genealogy, assist at divination and ordeals, and, in general, watch over the present as a part of the history and existence of Ireland, its land and society. The poet belonged to the "druidic element", to the spiritual aspect, associated with truth, and whiteness, purity, the right hand, poetry, and knowledge of the right order of things. Above

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1. Tadhg Dall, l. 55.
2. Sometimes a chief is mentioned as the inaugurator; but Curtis, in Galway Arch. and Hist. Soc. 19. 1940, thinks this was a later practice owing to the failure in "bardic prestige", p. 152.

all he had insight into, and thus power over, truth and justice - fír.

This, then, is the point at which truth and poetry come into the inauguration of the king. On one level, the white wand handed to the king by the poet is a mark and completion of the instructions given and the oath already administered that the king will rule justly, and with authority approved by all. It is the chronicler's function, says Keating,

> "to place the wand in the hand of each lord on his inauguration ..... and make it known to the populace that the lord of king need not take up arms thenceforth to keep his country in subjection, but that they should obey his wand as a scholar obeys his master .... for it is with the wand of equity and justice he directs his subjects, and not with the edge of the weapon of injustice". 1

Both the duty and the power of the king are here emphasised. For the wand is both a token or memento of the position and responsibilities of the king, and the actual repository, as it were, of the king's authority - the "wand of possession", like the king's sceptre. He is to wield it with truth and justice, without bias or partiality.

And this wand is handed to him, at the crucial point in the ceremony, by a representative of that most powerful group in the society, those who have insight into the true form of

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1. Keating, loc. cit.

things, who have, we might say, the spiritual authority. By the bestowal of the wand, the poet signifies their approval and support of rightful kingly power.

But at a deeper level - "the wand is white altogether as a token of truth ... because whiteness is likened to truth".[1] What is being given to the king by the poet is Truth itself. The special possession of the poet, we know, is truth: and it is this that he transfers to the king when he inaugurates him.

Thus the union of king and poet is seen as necessary for Irish society. It is only through this synthesis that the right order is maintained in the social and the natural world. For if their conjunction breaks apart, so too does the order and form of the world: if the king is untrue, if the poet satirises the king, the king is blemished and dishonoured, and the fruits fail; when true, the poet's praises support him, his truth, seen and uttered by the poet, sustains his kingdom. As in a marriage, and one conducted by the poet, the king is united with his kingdom, with, that is, the land and the history and social order formulated by the poet. The poet too and the jurist, are on their side, dependent on their union with the king: for it is only by his presence and guarantee

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1. Op. cit. p. 13.

that their judgments have validity or their poems a reference. Poet and king are mutually dependent. The kingly power is the basis and standard for the poet's power; the king's power is based and rooted in that of the poet. So, just as in Indian kingship there must be the conjunction between brahman and ksatriya, sacerdotium and regnum, represented, as so often, in the terminology of a marriage like that between sky and earth, and just as there must be agreement between the two aspects of sovereignty, Mitra and Varuna,[1] so too in Ireland, the royal and military power must be united with the insight and formative power of the druidic element of society. It is the union between spiritual authority and temporal power.

Now this explains two further points. First - the ambivalence about which came first, king or poet (or druid). Sometimes the king has precedence. It was the king who decided the case and judged when the poets were accused by the people of Ireland; the local poets were, in fact, dependent on their king's bounty; the grade of the aes dána, into which the churchmen were later more or less fitted, were intercalated between the nobility and the commoner. As the power and military force of the kings increased in later times, with Brian Boru and the Norman Invasion, the position of the poets and other members of the druidic tradition seems to have

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1. On India Dumézil, 1948; Coomaraswamy, 1942.

