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Shimmering Through a Christian Prism

*Integration through Covenant, Ritual, and Mediation in the
Myths of Finn Mac Cumhaill and Sigurðr, Facilitating their
Acquisitions of Otherworldly Knowledge*

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Abstract

This thesis will examine how traditions and rituals, pre-Christian and pagan, were integrated, reordered, and flourished in Christian doctrine before the Reformation, and how these phenomena may have influenced the symbolism and representation of pre-Christian rituals in Irish and Norse medieval literature—specifically in the evolution of legendary characters Finn Mac Cumhaill and Sigurðr, following their full participation in an otherworldly meal and acquisition of otherworldly knowledge. Pre-Reformation Christianity shared more similarities with pre-Christian religions than post-Reformation Christianity does, and several Christian teachings rise out of pagan origins and philosophy. Modern scholarship, however, tends to view these myths through a post-Reformation lens without demonstrating a deep understanding of pre-Reformation Christianity. This thesis will address how Sacred Tradition, ritual, sacrifice, and mediation through three separate roles—priest, prophet, and king—are paramount in pre-Reformation Christianity, working in union and in equal gravity with Sacred Scripture, facilitating a model of integration. It will address the role of covenant and participation in a sacred meal, binding two parties in kinship and legality, as well as the role of the lady with the drinking cup, in regard to kingship and marriage, as a form of covenant and necessary binding. Lastly, it will address mediation, an obligatory function in many religions beyond Christianity, from the vantage point of the three separate roles. These occurrences will be examined in the Irish literature, with parallels drawn to the Norse tradition and their nuances. Rather than assessing both traditions under the suffocating blanket of Christianity, this thesis will examine the nuances of pre-Christian and Christian integration, present in the subtleties and distinctions of these two traditions. In conclusion, this thesis hopes to provide a glimpse into the Christianity medieval scribes knew intimately, and perhaps shed light on the relationship that pre-Christian communities may have shared with the invisible side of nature—with the otherworld—by means of integration and re-ordering of relationships, through the prism of pre-Reformation Christianity.

Foreword

The concept for this thesis began many months before ink hit paper and is the result of numerous conversations with peers, supervisors, and clergy, plus several sleepless nights and one or two glasses of whiskey. My profound thanks to my supervisor Jan Erik Rekdal, without whom writing this thesis would have been impossible. His guidance, his insight, and his patience have been a blessing, as was his willingness to provide lessons and oversee self-study seminars in the Celtic field to bolster my knowledge. His experience and his demand for excellence leave me in a great debt of gratitude. Also, my sincere thanks to Ellen-Marie Pedersen, whose help finding scholarship, books, and articles during the Covid-19 pandemic was invaluable. My thanks to my professors at the University of Iceland, particularly Haraldur Bernharðsson and Torfi Tulinius, and to my good friend Morten Tirssøn Mathisen and the many enjoyable conversations that first sparked this idea. Lastly, I would like to thank my brother, Father Joshua Erickson, whose guidance in the theological aspects of this thesis leave me confident in their substantiality. To you all, my most heartfelt thanks.

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Part 1—Integration

Introduction

The trouble with interpreting Christian symbolism and influence in medieval mythology is that it's usually done through a post-Reformation understanding of Christianity, which is far too late. Gleaning comprehension of Christian pens without knowledge or consideration of the rituals, sacrifices, mediation, and Sacred Tradition imperative to medieval Christianity—a tradition that shoulders as grave a weight as Sacred Scripture—dooms an analysis to fall short. By separating Sacred Tradition, rituals, and mediation from Sacred Scripture, only half the story materializes, and the other half—the one that deals with integration—is stuffed in a closet. This study aims to examine the myths of Finn Mac Cumhaill and Sigurðr, particularly their acquisition of otherworldly knowledge, through the prism of pre-Reformation Christianity, endeavoring to develop a deeper understanding of the myths themselves, while delving into the symbolism and integration tactics of Christianity in that time, as penned by Christian scribes.

Two literary motifs that deserve further examination in regard to their ritualistic possibilities, and the ramifications for the protagonists thereafter, are the lady with the drinking cup and her role in the tales of Finn Mac Cumhaill; and the role of consuming a sacred meal that binds two parties into legal and symbolic contract—into covenant—with each other. The meals in *Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom* and *Völsunga saga* imbue Finn Mac Cumhaill and Sigurðr with otherworldly knowledge, setting these pre-Christian heroes on their journeys. Both heroes burn their thumbs while cooking an otherworldly meal for their respective mentors, and both accidentally consume the meal's juice after placing the burned members in their mouths, receiving spectacular benefits—Finn obtains *imbas forosna* (knowledge that enlightens)¹ and becomes a mighty poet while Sigurðr understands bird-speech and becomes known as the fearsome dragon slayer.

Joseph Nagy suggests that this consumption of raw otherworldly knowledge from the realm of nature is translated “into the realm of culture by the civilized and

¹ Meyer, Kuno, trans., “The Boyish Exploits of Finn,” in *Ériu* 1 (Dublin: The Royal Irish Academy, 1904): 180–190, 186.

the civilizing act of cooking,”² a claim fleshed out in his article *Intervention and Disruption of the Myths of Finn and Sigurd*. Nagy asserts that both Finn and Sigurðr perform a necessary societal function of bridging the otherworld and the material by palatalizing otherworldly knowledge through the ritual act of cooking.³ This parallel of heroic mediation through otherworldly abilities is fascinating, yet Nagy’s lynchpin of cooked verses uncooked may be misplaced, or at least over emphasized, in light of possible ritual ramifications through a symbiosis of Christian and pre-Christian rituals present in these tales.

Christian scribes writing the manuscripts were steeped in rituals, which thrived in pre-Reformation Christianity, originating in Jewish and pagan traditions, then reordered to fit Christian doctrine and integrated into it—a reality still present in the Catholic tradition today. Scribes from both traditions were learned in the folklore of their respective cultures and, thus, a healthy environment for integration and symbolism of pre-Christian ritual within the myths materialized and, arguably, was a natural development. This potential symbiotic relationship between pre-Christian and Christian rituals will be examined first in this study, for its understanding is vital to the textual analysis.

The questioning point in these episodes is *how* the acquisition of knowledge occurs—is it through consuming the raw knowledge and its palatalization by ritual cooking as Nagy believes, or does something draw deeper in the undercurrent, something palpable in pre-Christian past deliberately and artfully used by Christian scribes? In this context, ritual and covenant—as formalized procedures using natural materials to form binding agreements between two parties—will be examined, regardless if the parties involved exist in the otherworld, the material realm, or a combinations of the two.

What is consumed will be considered, in terms of sacred versus non-sacred; the time of year the event occurred, with regard to potential festivals and the meals and materials associated with these celebrations; the form in which these instances occur and the value of the materials used, reflected by archeological finds, literary

² Nagy, Joseph Falaky, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., 1985), 132.

³ Nagy, Joseph Falaky, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” in *Ériu* 31 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1980), 123–131, *JSTOR*, accessed February 25, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/30008217.

parallels, and linguistic evidence in the texts; and, lastly, the biblical parallels rising from Christian tradition and its possible ramifications on the literature.

Throughout this study, two final questions should be considered during the reading: does this possible symbiotic relationship of Christian and pre-Christian ritual, through integration, provide a glimpse into pre-Christian society and their relationship with the invisible? Integration does not sever but reorders and although Christian scribes recorded both Irish and Norse traditions, a Christian's relationship with the invisible varies greatly from culture to culture. This variance must be considered in regard to both traditions, not from the vantage point of the mighty Christian blanket smothering individual culture, but rather as something deeper and more personal, residing in the nuances and intricacies of their respective societies. If the above symbiotic relationship is valid—pre-Christian and Christian—then this integration will reveal itself through various heads rising within the literature and taking variant forms unique to the cultures, rituals, and relationships they represent. The Christian thread weaves through both traditions, but the subtleties may uncover deeper patterns of similarities or discrepancies, differentiating or amalgamating aspects of two separate traditions on profound and more symbolic levels.

In short, the second question to consider: does integration of ritual and relationship with the invisible provide additional depth to compare and contrast varying traditions to one another, from the perspective of ritual and relationship, as several of these separate traditions possess pre-Christian origins recorded by Christian scribes?

Chapter1: Understanding pre-Reformation Christianity

The distinction between pre-Reformation Christianity, in regard to practice and acceptance of pre-Christian rituals, as compared to post-Reformation Christianity is crucial in fathoming symbolic tactics of pre-Reformation scribes. The glimmering nucleus, continued today in Catholic tradition, is that pre-Reformation Christianity was never, and still isn't, solely a religion of the Book—its practices, beliefs, and teachings were not solely based on Scripture. Pre-Reformation Christianity unified Sacred Scripture with a living Sacred Tradition, going back to Christ and bearing influences of pre-Christian philosophers, festivals, and sacred spaces integrated and reordered into Christian doctrine and teaching. Several examples will illustrate this

concept more clearly, but the foremost paradigm is the celebration of Mass, notably called the *holy sacrifice of the Mass*.

1a—Sacrifice, Ritual, and Integration

Mass consists in two parts: the Liturgy of the Word—Sacred Scripture—followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist—Sacred Tradition—complete with ritual incensing and purification of the priest, the altar, the Gospel, and the congregation. This particular ritual draws on Jewish tradition and the incensing of non-bloody sacrifices seen in Leviticus 6:15, as well as additional examples found in Exodus 30 and 1 Chronicles 9:29.⁴ The congregation then participates, in union with the saints in heaven, in the bloodless sacrifice of Christ on the altar. This celebration of the Eucharist is not simply a representation or a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice, but a re-participation in Christ’s sacrifice and his actual presence, in the form of bread and wine, offered on the altar by anointed priests. Consuming the Eucharist is not required to participate in the holy sacrifice instituted by Christ—for example, non-Christians may participate in the Mass through their presence and receive the blessing of the Church. Full participation and entering into the New Covenant of Christ by consuming the Eucharist is reserved for those baptized who understand and profess their belief in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and are in good moral standing with the Church (are not in a state of mortal sin). The gravity of this distinction, in regard to the tales of Finn and Sigurðr, from the viewpoint of a Christian scribe, will be discussed later—participation through presence and full participation through consuming a sacred meal.

