# Donn, Amairgen, Íth and the Prehistory of Irish Pseudohistory

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Although it is increasingly generally recognised that much of the narrative of Irish legendary history, including its overall framework, is to be understood in terms of Latin sources and imported concepts, this does not exclude the possibility that some elements within the scheme have an older, indigenous background. This paper focuses on three key figures in the account of the Gaelic settlement of Ireland - the brothers Donn and Amairgen, and their kinsman Íth - arguing that they reflect ancient origin myths with significant analogues elsewhere in Indo-European tradition.

Writing in the year 1919, Kuno Meyer concluded his criticism of various points in Arbois de Jubainville's 1884 book *Le cycle mythologique irlandais* with a sweeping dismissal of that study's approach to the Middle Irish treatise known as *Lebor Gabála*, the work which provided medieval Ireland with the most influential account of its legendary history:[1]

> …Unfortunately, a great part of Arbois' book is built upon similarly inexact interpretations - above all, however, on the aforementioned mistaken view that the story-telling (*Fabeleien*) of early Irish scholars is always somehow based on native saga and tradition. Thus he already refers in the first chapter, for example, to the content of *Lebor Gabála* as 'the Irish mythological cycle', and without more ado proposes comparisons with Hesiod's *Theogony*. The days when this fabrication (*Machwerk*) was regarded as the prehistory of Ireland are, it is to be hoped, gone for good; but it it also time to stop using it, without qualification, as a mine of Irish mythology and legendary history. It is van Hamel's achievement to have uncovered many of the sources - for

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[1]For some introductory discussion of *Lebor Gabála*, and of the Irish pseudohistorical tradition as a whole, see Carey 1994 and 2005.

the most part misunderstood passages from classical authors - from which the authors of *Lebor Gabála* derived their wisdom (Meyer 1919: 546).

Ninety-one years on, Meyer's expectations can be seen to have been a good deal too optimistic. Far from its being the case that the notion of using *Lebor Gabála* as evidence for Irish prehistory had been abandoned forever by the second decade of the twentieth century, it could be said that the idea is still ubiquitous in those areas of popular culture and 'fringe' speculation which concern themselves with such questions. That it has not been banished from the universities themselves can be illustrated with three examples, to which others could probably be added without much difficulty. T. F. O'Rahilly, one of the giants of Irish philology in the first half of the last century, is now best known in many quarters on the strength of his *Early Irish History and Mythology*, in which his formidable learning was harnessed to the task of correlating the settlements chronicled in *Lebor Gabála* with a postulated series of Iron Age migrations (O'Rahilly 1946: 75-77, 90, 99-101, 193-208, 263-266, 487, 492-496, 513; cf. O'Rahilly 1936).[2] Writing more recently, Richard Warner has argued for a historical basis for the story of the conquests of the purportedly second-century ruler Tuathal Techtmar (Warner 1995); and now, at the cutting edge of insular prehistory, the geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer is finding in *Lebor Gabála* - and, indeed, in the seventeenth-century *Annals of the Four Masters* - important confirmation not only for the overall framework of his model of the Irish past, but even for its chronology (Oppenheimer 2006: 87, 100-103, 109-110).

If *Lebor Gabála* and related sources can still be taken seriously as records of fact, it is not at all surprising that they also continue to be regarded as repositories of indigenous belief. Thus the approach of the brothers Alwyn and Brinley Rees in their 1961 book *Celtic Heritage* took it for granted that not only individual figures and episodes in *Lebor Gabála*, but also the structure of the whole, reflect a primordial Celtic vision of reality (Rees and Rees 1961: especially 95-117). Two decades earlier, Marie-Louse Sjoestedt was confident that although it was 'retouched, no doubt, by clerics anxious to fit

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[2]Cf. Scowcroft 1988: 42 n. 118: 'It should by now be evident that O'Rahilly composed an *LG* of his own'.

the local traditions into the framework of Biblical history... its pagan quality has not noticeably been altered' (Sjoestedt 1982: 14). Proinsias Mac Cana was considerably more cautious in this connection, and acknowledged the pervasive importance of monastic learning in Irish legendary history. But even he concluded that 'despite its transparent fabrications, there is much in this account that is evidently traditional' (Mac Cana 1985: 62).

Other scholars, however, have carried forward the line of interpretation pioneered by A. G. van Hamel, and championed as noted above by Meyer. The late 1980s saw the publication of two extended articles on *Lebor Gabála* by Mark Scowcroft, which rank among the most significant and penetrating studies of that text. At the beginning of the second of these, in terms which echo a famous metaphor of Matthew Arnold's, Scowcroft reflected that

> Students of early Irish tradition have too often pursued a kind of literary archaeology, excavating (sometimes creating) documentary ruins out of which to reconstruct pagan antiquity. Ignoring or dismissing the churches built of that same ancient stone, they may fail to see that their reconstructions rest on cruciform foundations: that traditions as suggestive to the historian as the Milesian invasion or as meaningful to the mythologist as the two battles of Mag Tuired belong in fact to the architecture of medieval learning rather than to its vernacular building-materials (Scowcroft 1988: 1).