declined in importance as compared to that of the king - and this indeed is what we should expect. But, in reference to the earlier period, the druids and so on are sometimes most definitely represented as superior. Quite apart from the king's general dependence on druidic or poetic insight and approval, the druids, we are told, were accorded precedence in speech: in the meeting of the Ulstermen, so it says in one of the sagas, it was forbidden (geis) for them to speak until their king had spoken first; and it was forbidden for him to speak before his druids did. The king stood up from his throne; there was instant silence, so that a needle falling from roof to floor would have been heard; but the king did not speak - not until his druid had invited him with the question "What is this, O illustrious king?" Then, and only then, he made his speech.[1]

Most often the two sides of authority, the kingly and the poetic, are ranked together. A sage of letters, or a chief poet (ollave) have "equal nobility" with the king of one tuath; a battle is put off equally with the arrival of a king, a bishop or a poet; in the famous description in the Táin of the array of the host, the poets are pointed out, and one "would think they were all kings".[2] It is the same theme

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1. Joyce, I. p. 237; cf. Powell, 1959, p. 75.
2. AL. V. 103; 307; TBC, tr. Dunn, 332-3.

as that which is symbolised in the inauguration of the king: the conjunction between the two parts of power, the king and the poet.

The king thus represents one side of authority - kingly and military power. But he is the standard nevertheless for the whole society. For the truth and knowledge of the poet is, as we have seen, symbolically given him at his inauguration. And he can rule in virtue as it were, of his borrowed possession of these qualities.

This is how it comes about that the king himself is sometimes represented as combining in his own person the poetic virtues in addition to those of a king.[1] This is the second point that is now illuminated by our discussion of the inauguration ceremony. King and poet are so closely united, that the most famous kings are shown as themselves poets or brehons or druids. Kings were of course often taught, according to the stories, by druids or fostered or fathered by them. But what is more, they too, like poet and jurist, had poetic insight: Find Fili, the mythical ancestor of some of the Leinster royal families, was both king and fili, poet; many kings were well known for their ability to compose extempore verse, and Cormac, the archetypal king, perhaps, in Irish tradition "the prudent and good, was a sage, a poet, a prince". Cormac was

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1. MacAirt, 1958, p. 140.

the frequent subject of panegyric in Irish literature; he instituted many of the laws of Ireland, he separated every art from the other, made Tara the capital and defined the boundaries of the country from sea to sea. He was the Irish "Numa".[1] It was he who, after he was blinded and so no longer king, wrote the famous "Instructions of Cormac" and was, beyond all others, the king that was endowed with wisdom, the virtue of the poets.

Thus the background we find in mythical writing about the king has its counterpart in the actual ritual of inauguration. The king is given not only approval but truth itself; he is made into a kind of poet and seer. For in the political affirmation and rite de passage of the inauguration, he too is brought into the sphere of poetic and spiritual insight, so that though in one way a representative of only one aspect - the kingly - he is yet, paradoxically, a mark of the whole, through his endowment with fír - with, that is, the truth in accordance with which the land and society of Ireland is formed and perpetuated. This was not a matter of an inexorable fate or a rigid dualism inaccessible to men but of a cosmic order that could be affirmed and reasserted at the rite of inauguration.

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1. Binchy, 1943, p. 207.

In the poetic and learned idealisation of kingship - which after all we must follow, it is the only one to which we have access - even in this theory, the king is at the centre of society and of Ireland. Being central, his truth is necessary for the truth and order of his kingdom. "Truth in a prince (fírinni io flaith) is as bright as the foam cast up by the mighty wave of the sea, as the sheen of a swan's covering in the sun, as the hue of snow on a mountain".[1]

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1. AP. 37.

CONCLUSION

The subject of this thesis has been the theory and practice of early Irish kingship; in particular the former. It has been analysed in accordance with the assumption, argued in the introduction, that it is only by taking seriously the ideas, symbols and rituals associated with any kind of authority that it can be fully understood - even when, as in the case of Ireland, the concepts associated with kingship were expressed as a learned and romantic idealisation of the king's authority. This thesis then is designed as one example of this type of analysis of kingly authority.

There remain merely a few general points to make in conclusion.