This integration of ritual and tradition also flickers in the Easter flame. Catholic priests light and bless the Easter flame with holy water and the flame is carried into the church as a symbolic representation of Christ’s light coming into the world, a tradition connected to the victory of “Patrick’s fire of Christianity over the pagan cult fire.”⁵ Another example is the origin of the Christmas celebration in Rome and its replacement of *Natalis Invicti*, the pagan solar feast—a reordering of a habitual

⁴ Morrisroe, Patrick, “Incense,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), *New Advent*, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07716a.htm>.

⁵ McCone, Kim, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: Maynooth Monographs, 2000), 177.

pagan feast to Christian doctrine fixated to a specific time of year.⁶ The Pantheon, a pagan temple erected to Jupiter, Venus, and Mars, was converted to a Catholic Church and consecrated to the Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs in AD 609, hence the new title Sancta Maria Rotunda.⁷ A space sacred to the pagan becomes holy to the Christian, where Mass is still said today. Rome itself, the seat of the emperor, became the seat of Peter and the authority of the Church, and the four cardinal virtues, a teaching prevalent in Catholic tradition, first appear in Plato's *The Republic*.⁸

1b—Integration in Irish Tradition

Kathleen Hughes notes several instances of this integration occurring in Ireland with two prominent examples being Armagh (*Ard Macha*), named after the pagan goddess Macha and founded two miles from Emain Macha, likely her chief seat; and Kildare, founded five miles from Knockaulin (*Dún Áilinne*) where a pagan sanctuary stood, and whose patron saint, Brigit, bears the name of an Irish goddess.⁹ Hughes posited that this occurred, in part, to endowment and the passing on of pagan lands to the Church.¹⁰ However, Saint Brigit seems to possess “many of the attributes of a pagan goddess,”¹¹ similar to how other Irish saints borrow attributes of Irish pre-Christian heroes,¹² and considering “her festival on February 1st, was *Imbolg*, the pagan festival of spring”¹³—in light of the precedent set in Rome with *Natalis Invicti*—this occurrence smacks more of integration and reordering than endowment. The “excavations at Knockaulin and Emain Macha emphasize the proximity of major pagan sanctuaries to two great monastic foundations,”¹⁴ and are physical representations of reordering and integrating previous traditions and relationships that

⁶ Martindale, Cyril Charles, “Christmas,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), *New Advent*, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>.

⁷ Oestereich, Thomas, “Pope St. Boniface IV,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), *New Advent*, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02660c.htm>.

⁸ Cf. Cornford, Francis Macdonald, trans., *The Republic of Plato* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941). The four cardinal virtues are not listed in this work as such, but rather their existence and concepts are fleshed out over the course of the entire book.

⁹ Hughes, Kathleen, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 74.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 74–75.

¹¹ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 229.

¹² Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 220.

¹³ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 229.

¹⁴ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 245.

pre-Christian communities developed with sacred spaces, rather than destroying them outright. To the pre-Reformation Christian, ritual and nature are not evil in themselves. In fact, it is through nature and ritual that humanity relates to the divine, as humanity is both nature and spirit—humanity understands the spiritual mediated through the natural, which means the sticking point isn't on the existence of these rituals and sacred spaces, but rather to what or to whom these rites and places were ordered, and in what form they were practiced.

Nature itself is sacred in pre-Reformation Christianity: consider the Holy Land or the cleansing properties of water necessary for Baptism and expunging original sin, prefigured by John the Baptist in Sacred Scripture and demonstrated by Christ.¹⁵ This tradition still flourishes today in Catholicism where holy water fonts—sacramentals¹⁶—reside at church entrances for personal blessing, and the sacred natural spring is exemplified in the healing properties at Lourdes. Natural materials are indispensable in pre-Reformation Christian rites: water must be used when baptizing a person, saliva or another liquid does not fulfill the requirements; water must be mingled with wine during the consecration, attested to be a representation of humanity and divinity mingling as early as the fourth century, a tradition found in Greek, adopted by Rome, and used by Jews during Passover;¹⁷ and, lastly, the anointing with sacred chrism at Baptism developed in the second century AD, administered by anointed priests,¹⁸ signifying “the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptized.”¹⁹

Hughes' belief that much of the hagiography in Ireland “probably represents continuity between Christian Ireland and the pagan past”²⁰ supports this concept of integration and reordering, indicating that the Church in Christian Ireland developed, in part, through reordering pre-existing beliefs and relationships from pagan deities to

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version—Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), Matthew 3:11–17.

¹⁶ Cf. Leclercq, Henri, “Sacramentals,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), *New Advent*, accessed May 23, 2020, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13292d.htm>.

¹⁷ Philippart, David, “Why does the priest pour water into the wine and put a piece of bread into the cup?” in *U.S. Catholic*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (January 2005), *U.S. Catholic: Faith in Real Life*, accessed March 2, 2020, <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/scripture-and-theology/2011/10/why-does-priest-pour-water-wine-and-put-piece-bread-cup>.

¹⁸ Ferguson, Everett, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 269.

¹⁹ “The Sacrament of Baptism,” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Part Two, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, §1241, *The Holy See*, accessed March 2, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm.

²⁰ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 245.

Christian saints—integrating their sacred spaces, rituals, and festivals into Christian doctrine. The evolution from a pre-Christian society to a Christian society is an adjustment of the society’s relationship with the invisible—the relationship with the hidden side of nature, *síd*, associated with grave mounds like Newgrange (*Brú na Bóinne*), to a relationship with a being who transcends nature, the Christian God. The term supernatural, in this context, is problematic and tastes of Christian influence. Supernatural indicates something beyond nature, something that transcends nature, an implied hierarchy, whereas the people of the *síde* are intrinsically tied to the nature and the prosperity of Ireland, albeit hidden from the material realm, but often in conflict and feud with the material realm—visible and invisible, revealed and hidden, two sides of nature bound to coexist from opposite ends of the spectrum.

The gradual transformation of pre-Christian Ireland to Christian Ireland is marked by its peaceful occurrence. Considering the susceptibility for violence in other aspects of Ireland’s history, this peaceful conversion reflects a mindset of integration and reordering rather than destruction and eviction. Perhaps one of the fundamental principles Columbanus used in his Fifth Letter—addressed to Pope Boniface IV in 615, six years after the Pantheon became the Sancta Maria Rotunda—played some role in this: “although all the Irish were disciples of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, they were and never had been subjects of the Roman State.”²¹ As Charles-Edwards put it, “Columbanus had no allegiance to the emperor but looked only to Peter,”²² meaning, that although the Irish were Christian and linked inseparably to Rome, they remained Irish. Native scribes likely emblazoned this onto their souls: Pieces of Irish literature parallel Latin classics, yet the tradition and heroes remain authentically Irish. Scribes strove to knot Irish history with biblical tradition yet labored strenuously to maintain Irish identity within crucial moments in the biblical narrative—linked-to-Latin, but forever Irish.

In *Lebor na Huidre*, ‘Book of the Dun Cow,’ Fintan mac Bóchra is one of three Irish men who appear before the Flood. He becomes one of four historians of the western world, alongside two descendants of Noah and a great-grandson of Adam.²³ Not only did this grant Ireland an eyewitness historian, virtuous enough to avoid

²¹ Charles-Edwards, T.M., “The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland,” in *Literary in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998):62–79, 79.

²² Charles-Edwards, “The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland,” 79.

²³ *Lebor Na Huidre: Book of the Dun Cow*, eds. R. I. Best and Osborn Bergin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1929), 305. Cf. Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Peripheral Centre,” 62.

God's wrath, it raises Fintan to the esteem held by the sons of Noah and the family of Adam—biblical connection, but Irish identity.

In *The Death Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Conchobar mac Nessa, king of the Ulstermen, is recorded to have died after he heard of Christ's crucifixion.²⁴ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh notes that this episode illustrates the ultimate warrior-king “undergo a baptism of blood in death,” and “it is in the context of the crucifixion and subsequent resurrection that Ireland's history is related.”²⁵ Once again the virtue of Ireland is preserved, as Conchobar mac Nessa is purified by Christ's blood, paralleling red martyrdom found in dying for Christ.

Even the origin of the Irish language strains beneath the weight of biblical narrative and Irish identity. The story claims that the Irish language was invented at the Tower of Babel, ten years after the dispersal of the people, extracted from the best of the existing languages.²⁶ Therefore, the language “did not originate in the sin of pride” nor was it “a part of God's plan to confound the human race.”²⁷ It was created in excellence, echoing the excellence of the ultimate warrior purified in the blood of Christ, and the virtuous excellence of Ireland's historian standing abreast the sons of Noah and the grandson of Adam. Once again, Ireland is set apart from the rest of creation, secure in righteousness, blessed before the Almighty, irreversibly tied to the Bible, but distinctly Irish.

Similar tactics occur concerning the classics. The poem *Clann olloman uaisle Emna* has been compared to the Irish Troy tale and in the metrical composition, Troilus is compared with Cú Chulaind and the *Táin* is specifically equated with Troy.²⁸ According to Michael Clarke, both the narratives, the Irish text and the story of Troy, seek “to arrive at the authoritative version of the events of an ancient war, one pivotal to the Matter of Rome, the other to the Matter of Ireland.”²⁹ In *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh*, a work of political propaganda according to Ní Mhaonaigh, the

²⁴ Meyer, Kuno, ed. and trans., “The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes,” in *Todd Lecture Series*, Vol. 14 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1906): 2–21, 2–3.

²⁵ Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, “The Peripheral Centre: Writing History on the Western ‘Fringe,’” in *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, Vol. 4 (2017): 59–84, 73.