Kim McCone cites Scowcroft's conclusions with approval, observing that 'the complex question of later developments in the extant recensions of the *Lebor Gabála* is best left to specialists, but there can be no doubt about the repeated use of the Bible and other ecclesiastical material in the formation and elaboration of this fundamental historical doctrine from the seventh century onwards'. He goes on to state that 'the broad outlines of pre-Christian Irish history were fashioned with the help of key features culled from the great biblical narrative up to the end of Kings' (McCone 1990: 68, 71).

It will, I think, be obvious to any careful reader of *Lebor Gabála* that this is the correct approach to take to that work as a whole. The Bible provides the overarching context within which Irish events are situated; and the parallelism between

the early Gaels and the Israelites, and between the successive settlements of Ireland and the 'world kingdoms' of Eusebius' *Chronicle*, are not only evident in themselves but are in fact explicitly acknowledged in the text. It could indeed scarcely be otherwise, for the *raison d'être* of *Lebor Gabála* - as of other pseudohistorical works produced in other countries - is to close the embarrassing gap between native tradition on the one hand, and on the other the imposing tableau of universal history which had been elaborated by the scholars of the early Church. Nor was assimilation of this kind an innovation of the Christian Celtic peoples. Thus Ammianus Marcellinus, writing in the fourth century AD and drawing to at least some extent on the writings of Timagenes of Alexandria (first century BC), has this to say about the origin legends of the pagan Gauls:

> The druids, indeed, relate that a part of the people is indigenous, but that others besides these have poured in from the outermost islands and the regions beyond the Rhine, driven from their homes by frequent wars and the inundation of the furious sea. Some say that, after the destruction of Troy, a few of those who were dispersed in all directions fleeing the Greeks occupied these lands, which were then empty. But the inhabitants of these regions claim this most of all (which, indeed, we have read carved upon their monuments): that Hercules the son of Amphitryon made haste to destroy the cruel tyrants Geryon and Tauriscus, one of whom troubled Spain, and the other Gaul. After he had conquered them both, he united with women of noble birth and acknowledged many children as his own, giving their names to those regions over which they ruled (*Res gestae* XV.9.4-6).

That the doctrines here ascribed to the druids may go back to Timagenes' account, and may in fact give us a glimpse of the mythohistoric speculations of some of the pre-Christian Celts, are attractive possibilities. It is however significant that these ideas were no longer in the ascendant in Ammianus' day: for the Romanized Gauls of the declining Empire, descent from Hercules clearly meant more. It is also interesting that some of the Gauls adapted to their own uses the fiction of Trojan exile which the Romans had used as a link between their own obscure beginnings and the more prestigious traditions of the Greeks. Trojan origins were to be claimed throughout the

medieval period by several of the peoples of Europe, but it is among the Franks that that claim is first attested: Ammianus' testimony suggests that they may have taken the idea over from the Gallo-Romans among whom they settled. [3]

But it is time to return to the pseudohistorical lore of Ireland, and to the question of its background. Such sources as the Bible, patristic learning, and Graeco-Roman legend, adjusted and embellished by the imaginations of monastic scholars, can explain a great deal of what we find in a work such as *Lebor Gabála*. But they do not explain everything; and it is some items in this unresolved remainder that I wish to consider in what follows. We may begin with the article of Meyer's which was cited at the beginning of this essay: 'Der irische Totengott und die Toteninsel'. As noted already, Meyer held that 'in *Lebor Gabála* we have for the most part to do not with popular legend and tradition, which can - as unfortunately still often happens - be used without more ado to serve mythological ends, but with the self-conscious and systematic creation of classically educated scholars' (Meyer 1919: 538). He nevertheless believed that, in one case at least, it was possible to glimpse a bit of ancient belief behind the screen of learned fabrication: a figure named Donn, although assigned by *Lebor Gabála* to the patently artificial family of Míl Espáine ('the Soldier from Spain'; already present as the *miles Hispaniae* in the account of Irish origins in the ninth-century Welsh *Historia Brittonum*), still bore traces of a much earlier identity. Thus the poet Mael Muru Othna (died 887) said of Donn that

> His cairn was raised, and the stone of his kindred, above
> the broad sea: an ancient dwelling, a house of the waves,
> which is called the House of Donn.
>    This was his mighty legacy to his abundant
> descendants: 'To me, to my house, let them all come
> after their deaths.' [4]

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[3]Intriguingly, the passage quoted here is not mentioned in this connection by Ian Wood in his excellent essay on doctrines of Frankish origins. He does however cite Ammianus for the claim that the Burgundians were akin to the Romans (Wood 2006: 114).

[4]The translation is taken from a critical edition of the poem from all manuscripts, currently in preparation. Meyer's translation is essentially the same (Meyer 1919: 538-539).