The political organisation of Ireland included many small kings, each directly ruling only their own little local communities according to the pastoral and rural mode of Irish livelihood, but also loosely grouped together under the domination of the more powerful kings. From this point of

view, early Ireland could be described as an example of the "segmentary state"[1]. This useful term was introduced by Southall as a mean between, on the one hand, the completely uncentralised, the "segmentary", society, and, on the other, the unitary power state. As he points out, the centralised state is not always a helpful theoretical concept for analysis; also it is not nearly so widespread in practice as we would tend to suppose.[2] Southall suggests the "Celtic kingdoms" as one possible application for his new term of "segmentary state"; this suggestion of his was, in fact, one of the stimuli of this thesis. It turns out that in many ways early Ireland does conform to his model of the "segmentary state"; in Ireland there was a certain tendency towards a central focus for the country, but no real central control; the kings had various powers, yet local and kinship ties were essential in the maintenance of order; there was an idea of one people but not of defined territorial sovereignty. Southall's term is, therefore, a useful one for classification, and in several ways applies well to early Ireland. It does not, however, cover all aspects of significance, for, in the case of Ireland, it does not touch on what is perhaps the most interesting point, the two aspects of the "kingly" and

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1. pp. 246-63.
2. Ibid.; cf. Maine, 1875, p. 383f.

the "poetic" and the way in which these two are brought into conjunction in the ideal theory of kingship and the elaborate ritual of inauguration.

This thesis has been entitled "Early Irish Kingship" and speaks throughout not of chiefs and chieftaincy but of kings and kingship, even though, on the face of it, the size of the local ruler's domain seems to be more analogous in scale with what we have been accustomed to class as "chiefships", not "kingdoms".

There are several reasons for my use of the term "king" here.

In the first place, the Irish king was, at least in principle, inaugurated with mystic and solemn rites, ceremonially accepted by the people; like any king he was endowed with a semi-sacred office, over and above his own personal qualifications, through the part played by the poet in the ceremony. And, to follow Freeman's words about the inauguration ritual in his Comparative Politics, "I am not sure that it is not here that the true mystery and dignity of kingship really lay".[1]

Secondly, in the idealised theory of the perfect king, with his virtues and attributes representing his whole society, the day to day actions and powers of particular individual

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1. Freeman, 1896, p. 91.

kings were transcended by the ideal theory. It was this kingship in the abstract that was described, and given the special mystical aura and dignity that we find in the Irish theory of kingship.

Finally it is structure rather than scale which is the basis of classification. And Irish kingship, though small in scale, was, in the theory, not dissimilar to much more widescale and well-known kingships like those, for example, of ancient Egypt or India. In what has been called "cosmic kingship", the king is regarded as the upholder of the cosmic order (truth and justice) of which he is part, and as, in himself, transcending all divisions. Thus his actions have special symbolic significance; through and in them the cosmic order is maintained. In Ireland, the term for this order was fír (or maybe coir). In Egypt it was Maat personified as a goddess. Maat was "the right order which allowed nature to function unimpaired for the benefit of man", and the king "produced barley" by maintaining Maat; at the accession of the king "truth has repressed falsehood .... the water standeth and faileth not, the Nile carrieth a high flood".[1] Similarly in the Indian theory of kingship there are the analogous concepts of dharma and ṛta,[2] the sacred

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1. Frankfort, 1948, pp. 57-8.
2. Cf. esp. Basham, 1954, pp. 115ff, 236ff.

law and cosmic order which the king must guard and uphold, and, even more striking, the analogous part played by the Indian brahman or priest (the counter-part of the Irish druid/poet) as the complement of the king: he instructs the king, knows his rights and duties and the sacred law which he must uphold; the king is inaugurated by the priest who is in some ways regarded as his superior; and though on earth king and priest are apparently sundered, ideally they should be complementary, and fused into one.[1] These likenesses, then, between the Irish and the Egyptian, still more the Indian, theories of kingship make it not only plausible but necessary to speak likewise of Irish kingship; like them it was elaborate, articulate and long-lived; like them it expressed the part of the king in the cosmic order.