²⁶ *Auraicept Na nÉces: The Scholars' Primer*, ed. George Calder, B.D. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1917), 19–21. Cf. Charles-Edwards, “The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland,” 76.

²⁷ Charles-Edwards, “The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland,” 76.

²⁸ Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Peripheral Centre,” 72. Cf. Byrne, “Clann Olloman uaisle Emna,” 54–94; Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*; and Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Hectors of Ireland and the Western World,” 258–268.

²⁹ Clarke, Michael, “An Irish Achilles and a Greek Cú Chulainn,” in *Ulidia 2*, eds. Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (Maynooth: An Sagart, 2009): 192–206, 198, *Academia*, accessed May 8, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/9136280/An_Irish_Achilles_and_a_Greek_Cu_Chulainn.

“pivotal battle between the forces of King Brian Boru (Brían Bórama) of Munster and a combined host of Leinstermen ... included frequent allusions to the Graeco-Roman past.”³⁰ Similarly, another Irish battle, *Cath Maige Tuired*, was crucially synchronized in history to the destruction of Troy.³¹ Like the biblical narrative, Ireland is thrust upon the classical narrative, paralleling renowned events, reflecting classical heroes and structure, but remaining Irish.

1c—Method for Discerning Integration of pre-Christian Ritual

Through integration, Christian scribes maintained Ireland’s history, which begs the question: what of pre-Christian ritual depicted in Irish mythology and the relationship of pre-Christians to the invisible? Discerning this can be treacherous, and caution seems the operative word. T.F. O’Rahilly utilized a historical approach to myth, explaining the Lagenian invasion through the mythological tale *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, stating, “as spectators before a dimly lit stage ... we have been able to discern, through the mists of the centuries, the actors in the drama of the Lagenian invasion of some 2,000 years ago.”³² Considering the mists and years involved, O’Rahilly must have had excellent vision. Hughes criticizes his effort, stating: “O’Rahilly’s reconstruction involves a highly selective use of sources which a historian could not possibly apply to any normal historical evidence.... If the historian turns to mythology as a source for Irish pre-history, he will inevitably find himself in the Celtic twilight.”³³

Professor Kenneth Jackson offers a more nuanced approach. He doesn’t claim historical accuracy for the characters in the Ulster Cycle, as Hughes mentions,³⁴ but the societies in the tales reflect medieval reality and values³⁵—military prowess, courage, honor (a society pagan and heroic).³⁶ Albeit a far more reasonable approach than O’Rahilly’s, Jackson may stop a breath short. Perhaps pre-Christian mythology in Ireland, described by Irish Christians steeped in symbolism, ritual, and tradition, is

³⁰ Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Peripheral Centre,” 77.

³¹ Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Peripheral Centre,” 77.

³² O’Rahilly, T.F., *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies: Dublin, 1984), 140.

³³ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 174.

³⁴ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 175.

³⁵ Cf. Jackson, Kenneth, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 175.

not merely a window into pre-Christian societal values, but also a window into pre-Christian relationships with the invisible and the hidden side of nature. Out of pre-Christian tradition originated the oral tales, in which pre-Christian rituals, sacrifices, and kingship may have been based, and out of which the pre-Christian druid evolved into the Christian monk, who joined his Irish tradition to biblical Christianity.

This suggestion runs more in the vein of James Carney who urged that “references to pagan gods,” in some of the Leinster genealogical poems “should be considered with utmost seriousness,”³⁷ rather than to the more recent trend of scholarship that believes “early medieval Celts were in tune with the developments in contemporary Europe rather than simply regurgitating elements of a pre-Christian, Indo-European past.”³⁸ Bearing in mind Columbanus’ principle of the Irish being disciples of Saints Peter and Paul but never under the Roman state, and the notion of Irish identity being preserved throughout the laws³⁹ and literature, perhaps the representation of pre-Christian myth is not simply a regurgitation of pre-Christian elements. Perhaps it is a representation and partial continuation of integrated pre-Christian traditions, relationships, and symbolism that warrant the same attention that biblical tradition and symbolism receive.

1d—Dual Tradition—Pre-Christian Irish and Christian Irish

This dual tradition may be fully realized in Kevin Murray’s translation of *Baile in Scáil*. Following the fall of the kings of Tara, Lug returns after death and appears to Conn Cétchathach as a phantom. Present in the house is a girl who holds a golden cup of red ale, named as the Sovereignty of Ireland. Lug claims to be of the seed of Adam and he has come to relate to Conn the duration of Conn’s lordship in

³⁷ Thornton, David E., “Orality, literacy and genealogy in early medieval Ireland and Wales,” in *Literary in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83. Cf. Carney, “The Dating of Archaic Irish Verse,” 39–55. Unfortunately, the global pandemic of the Corona Virus and its complications inhibited access to some original material. In these instances, the original will be cited along with the secondary source and added to the bibliography.

³⁸ Thornton, “Orality, literacy and genealogy in early medieval Ireland and Wales,” 83.

³⁹ Cf. Charles-Edwards, T.M., *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 196–200. He argues for a traditional law, “inherited from the pagan past, yet wholly consonant with the Christian present,” and the notion of “natural goodness” present in the unbaptized pagan—natural opposed to supernatural, the unbaptized compared to the baptized.

Tara and that of his future descendants forever. He later instructs the Sovereignty of Ireland to let Conn drink first from the golden cup.⁴⁰

Lug originally was a chieftain-god known as the many skilled⁴¹ and is described as “the lord of the otherworld, living in a house of gold and silver and attended by the goddess of sovereignty.”⁴² According to Ó hÓgáin, “Sovereignty was posited as a gift proffered by the goddess, a gift of herself to the king who was thus her mystical spouse,”⁴³ sometimes symbolized by a ritual drink, and the “theme of her marriage to the proper ruler of a territory is a perennial one in Irish tradition.”⁴⁴ Ó hÓgáin concludes, “it is likely that the complex imagery and lore pertaining to kingship in Ireland should be regarded as residue of ancient rituals which accompanied the installation of kings.”⁴⁵ This notion of liquor and ritual is further realized in *Lady with the Mead Cup*, although Michael Enright’s correlation of marriage rituals to warbands may be a bit zealous.⁴⁶ This concept will be examined in full later.

In regard to divine kingship and marriage, Kathleen Hughes states in her chapter on secular laws:

In the pagan period the kingship had been regarded as divine, and some of the attributes of a divine king still clung to kings in the Christian period. We hear of the “marriage feast” of Tara, by which that king in the fifth and sixth centuries was wedded to his land. There had been similar fertility rites of inauguration for Emain Macha (the old capital of Ulster) and Cruachu (the capital of Connacht). Kings of the historic period had to be willingly accepted by their land.⁴⁷

Charles-Edwards echoes this notion in *Early Christian Ireland*:

432–540 is the period when the annals mark the kingship of Tara by noting that a king is holding the Feast of Tara, a ceremony which has been seen as pagan and as a celebration of the sacred marriage between the king and the goddess of the land. It does not follow that all these kings were themselves

⁴⁰ Murray, Kevin, ed. and trans., *Baile in Scáil: The Phantom’s Frenzy*, in Irish Texts Society: Cumann na Scríbeann nGaedhilge, Vol. 58 (London: Irish Texts Society, 2004), 51.

⁴¹ Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise, *Celtic Gods and Heroes* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000), 44–45.

⁴² Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *Myth, Legend & Romance: An Encyclopedia of The Irish Folk Tradition* (New York, New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 274.

⁴³ Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *Myth, Legend & Romance*, 264.

⁴⁴ Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *Myth, Legend & Romance*, 264.

⁴⁵ Ó hÓgáin, Dáithí, *Myth, Legend & Romance*, 264.

⁴⁶ Cf. Enright, Michael J., *Lady with the Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 69–96.

⁴⁷ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 56.

pagan, since such customs may have been preserved as long as there was a significant pagan element within the population.⁴⁸

Charles-Edwards refers to a time of integration, when traditional pre-Christian feasts, ceremonies, and rituals still held sway and were integral to ascertain authority from a surviving pre-Christian community. Early Irish kings were not crowned or anointed,⁴⁹ which is expected as anointing is found in Jewish tradition—God’s anointed kings (Saul and David)—and is continued in Christian tradition through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, but more precisely, in the Sacrament of Holy Orders and anointing the palms of ordained priests—also the Lord’s anointed. The royal sites Hughes and Charles-Edwards refer to represent the thrones of the early Irish kings, the seats of kingship;⁵⁰ however, as Charles-Edwards points out, when Cormac mac Airt succeeded Mac Con in Tara, “Mac Con does not say, ‘I shall leave the throne (or crown) to him,’ but ‘I shall leave Tara to him.’”⁵¹ The relationship, the covenant, the binding contract between the king and the land—the king and the otherworld—transmits “divine” authority to the pre-Christian king.⁵²

In light of integration—pre-Reformation Christianity integrating non-Christian ritual and symbolism into the text—this episode in *Baile in Scáil* plucks a Davidic chord: Lug, a former pagan deity and ruler of Tara, a lord of the otherworld who lived with the sovereignty goddess, is euhemerized into a descendant of Adam, which grants him biblical authority and subordinates him to a follower of the Christian God. He instructs the Sovereignty of Ireland to give the golden cup of red ale to Conn, betrothing her to him, and then foretells of Conn’s descendants in Tara forever, paralleling Genesis, when God came to Abram and formed a new covenant with him, naming him the father of all nations and granting the Promised Land to his descendants forever. Through the covenant, God grants Abram and his descendants divine authority.⁵³ In *Baile in Scáil*, divine authority and divine kingship are bestowed via the ritual drinking of the cup with the Sovereignty of Ireland, deemed worthy by Lug, the former lord of the otherworld now claiming to be of the seed of Adam. This

⁴⁸ Charles-Edwards, T.M., *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 503.

⁴⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 481.

⁵⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 481.

⁵¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 481. Cf. Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt*, 126–127.

⁵² Marriage as covenant will be examined later in this study.