After reviewing this and other pieces of evidence, Meyer concluded that

> After all this, I believe that it is possible to consider it to have been established that the pagan Gaels believed in their common descent from an ancestor Donn, who was also the death-god, and whose dwelling was situated on an island to which all true Gaels came after their death. As ancestor and death-god, Donn is the exact counterpart of the Gaulish *Dis Pater*, who according to Caesar... likewise combined both functions in himself.... This belief in an ancestor and death-god in one person is however not only Common Celtic, but Indo-European, as the Indic Yama testifies (Meyer 1919: 542-543).[5]

The correspondence between the Irish and the Gaulish figures is indeed a striking one, and most scholars have accepted Meyer's interpretation of the evidence. Our understanding of the significance which such a divinity may have held for the early Celtic peoples has been further enriched by a recent suggestion of Kim McCone's. After pointing to indications that, *pace* the objections of the currently vocal 'Celtosceptics', the term 'Celt' was in fact used as a collective designation in most parts of what has been conventionally regarded as the 'Celtic' sphere, McCone goes on to propose an etymology for the term itself: that it is

> a vṛddhi derivative meaning 'offspring of *kl̥tos* "the hidden one"'... a likely enough title of the god of the dead from whom the ancient Gauls all claimed descent according to Caesar.... The same root is certainly attested among the Celts' Germanic neighbours in the name of the underworld and its presiding goddess (Old Norse *Hel...*) still surviving in English as *Hell*. Vṛddhi derivatives have a clearly defined meaning 'belonging to, consisting of, descended from', are invariably thematic (i.e. add an *-e/o-* suffix, if not already present in the base) and are produced by inserting *e* after the first consonant of the base's root.... *Keltos* could have been formed from *kl̥tos* in the manner envisaged no later than the Proto-Celtic period itself, from which the myth of descent from the god of the underworld would then presumably date. It

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[5]Caesar's statement appears in his *De bello Gallico* 6.18.1f.: 'Galli se omnes ab Dite patre prognatos praedicant idque ab druidibus proditum dicunt'.

follows that the speakers of Proto-Celtic actually called themselves *\*Keltoi* 'Celts' (McCone 2008: 38-39; cf. McCone 2006: 95).

While any reconstruction of beliefs so deep in the preliterate past must to at least some extent remain speculative - a stricture which will apply in equal measure to the suggestions advanced below - I cannot see anything in the case outlined by McCone which is not well reasoned and eminently plausible. If he is correct, then the medieval Irish sources preserve, amid all their borrowings and concoctions, a recollection of one of the central myths of the Celts, from as far back in time as it is meaningful to speak of Celts at all.[6]

It is an arresting coincidence - if presumably no more than this - that one of the most important deities in the Egyptian pantheon, the divine sovereign *Amun,* also had a name which meant 'the Hidden One' (Budge 1920: i.51a; cf. Budge 1960: 194).[7] As the designation of an underworld and/or death god, 'Hidden One' could have been a protective euphemism, a way of avoiding direct reference to a dreaded supernatural power. This may have been the original significance of *Donn* as well: the word's normal meaning is 'dark brown', but there are lingering traces of an earlier sense 'black, dark, dusky'. [8] The same range of senses can be found for its closest cognate, the rarer Welsh adjective *dwnn*; and we can further compare words like English 'dun' and 'dusk', Latin *fuscus* 'dark' and Sanskrit *dhūsara-* 'ash-coloured' (Pokorny 1959: 270-271; Vendryes *et al.* 1959-: s.v. 'donn'). As Käte Müller-Lisowski pointed out, the Greek word θάνατος 'death' may go back to an analogous euphemism: it appears to be related to such words as Sanskrit *dhvāntá-* 'dark', Avestan *dvąnman-* 'cloud' and Latvian *dvans* 'vapour, smoke' (Müller-Lisowski 1952: 27; cf. Pokorny 1959: 266).

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[6]See now John T. Koch's argument that the word *\*keltos* may be attested in Tartessian, which he proposes as the oldest Celtic language (Koch 2009: 87).

[7]The root does not appear to have survived in Coptic, apart from the name *Amente* 'Hades, underworld'. That *Hades* itself meant 'invisible', although the etymology is disputed, was a recurrent idea in antiquity: see e.g. Burkert 1985: 196; Kingsley 1995: 47 n. 43.

[8]Cf. Bruce Lincoln's suggestion that the name *Donn* may be 'simply a descriptive term which has replaced an older proper name' (Lincoln 1981: 230). Lincoln's insightful article, of which I only became aware when revising this paper for publication, anticipates several of my own conclusions.

Meyer was struck by the difference between what seems to have been Donn's original significance and the rôle accorded him in *Lebor Gabála*. Far from appearing in the latter as the ancestor of all the Gaels, Donn is there said to have drowned in the course of the second landing of the sons of Míl in Ireland, leaving no descendants after him and never himself obtaining possession of any part of the new land - a discrepancy so sharp that Meyer was moved to speak of a 'pseudo-Donn, thrust into the place of the old god' (Meyer 1919: 539). I believe, however, that there is much in the Middle Irish account which may in fact also point back to Donn the primordial ancestor.