Moreover, the analysis here of Irish kingship has constantly recalled Hocart's penetrating analysis in his book on Kingship published in 1927. He did not in fact include any of the Irish evidence. The analogies are therefore all the more striking, especially points made in his discussion of the "king's justice" and its effects on the prosperity of crops and cattle, the significance of cosmologies and myths of creation, the analogies of sun and order, of earth queen

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1. On India: e.g. Basham loc. cit.: Heesterman, 1957; Coomaraswamy, 1942; Dumézil passim. On analogies coir/rta. cf. O'Rahilly, 1946, Ch. XV.

and kingdom, the relations of king and priest, and, most of all, the structure of the coronation rite, of which Hocart gives a full description. After his analysis using evidence from, among other places, Fiji, modern Cambodia, ancient India, Rome, Egypt and the Byzantine Empire, he concludes;

> It is unfortunate that with the exception of the Roman triumph, and possibly the Fijian installation, all these rites can be traced to a comparatively small area of the globe, from the Aegean to the Ganges ..... May we hope that the present study will serve as a stimulus to others to seek out other more distant forms and thus widen the basis of our inquiry? 1

Even when we reject his emphasis on diffusion and the idea that similar types of kingship must literally and originally be identical, we must admit that Irish kingship could indeed be counted as of the same type as that presented by Hocart, and that his material has thus been constantly illuminating.

Another writer whose work has been continually helpful in this discussion of Irish kingship, is Dumézil. He has analysed the basic ideas common to Indo-European societies - their conceptual framework, and the categories according to which political authority, myth, history, the world, are represented. He speaks, for example, of the tripartite conception of the world and society at the basis of Indo-European ideas, as represented by, say, the three-fold concept of ancient Indian classes, priests, warriors, and cultivators;

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1. Hocart, 1927, p. 98.

the colours associated with these different classes and their political aspects; and the dual concept of authority, the calm priestly aspect as opposed to that of the warrior, represented in India as the gods Mitra and Varuna, "les dieux souverains, la projection cosmique de la Souveraineté terrestre".[1] For all these points made by Dumézil, this present study of Irish kingship has shown some support: the Irish evidence, mentioned but not analysed in detail by Dumézil, fits very well with his general approach.

The writings of Dumézil, then, lie behind much of this thesis. But in spite of this (or because of it) I do not find <u>all</u> his points convincing. Some of his concepts (that, for example, of the dual representation of authority) are in danger of being ambiguous, so that they can be interpreted <u>either</u> in a very broad sense, in which case they are indeed useful for comparative analysis[2] but are not, as he would suggest, confined to those societies which are "Indo-European"; <u>or</u> they can be defined narrowly and precisely, and may then be found <u>not</u> after all fully applicable to all the Indo-European societies he would wish to include. Their plausibility may then possibly rest in part on this ambiguity. Nevertheless

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1. Dumézil, 1948, p. 77.
2. Cf. e.g. excellent discussion in de Jouvenel, 1952, p. 82ff.

if we follow not so much his conclusions about the nature of Indo-European concepts as distinct from others, as his analysis of ideas about, say, authority and sovereignty, his work is immensely stimulating, and his general approach of analysing the ideas and categories implicit in myth or ritual, is, in principle, a most useful one. It is satisfactory that my treatment of Irish kingship, as far as it goes, tends to support much of Dumézil's analysis.

This thesis has been in the nature of an experiment: to see what an anthropologist, aware of the contributions of modern social anthropology, could make of a specialist sphere; in this case early Ireland. As such, I consider it to have been in many ways a failure: for, in the end, no insight, even an anthropologist's, can really be a substitute for mastery of the original sources. Yet I hope that I have raised questions that now can and should be properly treated by Irish specialists - by specialists using not only their experience of Irish scholarship but also the resources of modern - not only 19th century - social anthropology.

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