⁵³ RSVCE, Genesis 17:1–8.

tale unites Tara to the Promised Land and the Irish to the chosen people, imbuing kingly authority through Irish tradition and biblical tradition.

Lug makes another appearance in *The Birth of Cú Chulaind*, where during a great snowfall at *Brú na Bóinne*, he comes in a dream to the virgin Deichtine, after she drank from a copper vessel where a tiny creature leapt toward her lips. In the dream, “a man spoke to her and said that he had brought her towards the Bruig, that it was his house she had entered, that she was pregnant by him and that it was a son that would be born. This man’s name was Lug son of Eithliu.”⁵⁴ Once again, Lug mirrors the biblical and the coming of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary to say she was with child by the Holy Spirit⁵⁵ and, once again, drinking from a vessel plays a pivotal role, possibly with implications concerning conception or the marriage ritual.

1e—Symbolism on Multiple Planes

Clearly, symbolism is at play, yet fathoming this symbolism remains the critical task. In the work of Luis Alonso Schökel and José María Bravo concerning Hermeneutics, medieval texts are described as layered in truth and tradition, overflowing with richness of meaning that may transcend the reader’s comprehension.⁵⁶ For example, in the *Life of Saint Íte*, the saint is referred to as the “blessed virgin Ita” thirteen times in the text,⁵⁷ as compared to another woman—described as a “holy and devout virgin”—who sought out Íte to ask her why God held her in higher esteem than the other virgins in the world.⁵⁸ In Christian tradition, the “blessed virgin” is a well-known title for the Virgin Mary, the mother of God. Christ is the New Adam and Mary, his mother, is the New Eve, overcoming the Fall in the Garden and redeeming humanity. By calling Saint Íte the “blessed virgin Ita,” the poet heightens her importance, her purity, and her relationship with Jesus, linking Ireland, via its saint, irreversibly to Mary, to the redemption of humanity, and to the conquering of original sin.

⁵⁴ Gantz, Jeffrey, trans., “The Birth of Cú Chulaind,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 131–133.

⁵⁵ *RSVCE*, Luke 1:26–32.

⁵⁶ Schökel, Luis Alonso with José María Bravo, *A Manual of Hermeneutics*, trans. Liliana M. Rosa, ed. Brook W.R. Pearson (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 125–147.

⁵⁷ Africa, Dorothy, trans., “Life of Ita,” in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Vol. 2, ed. Charles Plummer (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 116–130, *Ohio State University: Monastic Matrix*, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/cartularium/life-saint-ita>.

⁵⁸ Africa, “Life of Ita,” §11.

Within medieval literature, Irish scribes display “passion for significant detail,”⁵⁹ ascribing significance to the color of a person’s robes: “white for chastity, blue for fasting, grey for ascetic martyrdom, red for martyrdom by blood.”⁶⁰ The *filid*, who occupied an elevated position in Christian medieval Irish society, passed down traditional lore in much the same way as pre-Christian druids did,⁶¹ thus providing a suitable setting for pre-Christian symbolism and Christian symbolism to integrate. The ecclesiastical class’ interest in maintaining an Irish Church as distinct from the Latin Church, demonstrated by the ecclesiastical legislation and the Irish canonists “trying to fit the Church in their native legal system,”⁶² strengthens the notion of pre-Christian Irish ideals integrating into Christianity. In several stanzas regarding deserted pagan sites, like Tara and Emain Macha, *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (*Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé*) reads: “Heathendom has been destroyed, though it was fair and wide spread ... the great mountains of evil have been cut down with spear-points: forthwith have mountains been made of the valleys.”⁶³ The scholar is “rejoicing in the triumph of Christianity,”⁶⁴ yet he is speaking symbolically as grave mounds, like *Brú na Bóinne* (Newgrange), are still standing.

Perhaps it is not coincidence, then, that in present day, rosaries, holy water bottles, rags, and other various items are hung on Saint Brendan’s tree in Clonfert, Ireland.⁶⁵ Perhaps it is another manifestation of a pre-Christian relationship to nature and the remnant of the sacred groves in pre-Christian Ireland.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, to more fully appreciate Irish medieval literature, and medieval literature in general, it is imperative to view medieval Christianity as rich in both tradition and Scripture, with symbolism and ritual taken from many places, including pre-Christian, but integrated and reordered to fit Christian doctrine. With this concept in mind, this study will examine the Irish tales of Finn and his acquisition of wisdom, with careful attention to

⁵⁹ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 201.

⁶⁰ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 201.

⁶¹ Maier, Bernhard, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997), 116.

⁶² Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 79. Cf. Charles-Edwards, T.M., *Early Christian Ireland*, 196–200; footnote 39.

⁶³ Stokes, Whitley, ed., *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, in Henry Bradshaw Society, Vol. 29 (London: Harrison, 1905): 26–27, §213; §237. Cf. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 205–206.

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 206.

⁶⁵ Cunniffe, C., “Saint Brendan’s Tree, Clonfert,” in *South East Archaeological and Historical Society Newsletter*, No. 9 (Spring, 2012), 2, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Ireland: Pilgrim roads, Rituals, and Destinations*, accessed March 2, 2020, <https://pilgrimagemedievalireland.com/2014/09/19/st-brendans-rag-tree-and-holy-well-at-clonfert-co-galway/>.

⁶⁶ Green, Miranda, *The Gods of the Celts* (The History Press, 2011), 22.

Joseph Nagy's claim of "raw versus cooked" and his evocation of the social role of Finn. These tales will be compared to events found in *Sigurðr and the Volsungs*, examining the similarities and nuances in *Völsunga saga*.

Part 2—Analysis

Chapter 2: Finn Mac Cumhaill and the Salmon of Wisdom

In *The Boyhood Deeds of Finn*, the boy Demne visits Finn the Poet to learn the craft of poetry:

Seven years Finnéces [Finn the Poet] had been on the Boyne, watching the salmon of Fec's Pool; for it had been prophesied of him that he would eat the salmon of Féc, when nothing would remain unknown to him. The salmon was found, and Demne was then ordered to cook the salmon; and the poet told him not to eat anything of the salmon. The youth brought him the salmon after cooking it. "Hast thou eaten anything of the salmon, my lad?" says the poet. "No," says the youth, "but I burned my thumb, and put it into my mouth afterwards." "What is thy name, my lad?" says he. "Demne," says the youth. "Finn is thy name, my lad," says he; "and to thee was the salmon given to be eaten, and verily thou art the Finn." Thereupon the youth eats the salmon. It is that which gave the knowledge to Finn, to wit, whenever he put his thumb into his mouth, and sang through *teinm láida*, then whatever he had been ignorant of would be revealed to him.⁶⁷

According to O'Rahilly: "Linn Féic was the name of a pool in the Boyne, adjoining the *síd* of Clettech and the *síd* of the Bruig; and it was in that pool that the salmon of wisdom resided."⁶⁸ Tracing O'Rahilly's conclusions through the poems in *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, another spring is mentioned in the poem *Sinann I*, located in the domain of Condla, out of which sprang seven main streams, and over which "stands the poets' music-haunted hazel."⁶⁹ The poem claims that the "magic lore of Segais"⁷⁰ is found here, and it refers to the spring as "the honored well of Segais."⁷¹

In *Sinann II*, the poem describes how the River Sinann acquired its name and names the origin of the river Sinann as "Connla's well."⁷² Presumably, this is the

⁶⁷ Meyer, "The Boyish Exploits of Finn," 185–186. For Nagy's translation, cf. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 214.

⁶⁸ O'Rahilly, T.F., *Early Irish History and Mythology*, 320.

⁶⁹ Gwynn, Edward, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, Part III (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991), 287.

⁷⁰ Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 287.

⁷¹ Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 289.

⁷² Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 293.

same well as in *Sinann I*: “six streams, unequal in fame, rise from it, the seventh was Sinann.”⁷³ Around this well stand nine hazels, echoing the “music-haunted hazel” standing over the well in the first poem, and “when the cluster of nuts is ripe they fall down into the well ... and the salmon eat them.”⁷⁴

The well of Segais—or Connla’s well—is also found in the *Cináed úa Hartacáin* poem where Dagda, “the king of Fiacc’s Pool,”⁷⁵ desires Bóänd, the wife of Nechtan,⁷⁶ and as he approaches her, Bóänd says:

“Yonder rise the springs of Segais Whosoever approaches them with a lie, goes not from them in like guise ... / There the cupbearers dispense the cold water of the well, no arduous tale is this, the four of them pace round, guarding it ... / I will make my way to the pleasing Segais to prove my chastity beyond doubt; thrice shall I walk widdershins around the living water, inviolate!” / But dire the well burst forth towards her—true is my tale: with a cry she lamented her dishonor, when she found not protection in her undertaking. / Fast fled she, and the stream pursued her across the land: nor was more seen of the lovely lady, till she reached the sea. / And the stream keeps fast her name, for as long as the hills shall stand: Bóänd is the swift water’s name by every reach in its flowing course.⁷⁷

These poems elucidate O’Rahilly’s conclusion that the Spring of Segais and Connla’s Well are one and the same: both are associated with hazelnuts and both are the origin of seven rivers, one named Sinann and another Bóänd. Gregory Toner supports this notion in his article *Landscape and Cosmology in the Dindshenchas*: “Segais is, of course, another name for the source of the Boyne and is described in almost identical terms as surrounded by hazel trees, the nuts of which fall into the pool where they are consumed by salmon.”⁷⁸ This is the history Demne enters into—the “salmon of Linn Feicc”⁷⁹ from the River Boyne is salmon of wisdom that attained its knowledge by eating the hazelnuts, the fallen fruit of the tree of knowledge lying at the bottom of the Spring of Segais.⁸⁰ It is through the hazelnut that *imbis forosna* is transmitted, which

⁷³ Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 293.

⁷⁴ Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, 293.

⁷⁵ Gwynn, Lucius, “Cináed úa Hartacáin’s Poem in Brugh na Bóinne,” in *Ériu* 7 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1914): 210–238, 230, *JSTOR*, accessed March 4, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/30007323.