Anyone reading *Lebor Gabála*'s narrative of the Gaelic conquest can hardly help but notice that it consists of two parallel strands. The first of these concerns the doings of Éremón (ancestor of the Uí Néill, the Connachta, the Laigin, and other population-groups) and of Éber Find (ancestor of the Eóganachta and others), both with names derived from names of Ireland (Irish *Ériu* and Latin *Hibernia* respectively), and associated with such similarly eponymous siblings as Ír (ancestor of the Ulaid),[9] Érennán and Érech, along with Colptha (eponym of the Boyne estuary). We hear about their landing places, their wives and sons and other descendants, and (briefly) about some of their deaths, but next to nothing apart from this: it is the same sort of genealogical and toponymic lore which makes so much of *Lebor Gabála* such pedestrian reading.

Only two of the sons of Míl Espáine have a further part to play in the story, and it is their deeds which make up its second strand: these are Donn, the eldest of the brothers; and Amairgen, the poet and judge, whose name may mean 'Born from Song'. They appear in conjunction, but also in opposition, representing the rival claims to authority of the warrior and the sage. When the advancing Gaels successively meet, on the tops of three hills, the three goddesses of the land, it is Amairgen who gains their good will by promising them that Ireland will be known by their names; Donn however defies them, saying that 'We will not thank her for it, but our own gods and powers'. Speaking apparently under inspiration, Amairgen declares that the Gaels must put to sea once more, go nine waves from shore, and then land again to

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[9]There may however be more to the figure of Ír; see below.

take definitive possession of the island. When they are then brought into difficulties by a magical wind raised by the Tuatha Dé Donann, Donn calls this 'a shame to the men of art', only to have Amairgen calm the storm with a chant in which he invokes the land itself in terms of its various features, concluding with a recognition that Ireland is personified in the 'vast woman Ériu'. Filled with an exultant arrogance, Donn cries 'Now I will bring under the edge of spear and sword all that there is in Ireland', whereupon the wind drives his ship upon a sandbank so that he drowns.[10] And so it is Amairgen who, in an anecdote found at the beginning of the saga *Mesca Ulad*, divides Ireland between the Gaels and the old gods (LL 34591-7).

I accordingly propose a division of the sons of Míl into two groups: a collection of two-dimensional ancestor figures, whose artificial-looking names are almost all that we know about them; and Donn and Amairgen, who are the central characters in the actual story. These feature as a pair as far back as the early eighth century: in the cryptic treatise known as 'The Caldron of Poesy', the author claims the identity of 'white-kneed, blue-shanked, grey-bearded Amairgen', and says that the nature of poetry should be made known 'in order to compose poetry for Éber Donn (*do Hébiur Dunn*) with many great chantings' (Breatnach 1981: 62 §1). The text's editor, Liam Breatnach, has followed one of its Middle Irish glosses in understanding 'Éber' and 'Donn' as two distinct names here, juxtaposed in asyndeton (Breatnach 1981: 78); but this interpretation seems to me unlikely. For one thing, 'Éber Donn' is well attested as a designation for Donn, appearing for instance several times in *Lebor Gabála* (thus LL 1533, 1539, 1600, 1612, 1629). For another, it is hard to understand the rationale behind the pairing postulated by the gloss. Éber (Find), ancestor of the chief dynasties of the south, is normally mentioned in conjunction with Éremón, his counterpart in the north:[11] why associate him instead with

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[10]For a convenient translation, based on my unpublished edition of the first recension of *Lebor Gabála* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard 1983), see Koch and Carey 2003: 266-267; text in Macalister 1956: 34-39, 52-57, 70-81. The encounters with the three goddesses are also mentioned by Mael Muru (thus Best *et al.*1954-1983 [hereafter LL], lines 16081-2), and by the Middle Irish *Lebor Bretnach* (Hamel 1932: 26).

[11]Besides instances of their being treated as a pair in *Lebor Gabála* itself, see e.g. 'Fiacc's Hymn', where the pagan Gaels are collectively called 'the sons of

Donn, a figure with no dynastic significance, and one who - confusingly - could also be called Éber himself? These objections are probably not insuperable; but it seems considerably simpler to bypass them by translating *do Hébiur Dunn* straightforwardly as 'for Éber Donn'.

If we detach Donn and Amairgen from their brothers in this way, and view them as the protagonists of an older settlement legend, [12] a number of intriguing analogies with other Indo-European traditions suggest themselves. Meyer, as we have seen, compared Donn and the Gaulish Dis Pater with Yama in Indian mythology: also both god of the dead and ancestor of mankind. *Yama* is in fact the Sanskrit word for 'twin', from a root *\*yem-* which also yielded Latin *geminus* and Irish *emon* (Pokorny 1959: 505). In the *Ṛg Veda*, the other twin is Yama's sister Yamī, who offers herself to him as a mate only to be rejected on the grounds that such a union would be incestuous: since it is however stated that they were the only human beings in the world, it seems likely that this hymn is an adaptation of an older tradition in which this primordial couple did in fact engender the rest of humanity (*RV* 10.10).[13] In the later *Purāṇas*, Yama also has a brother Manu: while Yama becomes god of the dead, Manu is celebrated for his wisdom and becomes a lawgiver and, as survivor of the Hindu flood myth, the ancestor of mankind (O'Flaherty 1975: 50, 65-70, 179-84). The parallelism between Yama and Donn on the one hand (primeval ancestors and lords of the dead), and Manu and Amairgen on the other (judges and survivors), is close enough to raise the question whether they may not in fact reflect the same Indo-European myth.[14] The root underlying

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Éber, the sons of Éremón' (Stokes and Strachan 1901-1903: ii.316); and the tale *Airne Fíngein* (Vendryes 1953: 11-12).

[12]Cf. Mac Cana 1985: 62-63: 'Amhairghin, like Donn, is wholly mythological'. Lincoln too notes that it is these two who 'stand foremost' among the sons of Míl (Lincoln 1981: 228).

[13]Translated with discussion in O'Flaherty 1975: 62-65. For indications that both Indian and Iranian traditions have attempted to disguise an earlier account in which the siblings did in fact unite see Schneider 1967: 18-19.

[14]Cf. Lincoln's observation that Donn stands to Amairgen 'in the relation of king to priest' (Lincoln 1981: 228). He sees their story as representing the Irish reflex of an Indo-European mythologem, already examined by him in an earlier article, according to which 'the world begins with a pair of twins, \*Manu, "Man", and \*Yemo, "Twin", \*Yemo being characterized as the first king, while \*Manu is the first priest, and in the course of the myth, \*Manu offers \*Yemo as the first sacrificial victim' (Lincoln 1975: 139).

*Yama* is also found in the name of *Ymir*, the androgynous giant who figures as the first being in the Icelandic *Gylfaginning*;[15] and according to Tacitus the ancient Germans held that *Mannus*, the universal ancestor corresponding to Indian Manu, was the son of a god *Tuisto*, born from the earth, whose name comes from the root meaning 'two' and evidently also had associations with twinhood (*Germania* 2.3; cf. Maier 2003: 63).

A formidable body of scholarship has been devoted to these and cognate traditions (e.g. Ward 1968, O'Brien 1982), and I will make no attempt to do justice to the whole of it here: even a consideration limited to the specifically Celtic evidence would carry us too far afield.[16] For our present purposes it may suffice to allude quickly to the Dioskouroi in Greek mythology, the twins Castor and Polydeuces, who take turns dwelling in the underworld; to the brothers Hengist and Horsa, said to have crossed the sea to Britain where Hengist established the line of the kings of Kent while Horsa died without issue; and, of course, to Romulus and Remus in Roman legend. Of this last pair, again, one twin establishes a royal line while another perishes - that Remus is killed after derisively leaping across a boundary trench may be compared with Donn's death following his hubristic words just before the decisive landing in Ireland (Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.7). It would probably be chimerical to attempt to combine all of this evidence in the quest for some single archetypal foundation myth, from which the story of Donn and Amairgen can be derived. Even if we abstain from such an exercise, however, it seems to be sufficiently evident that this body of material exhibits elements which, again and again, find parallels in the story of the Gaelic settlement.

A further Celtic datum has not, it seems to me, so far received the attention which it deserves in this connection. According to Diodorus Siculus,

> the Celts dwelling beside the ocean honour the Dioskouroi most of all the gods; for it has been handed down to them from ancient times that these gods came

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[15]Snorri Sturluson 1988: 10-12; cf. the earlier allusions to this figure in *Vǫluspá* §3, *Vafðrúðnismál* §§21, 28, *Grímnismál* §40 (Kuhn 1983: 1, 48-49, 65); and discussion in Turville-Petre 1964: 275-278, 319 n. 11.

[16]Thus I will not discuss Lincoln's stimulating argument for an association between Donn son of Míl and Donn the bull of Cuailnge (Lincoln 1981: 229; Lincoln 1981a: 87-92).

from the ocean (*Histories* 4.56.4).

Not only do we find particular reverence being accorded to two divine brothers, then, but also a story of how they came from across the sea. It may be that we have here the last faint trace of a Gaulish counterpart to the story of Donn and Amairgen.

There is one respect in which the Irish story differs from most of those with which I have compared it. Amairgen is not a ruler and dynastic founder, like Hengist or Romulus; or one of a pair of heroes, like Castor or Polydeuces; or a universal ancestor, like Manu. He is, rather, a prototypical poet and legal expert, an embodiment of the powers of the word, set over against his elder brother Donn, the leader and man of action. This polarity recalls Caesar's celebrated generalization that the only two classes of any consequence in Gaulish society were the druids and the *equites*, or horse-riding nobility (*De bello Gallico* 6.13); less remotely, we can recall the semi-allegorical Middle Irish anecdote about the birth of Aí, or 'Poetry', the son of Ollam, or 'Master Poet', and Aí's precocious demands upon the generosity of Ollam's brother the king Fiachu of the Tuatha Dé Donann (Thurneysen 1936: 193-194; trans. Koch and Carey 2003: 222).[17] In this story about two brothers, one a poet and the other a ruler, the agenda is to assert the ultimate supremacy of the former over the latter; and it is plain that the story of Amairgen and Donn has a similar message. It may well be that the *filid* or professional poets, in transmitting this ancient tale, gave it a slant calculated to enhance the standing of their own profession.[18]

In his own comments on the passage from Diodorus, Bernhard Maier has suggested that 'a connection between this idea of the gods and the system of the double kingship occasionally mentioned by ancient sources in connection with various Gaulish tribes is in any case conceivable' (Maier 2001: 76). This is an intriguing idea. Maier goes on to caution that the examples of this institution which have been proposed

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[17]That this story may draw upon very old tradition is suggested by its association of Aí's birth with a strong wind: although there is no trace of this in the word's attested usage, *aí* derives from a root *$h_2w\bar{e}$ 'to blow'.