⁷⁶ Gwynn, “Cináed úa Hartacáin’s Poem in Brugh na Bóinne,” 231.

⁷⁷ Gwynn, “Cináed úa Hartacáin’s Poem in Brugh na Bóinne,” 236.

⁷⁸ Toner, Gregory, “Landscape and Cosmology in the *Dindshenchas*,” in *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland*, eds. Jacqueline Borsje, et al (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2014), 281.

⁷⁹ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 214.

⁸⁰ Murray, Kevin, *The Early Finn Cycle* (Four Courts Press, 2017), 82. Murray questions the precise translation of the word “inspiration” in his text, yet it remains linked to this idea of *imbis* as “knowledge that illumines” and the inspiration of poetry.

heightens inspiration for poets, further evidenced in *The Cauldron of Poesy*, by enabling Cormac mac Cuilennáin to become a great *fili*.⁸¹

Therefore, when Demne consumes the salmon, he partakes in this elite tradition of poetry, a tradition that is required to become a great *fili*, through the fallen fruit from the Irish tree of knowledge. Biblical parallels abound in this story, the most obvious ones to the Garden of Eden⁸²—a river flowed out of Eden and divided into four rivers that enriched the earth: Pishon flows around the whole land of Havilah, Gihon around the land of Cush, the Tigris flows east of Assyria, and the Euphrates.⁸³ Effectively, just as the Spring of Segais sprung seven famous rivers that made Ireland fertile, and housed the fallen fruit from the tree of knowledge—the hazelnut—the Garden of Eden’s river sprung four major rivers that enriched the surrounding lands and also housed the fruit from the tree of knowledge—the apple. Kay Muhr develops this symbolic parallel in great detail in her article, *Water Imagery in Early Irish*, but it is this statement which provides the framework to examine the rest of Finn’s episode: “Among the many different texts in the Bible, the Irish seem to have felt most sympathy with the rural and tribal society depicted in the opening books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Kings, and with the language of the proverbs and psalms, ‘of David,’ which were used in Ireland in everyday devotions.”⁸⁴

Considering this, two details resonate in the episode of Finn and the salmon: Finn partakes in a meal imbued in pre-Christian knowledge—through sucking on his burnt thumb—and immediately after is renamed as the true Finn. It is important to approach Finn’s participation in this meal as accidental participation with the otherworld, compared to purposeful participation for self gain, within the prism of a covenant: a binding contract between two parties symbolized and actualized through ritual and a sacred meal, demonstrated in Old Testament and New Testament narratives, and represented in Irish and Norse literature. These covenants will be examined in full presently, but the distinction between accidental participation opposed to intentional participation—humility as compared to pride of the pre-Christian hero—is essential, especially when otherworldly knowledge was believed to hold grave dangers for Christians.

⁸¹ Murray, *The Early Finn Cycle*, 81. Cf. Breatnach, “The Cauldron of Poesy,” 66–67.

⁸² *RSVCE*, Genesis 3:6.

⁸³ *RSVCE*, Genesis 2:10–14.

⁸⁴ Muhr, Kay, “Water Imagery in Early Irish,” in *Celtica: Essays in honour of James Patrick Carney*, Vol. 23 (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1999), 198.

2a—The Dangers of Otherworldly Knowledge

Pre-Christian knowledge passed on by an eyewitness is essential in Irish literature. It is vital for continuing Ireland's past, comprehending the otherworld, receiving *imbais forosna*, and becoming a great *fili*. Yet from a Christian perspective, this knowledge carries potential dangers and is not meant for everyone. In *The Lough Foyle Colloquy Texts*, Colum Cille remarks on this danger after meeting the ageless youth and acquiring otherworldly knowledge from him:

Looking toward his followers, Colum Cille arises and went aside with him (the youth), to speak with him and ask him about the heavenly and earthly mysteries.... When [the conversation] ended, they suddenly saw that the youth was hidden from them. They did not know whither he went nor whence he came. When Colum Cille's followers were asking him to reveal to them something of the conversation (?), Colum Cille told them that he could not tell them even a single word of anything that he had been told; and he said that it was better for mortals not to be informed of it.⁸⁵

This episode conjures intimate resemblances to the Transfiguration of Jesus in the New Testament when Moses and Elijah came down and conversed with him about his exodus—his resurrection from death following his crucifixion and his fulfillment of the Old Covenant and establishment of the New Covenant, as continued by the Apostles and their descendants (bishops and priests). In the biblical narrative, Moses symbolizes the Old Law which mediated God's design for an enriched and righteous life for the Israelites. Elijah symbolizes the prophets who mediated God's word in their specific time, to the people of Israel. Together, the Old Law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah, the written word and God's spoken word, make up the totality of the Old Covenant, which, according to Christian tradition, Christ fulfilled through his death and resurrection as priest, prophet, and king—the unification of three separate and distinct roles.

In the Irish narrative, the ageless youth mediates the Old Wisdom—the pre-Christian Wisdom and truths of Ireland—and Colum Cille, the Apostle of the Scots

⁸⁵ Carey, John, "The Lough Foyle Colloquy Texts: Immacaldam Choluim Chille 7 Ind Óclaig Oc Carraic Eolairg and Immacaldam in Durad Brain 7 Inna Banfátho Febuil Ós Loch Fébuil," in *Ériu* 52 (2002): 53–87, 61, *JSTOR*, accessed March 5, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/30008178.

and the Picts,⁸⁶ mediates God's word and sacraments of Christianity to the Irish. Colum Cille fulfills the roles of priest and prophet and receives the Old Wisdom from the youth, becoming its keeper. The hidden wisdom of nature, the otherworld, is incorporated into the supernatural wisdom of Christianity and is sanctified.

Just as the ageless youth vanishes before the followers of Colum Cille, Moses and Elijah vanish from the sight of the disciples, and just as Colum Cille refuses to tell his followers the old knowledge that passed on to him, Jesus instructs his disciples to tell no one until the appropriate time: upon looking up, the disciples saw only Jesus who instructed them to "tell no one of the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead."⁸⁷ Moses and Elijah, mediators of the Old Covenant are fulfilled in Christ, mediator of the New Covenant, which he passed on to be mediated by his disciples through Scripture, tradition, and ritual. The pre-Christian wisdom of the ageless youth is given to the Apostle to the Scots and Picts and Irish history is sanctified and preserved, although its knowledge and revelation are not meant for everyone and must be mediated by the Saint.

This cautionary attitude toward pre-Christian wisdom carries influences of Saint Augustine's *The City of God*, which warns against the treachery of devils:

Now devils are attracted to dwell in certain temples by means of the creatures (God's creatures, not theirs), who present to them what suits their various tastes. They are attracted not by food like animals, but, like spirits, by such symbols as suit their taste, various kinds of stones, woods, plants, animals, songs, rites. And that men may provide these attractions, the devils first of all cunningly seduce them, either by imbuing their hearts with a secret poison, or by revealing themselves under a friendly guise, and thus make a few of them their disciples, who become the instructors of the multitude.⁸⁸

Considering the otherworld and wisdom of pre-Christian Ireland, the sacred groves, stags and birds shifting into otherworldly beings, the gravemounds and springs connected to otherworldly people, this warning is especially applicable to Christian scribes. Yet susceptible to evil and devilish infestation does not mean inherently evil and inherently infested. In *Echtrae Chonnlaí*, the description of the otherworld isn't one raging with demons. Conlae sees a beautiful woman and asks her whence she came, and she responds: "I come from the Lands of the Living, a place in which there

⁸⁶ Rekdal, Jan Erik, "The Irish Ideal of Pilgrimage," in *In Quest of the Kingdom: Ten Papers on Medieval Monastic Spirituality*, ed. Alf Härdelin (Almqvist & Wiksell International: Stockholm, 1991): 9–26, 12.

⁸⁷ RSCVE, Matthew 17:1–11. Cf. Mark 9: 2–10; Luke 9:28–36.

⁸⁸ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Digireads.com Publishing, 2015), Book 21, Chapter 6: 574, Kindle.

is neither death nor sin nor transgression. We enjoy lasting feasts without toil and peace without strife.”⁸⁹

In this description, the otherworld has “neither death *nor sin* nor transgression,” which hints of Christian penmanship, specifically with the notion of sin:

Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as “an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.”⁹⁰

Sin is a Christian concept, it wounds humanity’s relationship to the Almighty on a personal level, distancing humanity from grace, the supernatural, and growing closer in relationship to God who transcends nature itself. What is *sin* to a pre-Christian, and why would a woman of the otherworld be mentioning it? This is said in the vein of Proinsias Mac Cana and scribal adaption “to the Christian ethic and terminology”⁹¹ and bringing a pagan concept of the otherworld into the framework of Christian orthodoxy⁹² rather than James Carney’s notion of allegory—expressing “Christian reality in symbols that were consistent with a pagan historical background.”⁹³

Essentially, this description in the literature elevates the otherworld into a place of inherent good, free from sin, transgression, and evil, thus, it originates in a state of purity, without devilish corruption. Hence, the wisdom transferred from there, in origin, isn’t sinful, yet it must be handled with care as it is susceptible to devilish

⁸⁹ Ó Cathasaigh, Tomás, “The Semantics of ‘Síd,’” in *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 27, ed. Tomás Ó Concheanainn (The National University of Ireland: Keltisk Institutt, 1977–9), 138. Cf. Pokorny, “Conle’s abenteuerliche Fahrt,” 195.

⁹⁰ “Sin,” in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Part Three, Section One, Chapter One, Article 8, §1849, *The Holy See*, accessed March 20, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a8.htm. Cf. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, Book XXII.

⁹¹ Mac Cana, Proinsias, “The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*,” in *Ériu* 27 (1976): 95–115, 108, *JSTOR*, accessed May 16, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/30007670.

⁹² Mac Cana, “The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*,” 100.