[18]This contrasts with the situation which according to Donald Ward obtains elsewhere in the Indo-European world, where one of the twins represents Dumézil's 'third function' (Ward 1970); Ward's own position represents a departure from that of Dumézil himself, who had assigned both twins to the third function.

'are not all to be interpreted in this sense: while Ambiorix and Catuvolcus, according to Caesar's account, ruled jointly over the Eburones, the cases of Dumnorix and Diviciacus..., Indutiomarus and Cingetorix..., as well as Cavrinus and Moritasgus manifestly involve competing antagonists' (Maier 2001: 195 n. 171). The analogy of the Irish legends, however, suggests that these alternatives were not always clear-cut: are Donn and Amairgen allies, or rivals, or both?[19] In the case of the Aedui, it is certainly suggestive that of the two brothers contending for primacy, Dumnorix and Diviciacus, the latter is said by Cicero to have been a druid (*De diuinatione* 1.41.90); but this statement has been challenged by some scholars and is in any case too isolated to serve as the basis for broader conclusions (thus Maier 2009: 35-36). More promising, perhaps, is Caesar's portrayal of the Aedui as having had leaders of two kinds: chieftains like Diviciacus and Dumnorix, who owed their standing to birth and to the number of their followers, and who acted as leaders in war; and the supreme magistrate known as the *uergobretus*, 'who is appointed for a year and has power of life and death in their affairs' (*De bello Gallico* 1.16). Whatever may be the sense of this word's first element, *-bretus* clearly designates a judge of some kind; that the *uergobretus* was not an institution peculiar to the Aedui is indicated by the term's occurrence, in the form VERCOBRETOS, in an inscription from the adjacent territory of the Bituriges.[20]

But let us return to Ireland, and to *Lebar Gabála*. There is one other character in the account of the Gaelic settlement whose adventures are related in some detail: this is the tragic figure of Íth son of Bregon, whose wrongful death is the catalyst for the invasion. His story has various aspects. In part, it is as clear an example of the latinate artificiality of the pseudohistorical schema as one could wish for: when Íth ascends the tower built by his father Bregon in Spain, and gazes across the winter sea to Ireland, he is ascending the

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[19]For the implicit rivalry between the brothers, present also in the case of Romulus and Remus and, in a non-Indo-European tradition, in that of the twins Jacob and Esau, see Emily Lyle's chapter 'The place of the hostile twins in a proposed theogonic structure' (Lyle 1990: 105-118); for this reference I am grateful to Máire Herbert.

[20]Allain, Fleuriot and Chaix 1981; on p. 21, Léon Fleuriot identifies the first element as 'le mot *uergo-* "acte", ou "acteur", auquel correspond le vieux-breton *guero* glosant *efficax* et beaucoup d'autres mots'.

Roman lighthouse (still standing) of *Brigantia*, the modern Coruña in Galicia, and taking advantage of Orosius' statement that the nearer regions of Ireland 'gaze from afar (*spectant*), across an extensive distance, at the city of Brigantia in Galicia' (*Historiae* 1.2.80-81; Zangemeister 1889: 12). By *spectant* Orosius may have meant only that the southern parts of Ireland face toward northwestern Spain: but there was certainly scope for a more literal understanding of his words, and this is how they were in the event understood. Already in *Historia Brittonum*, written early in the ninth century, we find evidence that Irish pseudohistorians combed sedulously through Orosius' account of world geography for material to use in their accounts of the continental wanderings of the Gaels (*Historia Brittonum* §15, Mommsen 1898: 157; cf. Orosius, *Historiae* 1.2.87-94, Zangemeister 1889: 13-14); the same thing has clearly been happening here.

When Íth has crossed the sea and come to Ireland, however, it is analogies of a different kind which suggest themselves. Traversing the island from south to north, he comes to Ailech Néit where the three Tuatha Dé Donann kings, husbands of the land-goddesses Ériu, Fótla and Banba, are arguing over an inheritance. In the words of *Lebor Gabála*:

> Íth surpassed the judges of Ireland in cleverness and pleading, and he righted every complaint and contention that there was among them, and he said: 'Enact rightful law, for you dwell in a good land. Abundant are its mast and honey and wheat and fish. Balanced are its heat and cold.' Then they plotted to kill Íth, and they banished him from Ireland; and he departed from them in Ailech and came into Mag nÍtha. Emissaries followed him, and slew him there in Mag nÍtha, whence it is called 'the Plain of Íth' (trans. Koch and Carey 2003: 263; cf. Macalister 1956: 10-21).

The reason for the treacherous ingratitude of the three kings is not spelled out in the text, but can be inferred in light of the ideology of early Irish kingship. Thus the celebrated wisdom text *Audacht Morainn* enjoins a ruler to judge justly, for his land and people will only flourish if he does so; and also to 'estimate [i.e. assess, evaluate] the creations of the Creator who made them as they were made; anything which he will not judge according to its profits will not give them with full increase' (Kelly 1976: 12-15 §32). Íth shows that his powers of

judgment are greater than those of the judges of the kings, and evidently of the kings as well; and he is able to recognise, and to describe, the virtues of the land. Through speech, in other words, he shows himself to be better fitted to be a king in Ireland than are those who exercise the rule: the latter perceive this as a challenge, and Íth pays with his life. We may also observe that Amairgen is distinguished in just the same way: his are the decisive judgments, to which even the three kings declare themselves ready to submit; and it is his chanted description of Ireland which causes the magical wind to be stilled, allowing the Gaels to take possession of their new realm.

But if this part of the story of Íth carries us back to traditional conceptions of Irish kingship, his name may carry us further still. Formally, it is identical with a noun *íth* which means 'fat, lard, grease'. Such a name might seem less appropriate to an illustrious Gaelic pioneer than to the Middle Irish satirical work *Aisling Meic Con Glinne* (where an Íth does figure in the 'genealogy of food' which links Mainchín of Cork to Adam; Jackson 1990: 13); but it is in fact appropriate, on a deep level. I think that it is John T. Koch who first pointed out in print the significance of the fact that *íth* 'fat' appears to have the same root as that which John Rhŷs proposed for *Ériu* 'Ireland', both deriving from the Indo-European root *\*peiH-* (Koch 1986: 7-9, 1991: 22-23; cf. Rhŷs 1873-1875: 196). Ireland would accordingly be the 'fat' country in the sense that it is fertile and abundant: a semantic spread also reflected in the pairing of *ith* 'grain', originally 'food' (from the zero-grade *\*pitu-*) and *iath* 'land, territory' (from the *e*-grade *\*peitu-*; Pokorny 1959: 794).[21] The same suffixation with -*er*- has yielded Sanskrit *pīvarī*, the feminine form of *pīvan* 'fat', and Greek πίειρα, feminine of πίων with the same meaning. It is interesting that Ireland's name seems, following this hypothesis, to go back to a specifically feminine Indo-European form; and even more interesting that Greek πίειρα, although it can be used of feasts, is most frequently applied to fruitful land. The same association evidently lies behind the Thracian placename *Pieria*.

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[21]In this connection Máire Herbert has called my attention to a Middle Irish toponymic tale in which, as the girl Ériu ('Ireland') is fed, the hill on which she is sitting grows: Stokes 1893: 490 and 1895: 490; Gwynn 1903-35: iv.184-187.

The vocalism of *Ériu* is a problem, and McCone has recently revived Osborn Bergin's suggestion that this name should rather be understood to have been 'taken over from pre-Celtic inhabitants speaking a non-Indo-European language' (McCone 2008: 11; Bergin 1946: 152-153). But this position leaves out of account the existence of a doublet *íriu*, used as a common noun meaning 'land, earth, world' - clearly cognate with Welsh *Iwerddon* 'Ireland', and readily comparable with Sanskrit *pīvarī*, Greek πίειρα and Thracian *Pieria*. In light of this evidence, Graham Isaac has put forward a more complex analysis in support of Pokorny's alternative derivation of *Ériu* from *$h_1epi$-uerion-*, which Isaac himself understands to have meant something like 'by the stream (of ocean)'. This protoform, becoming Celtic *$\bar{e}weriy\bar{u}$, would have yielded Irish *Ériu* and Welsh *Ywerddon* (the form attested in thirteenth-century manuscripts), while *$\bar{\imath}weriy\bar{u}$, from the 'fat' root, lies behind Irish *íriu* and Welsh *Iwerddon* (which latter he takes to have been originally, like *íriu*, a common noun 'land', which fell together with, and ultimately replaced, *Ywerddon* through natural confusion). Greek Ἰέρνη is not evidence that the name for 'Ireland' originally began with *ī*, but is simply due to borrowing into a language in which no lexemes began with *eie*- (Isaac 2009).

Isaac's argument is impressive; but its acceptance involves positing the coexistence, since the beginnings of insular Celtic, of two forms *$\bar{e}weriy\bar{u}$ 'Ireland' and *$\bar{\imath}weriy\bar{u}$ 'land'. A certain degree of overlap, if not coalescence, would have been virtually inevitable from a very early date – as illustrated by the postulated borrowing of *$\bar{e}(w)er$*- into Greek as ἱερ-, and the further postulated falling together of *Ywerddon* and *Iwerddon*. So far as I can see, then, this latest ingenious reading of the evidence does not significantly alter the case which Koch has advanced. Íth's name can scarcely have arisen by an obscurely motivated coincidence, and the idea of *Ériu* as the 'fat land' – whether this was indeed the name's original meaning, or arose through an early reinterpretation – provides it with an explanatory context. The first Gael to die in Ireland appears to have a name associated with that of Ireland itself.