⁹³ Carney, James, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 287. Both Mac Cana and Carney speak on the Christian virtue of chastity and its various appearances in the otherworld, hence the following distinction: Chastity should not be confused with continency. According to Christian doctrine, and finding its root in Aristotle, chastity is the exclusion or moderation of the sexual appetite, whereas continency includes abstaining from the licit gratifications of marriage. From a Christian point of view, couples bound in marriage may participate in a chaste marriage or an unchaste marriage, depending on whether the sexual act is participated in through love or lust. Chastity is often associated with virginity or celibacy, but a Christian virgin or celibate can be unchaste in thought without performing the deed. In short, chastity does not mean abstaining from the sexual act, rather it is moderating the appetite to reflect mutual self-giving for the good of the other, so the act can flourish in love rather than in self-desire. Cf. Melody, John, “Continence,” *New Advent*, §1; Melody, John, “Chastity,” *New Advent*, §1.

infestation and may lure mortal man along wayward paths, as seen by Colum Cille’s refusal to tell his followers what was transmitted to him by the ageless youth.

A similar transference of knowledge happens in a much later text, the *Acallam na Senórach*, when Patrick—the Apostle to the Irish⁹⁴—receives pre-Christian knowledge from the Fenian Caílte, who appears with a company of other-worldly beings after Patrick blesses the house of Finn mac Cumhail with holy water.⁹⁵ The holy water ensures no foul play through possible infestation as the water is blessed and made holy during the holy sacrifice of the Mass, alongside oil for chrism. According to Sarapion’s Pontifical,⁹⁶ the formula for the blessing is:

We bless these creatures in the name of Jesus Christ, thy only Son; we invoke upon this water and this oil the name of him who suffered, who was crucified, who arose from the dead, and who sits at the right of the uncreated. Grant unto these creatures (the water and oil) the power to heal; may all fevers, every evil spirit, and all maladies be put to flight by him who either drinks these beverages or is anointed with them, and may they be a remedy in the name of Jesus Christ, thy only son.⁹⁷

In the *Acallam*, Saint Patrick is called the “salmon of Heaven” and “sprinkled holy water on those great men.”⁹⁸ The two parties share a meal⁹⁹ and, only then, does Caílte relay to the saint numerous Fenian tales and knowledge of their pre-Christian past, including knowledge about *síd*, magic, and grave mounds. Patrick orders his scribe to write down the information¹⁰⁰ and at the end of the episode, Patrick’s last line is, “the Church must spread its seed.”¹⁰¹

The Church’s position toward pre-Christian knowledge in Ireland may have become more relaxed in the twelfth century than it was in the eighth century,¹⁰² due to Christianity’s solidification in society at that time. The distinction between Colum Cille refusing to impart any otherworldly knowledge to mortals and Patrick blessing the bearers of that otherworldly knowledge before receiving it may reflect such a transition, as heathendom and its lore would not have carried the same threat as

⁹⁴ Dooley, Ann and Harry Roe, trans., *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A new translation of Acallam na Senóach* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1999), 5.

⁹⁵ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 5.

⁹⁶ Sarapion of Thmuis was a fourth-century bishop.

⁹⁷ Leclercq, Henri, “Holy Water,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), *New Advent*, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07432a.htm>.

⁹⁸ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 5.

⁹⁹ This may be an example of covenant and binding, enacted through the shared meal between two parties, and will be examined in full later.

¹⁰⁰ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 20.

¹⁰¹ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 32.

¹⁰² Cf. Ní Mhaonaigh, “The Peripheral Centre,” 59–84.

before. Yet, Patrick's blessing was still required, demonstrating a continuation of the same notion present in the eighth century—that dangers may lurk in otherworldly knowledge.

In both tales, it is a learned saint who attains otherworldly knowledge through an eyewitness from the otherworld—Saint Colum Cille, Apostle to the Scots and the Picts, and Saint Patrick, Apostle to the Irish.¹⁰³ Pre-Christian wisdom is transferred from the old mediator, the Fenian, to the new mediator, the Christian priest, and Irish tradition is preserved and assimilated into Christian tradition, under the guidance of two prominent saints, in full awareness of Augustine's warning.

In light of this, Nagy's interpretation that *before* the poet can consume the salmon and "utilize the poetic essence within, the *gilla* must cook the fish,"¹⁰⁴ may be misplaced. Notably, Finn doesn't consume cooked food to acquire wisdom in the additional episodes in which he acquires otherworldly knowledge, as will be examined presently, yet the theme of accidental participation through consumption of a meal or ritualistic drink runs throughout them all. It is true that the salmon is cooked and that when Demne burns his thumb, he is in some manner cooking himself, yet the focal point in the narrative isn't the "civilizing and ordering effect"¹⁰⁵ the act of cooking symbolizes, but rather the accidental, unintentional, and unambitious nature in which Demne acquires this knowledge—through a sudden splatter, quite common when cooking, burning his thumb, and doing what any sane person would do: stick the blistering member into his mouth.

Nagy's description of the "humble cook" being raised to an "exceptional poet and seer"¹⁰⁶ is precise, considering Augustine's warning and the care in which Colum Cille and Patrick acquired the knowledge, except rather than *cook* serving as the operative word it is *humble*—humility ennobles the pre-Christian hero within the Christian sphere and raises Demne from a *gilla* to a *fili*, enacted through participation in a sacred meal and entering into a covenant that bound him intimately to the otherworld.

¹⁰³ For more on the mediational role of saints in religious and literary contexts, cf. Nagy, Joseph Falaky, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁴ Nagy, "Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd," 124.

¹⁰⁵ Nagy, "Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd," 125.

¹⁰⁶ Nagy, "Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd," 125.

2b—What is Covenant?

Biblically—and with links to ancient Near Eastern society—oath and covenant are “a widespread legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group.”¹⁰⁷ This covenant can fall along a spectrum of three forms: *kinship covenant*, usually between two parties of equal status; *treaty covenant*, where the obligations are imposed on the inferior party by the superior; and *grant covenant*, where obligations rest predominantly with the superior, who freely accepts responsibility for the inferior.¹⁰⁸ These covenants weren’t simply intended for religious use but rather a covenant was “an extension of familial relationship, and the extended family, the *bêt ’āb*, [and] was the central framework for the legal, religious, and political activities of ancient Semitic society.”¹⁰⁹

For the Old Testament Jews, God established a family bond by means of a blood covenant at the first Passover, and the Passover ritual and meal were symbolic of the flesh-and-blood communion shared between Israel and God.¹¹⁰ The ritual meal of Passover, called *seder*, as recorded by rabbis in the *Mishnah* around AD 200, consisted of four courses: a festival blessing spoken over a cup of wine and a dish of herbs; a recital of the Passover narrative and a second cup of wine; the main meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and the third cup of wine known as the “cup of blessing;” and singing the Great Hallel (Psalms 114–118) and drinking the fourth cup of wine.¹¹¹ Hence, the agreement between God and the Israelites was commemorated and participated in through an elaborate, ritualistic meal.

Likewise, in Christianity, the New Covenant is fulfilled in Christ through the sacred meal instituted at the Last Supper,¹¹² and offered in Catholic tradition at the holy sacrifice of the Mass, where Christians actively participate in the New Covenant, as a united family, through the consumption of the sacrificial lamb—Christ’s actual body and blood—under the form of bread and wine. The spiritual is mediated to

¹⁰⁷ Hahn, Scott W., *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009), 28.

¹⁰⁸ Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 3. For further study, cf. Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylon, Syria, and Israel*; Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East*.

¹¹⁰ Hahn, Scott, *The Fourth Cup: Unveiling the Mystery of the Last Super and the Cross* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2018), 54. Cf. *RSCVE*, Exodus 24:1–8; 12:1–20.

¹¹¹ Hahn, *The Fourth Cup*, 55–56.

¹¹² Cf. *RSCVE*, Matthew 26:20–29; Mark 14:12–25; and Luke 22:7–23.

humanity through the natural, Christ's actual body and blood are mediated through bread and wine, an essential practice to the pre-Reformation Christian as humans are both matter and soul, nature and spirit. Therefore, for Christian scribes, sacred meals were not merely symbols of a covenant between two parties, but rather an active and necessary participation in that covenant.

Notably, as in Judaism where sacrificial lambs, goats, bulls, and herbs were used in ritual offerings and meals at Passover, as in Christianity where the sacrificial lamb takes on the form of bread and wine, which are purified through incense and used in the ritualistic sacrificial offering and the meal at Mass, so too in Irish literature and archeology, animals, such as bulls and boars, were used in ritualistic manners, found in ritual deposits, demonstrating their sacrificial and cultic importance.¹¹³

It is worthy to remember that the term covenant is not restricted to religious use or solely binding humans to a deity. In terms of secular covenants found in Scripture, Isaac and Abimelech fashion an agreement and their "covenant-making ceremony consists of a shared 'meal,' and an oath that is sworn by both parties."¹¹⁴ Also, in the covenant between Jacob and Laban, these two and their kinsman share a meal, then Jacob sacrifices an animal and swears an oath.¹¹⁵ This bond, brought about through sharing a meal, is likely why Patrick waited to receive the otherworldly knowledge until after blessing Cailte and sharing a meal with them.¹¹⁶ It bound the two parties into covenant.

2c—Examples of the Sacred Meal and Covenants in Irish Literature

An Irish parallel is found in the adventures of Cormac mac Art when he attains his golden cup. Cormac mac Art finishes cooking a pig with a mysterious band of warriors, a pig which was boiled to completion by telling four truths. After being served his portion, Cormac refuses to partake in the carved pig, or the feast, until his retinue of fifty warriors, along with his wife, his daughter, and his son are present, thereby ensuring their safety and participation, binding them, himself, and his warriors to the mysterious band in covenant. This mysterious band are later revealed to be the men of Manannán son of Ler, King of the Land of Promise, and Manannán

¹¹³ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 167.

¹¹⁴ Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 43. Cf. *RSCVE*, Genesis 26:26–33.

¹¹⁵ Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 43–44. Cf. *RSCVE*, Genesis 31:43–54.

¹¹⁶ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 5.

himself is present.¹¹⁷ Cormac's family and retinue needs to be present to participate and participation is fully realized through Cormac's consumption of the sacred meal, as he is head of his household and thus possesses the authority to do so.

Hence, when Demne accidentally partakes in the meal imbued with pre-Christian wisdom, he is participating in an otherworldly meal and binding himself to the otherworld through it. This binding is further realized when he is renamed Finn, the true poet. Nagy addresses this as a "confusion of identities,"¹¹⁸ however, biblical parallels and practices in pre-Reformation Christianity suggest another possibility. Rather than confused identities, Demne is forming a covenant, a family bond with the otherworld, an occurrence marked forever by his name change. Finn the Poet recognizes Demne as the true poet, the true Finn, whom the salmon of wisdom was meant for.

The act of name-changing bears three prominent parallels in Scripture: God establishes a covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham making him the father of all nations;¹¹⁹ God blesses Jacob and changes his name to Israel, and he becomes the father of the twelve tribes;¹²⁰ and when Simon Bar-Jona revealed to the others that Jesus was the Christ, son of the living God, Jesus called him Peter and made him head of his Church,¹²¹ father and head of a family united as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Other parallels in Christianity are: a child baptized into the Christian family is forever marked by the seal of Baptism¹²² and is named; in the Sacrament of Confirmation, the recipient is anointed, marked with a seal of Confirmation,¹²³ and takes on the additional name of the patron saint; when the Pope is elected by the College of Cardinals, he takes a new name; and in some traditional orders, monks and nuns take a new religious name to symbolize their beginning a new life. This tradition of taking a new name to mark an intrinsic change in a person's being is not limited to

¹¹⁷ Stokes, Whitley, *Irish Texts mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch in Irische Texte*, eds. Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891), 214–216, *CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts*, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://celt.ucc.ie//published/T302000.html>.

¹¹⁸ Nagy, "Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd," 125.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *RSCVE*, Genesis 17:4–6.

¹²⁰ Cf. *RSCVE*, Genesis 32:24–33.

¹²¹ Cf. *RSCVE*, Matthew 16:16–20.

¹²² "The Sacrament of Baptism," §1216.

¹²³ "The Sacrament of Confirmation," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Part Two, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 2, §1295, *The Holy See*, accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccs/_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm.

Christianity. It also occurs in certain initiation rites in Buddhism,¹²⁴ as well as coming-of-age narratives in Native American folklore.

Another example in Irish literature, and a parallel narrative to Finn, is *The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind* when Sétantae is renamed Cú Chulaind by the druid Cathub after slaying Culand's massive hound,¹²⁵ a marked occurrence in the young warrior's life—Culand was King Conchubur's smith. Yet, in the episode of *Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom*, instead of killing, Demne consumes a sacred meal, imbued with *imbas forosna* and pre-Christian wisdom hailing from the fallen fruit of the Irish tree of knowledge, and is renamed Finn, the true poet. Through a ritual binding to the otherworld, Finn becomes the humble mediator to the mortal realm, attaining hidden wisdom and revealing it to the commonwealth.

In *Macgnímartha*, a short episode follows *Finn and the Salmon of Wisdom* which demonstrates this mediation more clearly, displaying, once again, the use of a sacred meal as covenant. In the narrative there is a brief altercation between Finn and the otherworld during the festival of *Samain*, in which men of Ireland tried to woo the beautiful woman in the fairy-knoll of Brí Ele, and every *Samain* one of their party is mysteriously slain. This murder repeats itself when the poet Cethern, from whom Finn was learning greater poetry skill, attempts to woo the maiden and one of his retinue, the poet Oircbeil, is slain. Responding to this grievance, Finn sits between the strongholds which are between the two Paps of Anu:

Now, when Finn was there between them, on Hallowe'en night, he saw the two fairy-knolls opened around him, even the two strongholds, their ramparts having vanished before them. And he saw a great fire in either of the two strongholds; and he heard a voice from one of them, which said: "Is your sweet food good?" "Good, indeed!" said a voice in the other fairy-knoll. "A question. Shall anything be taken from us to you?" "If that be given to us, something will be given to you in return." While Finn was there he saw a man coming out of the fairy-knoll. A kneading-trough was in his hand with a ... pig upon it, and a cooked calf, and a bunch of wild garlic upon it. That was Hallowe'en. The man came past Finn to reach the other knoll. Finn made a cast with the spear of Fiaccail mac Conchinn....¹²⁶

Nagy argues that in this episode the "cooked food is one which Finn can exploit: he disrupts a channel of communication between the *síde* and diverts cooked

¹²⁴ "Initiation," in *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., (Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 376.

¹²⁵ Gantz, Jeffrey, trans., "The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin Books, 1981): 134–146, 140.

¹²⁶ Meyer, "The Boyish Exploits of Finn," 188.

food from its rightful recipient.”¹²⁷ While there is definite communication between the two *síde*, it is a communication of covenant, of agreement and oaths and exchanging gifts between the two fairy-knolls, binding their two communities together through the ritualistic consumption of a sacred meal: the pig, the cooked calf, and the garlic. The text curiously pauses the narrative after describing what the man carries to reemphasize, *that was Hallowe'en (Samian)*. Perhaps, this clarification simply indicates that this specific dish was served during this festival, which not only elevates its importance to the story, but it begs the question—why is this dish, in particular, being transferred? Or perhaps something deeper swims here, something notable to Christian pens and the shared meal.¹²⁸

Miranda Green outlines numerous archeological examples of pigs and the ritual role they played in the Celtic world: the Lá Téné burials verify the presence of the champion's joint of pork, found also in vernacular and Graeco-Roman writings; chariot inhumations with pigs' heads were found in the Arras Culture graves of King's Barrow and at Garton Slack; and in the hill-top burial of La Gorge-Meillet in the Marne area, a young warrior was buried with a sword, food-offerings, wine-vessels, and a pork-joint.¹²⁹ The boar was a warrior symbol and pork a symbol of hospitality, appropriate for feasts, mortal and otherworldly, and in Irish mythology, magic-divine pigs were part of ritual hunts, and pigs and shape-shifting correlate often.¹³⁰

Notably, in *The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind*, Conchubur is gravely injured and tells Cú Chulaind that if he were able to eat a roasted pig, he would live. Cú Chulaind slays the terrifying man roasting the boar, eats the pig, presumably shares some with the king, and the king lives.¹³¹ In the aforementioned tale of Cormac mac Art, Cormac is required to tell a truth to finish boiling a pig that would resurrect on the following day. After Cormac's retinue of fifty warriors, his wife, his daughter, and his son are present, does he eat the pig and his spirit is renewed. The golden cup is placed in his hand and this cup is able to discern between truth and falsehood,

¹²⁷ Nagy, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” 126.

¹²⁸ John Carey discusses the intimate relationship of the Ancient Irish to the Otherworld, and its bond to sacred places—like gravemounds—*Samain*, feasting, the authority of kingship, and the ritual *feis* representing a marriage between the king and the goddess of the land as something “not only beyond the limits of existence, but also at the very heart of society” (Carey, 15). Cf. Carey, “Time, Space, and the Otherworld,” 1–27.

¹²⁹ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 169.

¹³⁰ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 169–170. Cf. Ford, “A Highly Important Pig,” 292–304.

¹³¹ Gantz, “The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind,” 138.

breaking when three falsehoods are uttered, and re-uniting when three truths are said.¹³²

Similarly, in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, Conare tries to prevent the three men of Deirg from breaking his *geiss* by offering them three oxen and three salted pigs so they would not enter the hostel before him. When this fails, he entreats them again by offering six oxen and six salted pigs plus gifts, but to no avail. The two sides do not enter an agreement or share gifts, and Conare's *geiss* is broken. When Conare does arrive in the hostel, another *geiss* is broken when Fer Calliu desires to share a meal with him and offers him a pig so he doesn't have to fast, for he is "the best king to ever come into this world."¹³³

Like the pig, cattle ritual flourishes in Irish history. At Iron Age South Cadbury, Green describes newborn calves buried beside shrines, with cattle skulls set carefully upright in pits; ritual offerings of bulls, oxen, or cows in the Romano-Celtic period in Britain are evident in numbers;¹³⁴ and although "the precise significance of bull-symbolism in the Celtic world is obscure ... the frequency of its iconographic occurrence as an isolated image, and the abundant evidence for ritual and sacrifice suggests that it possessed a sanctity for its own sake."¹³⁵ The river Boyne, old Irish *Böand*, which hailed from the Spring of Segais and made the land bountiful in the mythology, is etymologically linked to *Buvinda*, with a possibly original form **Bou-vinda*, meaning 'cow-white' (goddess).¹³⁶ Historically, the river Boyne was a mighty river flowing into the heart of Tara, essentially a medieval highway for the Vikings to gain access to the center of Ireland as well as trade between the inland residents and the coast, and, practically speaking, bountiful for Irish life similar to the Nile and Egypt.

Belfast Lough, into which the River Lagan flows, is known in Irish as *Loch Laoígh*, where *loíg* is the genitive of the Old Irish *lóeg* (modern Irish *laogh*)—"a calf"¹³⁷—and is possibly another fertility reference, symbolized by an animal that produces food, milk, leather, materials for clothing, bone, and skins for parchment. Considering these ritual and fertility connections, it is small wonder this animal, along

¹³² Stokes, *Irische Texte*, 214–216.

¹³³ Gantz, Jeffrey, trans., "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin Books, 1981): 60–106, 70–72.

¹³⁴ Cf. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 9–38.

¹³⁵ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 167–168.

¹³⁶ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, 3.