How old might such an association be? In the nature of things, we cannot hope for any even approximate chronology here. It is however telling that the Celtic languages, unlike Sanskrit and Greek, have not preserved any associations with

'fat', etc., for derivatives of the root *\*peiH-* with a suffixed *-r-*: these only have the sense of 'earth' or 'territory'. This indicates that a link between *\*(p)īwer-* and *\*(p)īt-* had probably already become opaque at a point very early indeed in the development of Irish as a distinct language.

Irish tradition appears to preserve some further traces of the mythological/semantic nexus reflected in the names of Ériu and Íth. Íth is said in the genealogical literature to have been the ancestor of various peoples of the *Érainn*: an ethnic designation which, although its true significance is largely obscured by medieval propaganda, evidently designates a population-group centred in Munster which enjoyed considerable importance prior to the rise of the Uí Néill and Eóganacht in the fifth and sixth centuries. One tract attributes two sons to Íth: Iar and Lugaid (O'Brien 1976: 372).[22] The name Iar appears elsewhere in the genealogies of the Érainn as well (O'Brien 1976: 188-189, 329, 378),[23] and the existence of a personal name Mac Iair bears further witness to his early importance as an ancestor figure (O'Brien 1976: 16, 27, 40, 82, 85, 140, 196, 215, 315, 341, 414, 431).[24] Genitive *Iair, Ieir* rather than *Éir* shows that the name was disyllabic, going back to a protoform *\*(p)īweros*.[25] If from *\*peiH-*, this formation is evidently secondary, involving as it does a masculine derivative of originally feminine *\*pīwer-*; but it is still old enough for the connection with such names as *Ériu* and *Érainn* no longer to be readily apparent. Iar may in turn lie behind the figures Ír and Ér, who in different accounts of the Gaelic settlement occupy a role closely similar to that of Íth in that they are severally said to be the first of the sons of Míl to die in, or while approaching, Ireland.[26]

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[22]A paragraph concerning the two brothers gives the form as *Hír*; but in the immediately preceding pedigree the name appears in the genitive as *Ier, Iair, Hiair*. Cf. O'Rahilly 1946: 82 n. 3. In the early stratum of 'O'Mulconry's Glossary' the Érainn are called *tuatha Ier* 'peoples of Iar': Stokes 1900: 254 §417.

[23]The name's presence in an Osraige pedigree (O'Brien 1976: 16) may reflect the overlordship which the Corcu Loígde are said to have exercised over that kingdom in the sixth and seventh centuries (Radner 1978: 2 and note on p. 185).

[24]Note further MAQQI-IARI in an *ogam* inscription from Ballintaggart, Co. Kerry: Macalister 1945: 152 §156.

[25]There is in fact one instance of genitive *Heir* (O'Brien 1976: 329).

[26]Ír: Koch and Carey 2003: 264; Macalister 1956: 30-31, 72-3. (It may be significant that a curse uttered by Donn, comparing Ír with Íth, appears to be

Lugaid son of Íth appears in the genealogies as ancestor of the Corcu Loígde, the most prominent of the Érainn peoples: over-used by some scholars though such an explanatory strategy may have been, it does not seem far-fetched in the present case to surmise that he is 'ultimately the same' as the eponymous Lugaid Loígde, and as the latter's son Lugaid Mac Con.[27] All of these names of course recall that of the god Lug; and both Lug and Lugaid Mac Con were closely, if variously, associated with the kingship of Tara.[28] That Lugaid son of Íth was prominent in early versions of the Gaelic origin legend is suggested by *Lebor Gabála*'s description of him as 'the harsh violent mighty warrior with the strength of a hundred' (Koch and Carey 2003: 264; Macalister 1956: 28-29): no other member of the conquering expedition is accorded a description of this kind, even though Lugaid is scarcely mentioned in the rest of the account.

After all of this, what are we left with? A handful of names, a few attributes and sketchy narrative associations, and no certain conclusions. We are, and will almost certainly remain, a long way from being able to reconstruct an archetypal myth of Gaelic origins - even assuming, and this seems to me unlikely, that some single definitive doctrine on this subject ever existed. But we have at least found clues, and suggestive ones, which indicate that some elements in the Irish pseudohistorical construct come to us, not from Orosius or Eusebius or Genesis, but from ancient native stories of the first settlement of the land: stories which find echoes in beliefs attributed to the druids, and which may in part go back as far as the naming of Ireland itself.

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the cause of Ír's death.) Ér: Hull 1932.
[27]Discussion and references - going however considerably beyond what is suggested here - in O'Rahilly 1946: 77-82.
[28]Thus Tomás Ó Cathasaigh sees an identification of the two in terms of Corcu Loígde claims to Tara: '[Lugaid] is, so to speak, *their* Lug, deposing Art (of the Dál Cuinn) from the kingship' (Ó Cathasaigh 1977: 38 n. 147). On Lug and Tara, see further Carey 2005a: 41-44.

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