¹³⁷ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, 3.

with the pig, was noted in the tale on the night of the religious festival *Samain*, a festival known to be related to stock-rearing and pastoralism.¹³⁸

Lastly, garlic carries its own religious properties found in antiquity. In *The Characters of Theophrastus*, Theophrastus describes figures of Hecate, found at the crossroads, to be wreathed in garlic.¹³⁹ Hecate was a Greek deity of the lower world who bestowed prosperity to youth and to the flocks of cattle. She was the goddess of purifications and expiations, and later developed into “a spectral being, who at night sent from the lower world all kinds of demons and terrible phantoms, who taught sorcery and witchcraft, who dwelt at places where two roads crossed each other, on tombs, and near the blood of murdered persons.”¹⁴⁰ Additionally, “at the close of every month dishes with food were set out for her and other averters of evil at the points where two roads crossed each other.”¹⁴¹ To the Greeks, then, garlic seems to be an averter of evil of some sort, which parallels closely to late superstitious folk beliefs that garlic was a powerful deterrent against ghosts, demons, and vampires.

Similar examples are found in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*: “garlic and onions are invoked by the Egyptians, when taking an oath, in the number of the deities,”¹⁴² and again in Greece, “it was prescribed to those who wished to be purified and absolved from crimes.”¹⁴³ Perhaps the healing properties found in garlic and leeks only furthered these other attributes, similar to how the healing and cleansing properties of water purify both material injuries and supernatural sin in Christianity. One does not prevent the other, simply, it makes it fitting for use.

In light of these examples, and bearing in mind the unifying role of covenant through oaths—symbolized and actualized by participating in a sacred meal—between two parties, this episode of Finn is striking: he is simultaneously sitting between two strongholds and two fairy-knolls (cognate with gravemounds, effectively, tombs), literally at the crossroads between worlds, where the poet Oircbeil was murdered, on the night of *Samain*, when nothing can be hidden¹⁴⁴—a festival that

¹³⁸ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 15.

¹³⁹ Edmonds, J. M., ed. and trans., *The Characters of Theophrastus* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1967), 83.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, William, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1870), 364.

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Vol. II, 364.

¹⁴² Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, Vol. IV, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1858), 171.

¹⁴³ Pliny, *The Natural History of Pliny*, Vol. IV, 175.

¹⁴⁴ Meyer, “The Boyish Exploits of Finn,” 187.

revolves around what livestock would be killed and what would be kept,¹⁴⁵ when the barriers are broken between the revealed and the hidden worlds, and the spirits of the dead move freely.¹⁴⁶

Perhaps, the parallels to the Greek goddess Hecate are circumstantial and the wild garlic on the cooked pig and calf in the episode are simply a description of how the dish was prepared, yet Christian monks, who were learned in the Classics, may have been aware of the symbolism swimming in these waters. Hecate was a deity of the lower world who bestowed *prosperity to youth and to the flocks of cattle*; she was the goddess of *purifications and expiations*, who dwelt at places where *two roads crossed, on tombs, and near the blood of murdered persons*.¹⁴⁷ Theophrastus describes her image as being wreathed in garlic, which, for the Egyptians, was invoked when taking an oath, and for the Greeks, seems to be an averter of evil, and prescribed to those who want to be purified and absolved from crimes. This does not suggest a direct borrowing of Hecate by the Irish, but rather knowledge of her and the symbolism and role of garlic was likely known by learned Christians scribes. As will be demonstrated later, garlic appears in *Völsunga saga* in an eerily similar role of purification and covenant.

In the Finn episode, the man carrying the meal between the *síde*—pig, calf, and wild garlic—is the red-handed murderer, and Finn extracts the proper vengeance for his fallen companion. Before the meal appears, both sides are offering each other an exchange of gifts, effectively saying *what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine*, and thereby seeking to bind their two *síde* during the festival of *Samain*, symbolized and enacted through sharing a sacred meal complete with ritualistic meats—pig and calf—and wreathed in wild garlic.

In the subsequent narrative where Finn captures otherworldly women and releases them after receiving valuable ransoms, Nagy is quite correct by asserting that “Finn succeeds completely in forcing the otherworld to communicate and share its resources with him.”¹⁴⁸ This communication and sharing of resources is mediation. Finn is taking knowledge of the hidden world and revealing it to mortals, on authority and ability gained through participation in the sacred meal and binding himself to the otherworld, thus fulfilling the prophecy given at his naming: “to thee was the salmon

¹⁴⁵ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 111.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Vol. II, 364.

¹⁴⁸ Nagy, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” 126.

given to be eaten, and verily thou art the Finn.”¹⁴⁹ It is not a matter of cooked and raw. It is a matter of what is symbolized, actualized, and bound through ritual and consuming the sacred.

Chapter 3: Finn and the Man in the Tree

In a second tale of acquisition, *Finn and the Man in the Tree*, Finn once again acquires his ability through accidental consumption, although this time it is the liquid from the dripping vessel of the woman bearing the cup who shut his thumb in the door of a *síd*:

When the fian were at Badamair on the brink of Suir, Cúldub the son of Ua Birgge came out of the fairy-knoll on the plain of Femen (ut Scottie dicunt) and carried off their cooking from them. For three nights he did thus to them. The third time however Finn knew and went before him to the fairy-knoll on Femen. Finn laid hold of him as he went into the knoll, so that he fell yonder. When he withdrew his hand, a woman met him coming out of the knoll with a dripping vessel in her hand, having just distributed drink, and she jammed the door against the knoll, and Finn squeezed his finger between the door and the post. Then he put his finger into his mouth. When he took it out again he began to chant, the *imbas* illumines him and he said....¹⁵⁰

Another variant of this story identifies the stolen cooking as a pig meant for Finn, and after chasing the thief, Finn thrust at him in the fairy-mound and broke the man’s back, getting his finger stuck in the door in the process. Putting the portion of his finger that had entered the fairy-mound into his mouth, he discovered he had slain Cúldub and returned home: “he carried the pig in his bosom, and apportioned it among his household.”¹⁵¹

In both these narratives, there is movement between the otherworld and the material world, which is enabled on *Samain*. Once again, it is a pig that is being transferred to the *síd*, except this time it is Finn’s portion, likely a literary reference to the “champion’s joint,” as found in the archeology in the aforementioned Lá Téne burials and in the hill-top burial with the young warrior. In both episodes, Finn’s finger is jammed in the door, yet in the former, the detail of the woman with the dripping drinking vessel is worth noting. Nagy argues that, in light of *Feis Tighe*

¹⁴⁹ Meyer, “The Boyhood Exploits of Finn,” 186.

¹⁵⁰ Meyer, Kuno, ed. and trans., “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” in *Revue Celtique*, Vol. 25 (1904):344–349, 346–347.

¹⁵¹ Hull, Vernam, “Two Tales about Finn,” in *Speculum*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1941), 330–333. *JSTOR*, accessed March 26, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/2852709.

Chonáin, “presumably, some of the liquid in the woman’s vessel spills on to his finger. Finn removes it and puts it in his mouth, thus ingesting the magical fluid,” and he is enlightened.¹⁵² Yet, this isn’t the only powerful fluid and drinking vessel in *Feis Tighe Chonáin*.

In the episode where Finn is changed into a decrepit, old man, after retrieving a red-gold ring for an otherworldly maiden at Loch Dogra, he is conveyed in a chariot to the *síd* of Cuilleán of Cuailgne. After the Fenians dig into it for three days and nights, Cuilleán comes out of the *síd*, and gives a vessel of red gold to Finn, who drinks from it and is restored to his natural appearance apart from half the hair on his head remained silver.¹⁵³ Afterwards, Finn relates that:

The vessel was passed into the hand of Mac Reith, and he took a drink from it; he gave it into Diorraing’s hand, and he too drank out of it. While Diorraing was in the act of handing the vessel to the man who was next to him, it gave a turn to one side, and sprang out of his hand into the loose earth that had been dug up; in which it sank deep before our eyes; and, though we all hastened to recover it, the earth swallowed it up. This was a cause of great affliction both to me and to the Fenians; because, if they all had drunk from it, they would have become gifted with foreknowledge and true wisdom.¹⁵⁴

In this episode, it is the king of the *síd* that offers Finn the cup, a detail that will be fleshed out later and paralleled in Michael Enright’s *Lady with the Mead Cup*.

3a—The Role of the Lady with the Cup, Marriage, and Covenant

Further on in *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, another woman bearing a cup appears after Conan asked Finn how he came to possess foreknowledge:

“Tell me now by what means you became possessed of the true and infallible foreknowledge with which you are gifted: it is not the foreknowledge acquired at Cuanna’s house nor that of the salmon (I mean).”

“I will tell you that,” said Fionn, “There is a fountain of the *Moon* belonging to *Beag son of Buan*, a Tuatha Dedanan: every one who drinks a vessel of water, will be gifted with foreknowledge, and true wisdom; and, if he drink the contents of a second vessel, he will become a true prophet, and also his son after him. Three hundred *ungas* of red gold is the price paid for a vessel of it. Teisíonn, Teithcheann, and Armhach, the three daughters of Beag Buan, are the names of those in charge of it; and it is Teisíonn who gives the water from the fountain to those who purchase it.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Nagy, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” 126.

¹⁵³ O’Kearney, Nicholas, ed., “Feis Tighe Chonáin,” in *Transactions of The Ossianic Society for the year 1854*, Vol. II (Dublin: 1855), 173.

¹⁵⁴ O’Kearney, “Feis Tighe Chonáin,” 173.

¹⁵⁵ O’Kearney, “Feis Tighe Chonáin,” 175.

Finn continues his tale, relating how he was out hunting with Diorraing and Mac Reith—the two who had consumed the contents of the cup in the previous episode before it disappeared into the earth—and as they approached the fountain “three females rushed forth together to oppose our progress; and Teisionn splashed us with the full of a vessel of the water of the fountain, in order to stop us. A portion of the water passed into our mouths, hence, have we been ever since that time possessed of true prescience.”¹⁵⁶

Clearly, the source of wisdom in this narrative is the water from the “well of knowledge,”¹⁵⁷ although it possesses slightly varied functions, notably allowing the consumer to become a true prophet. Conan stresses this by acknowledging that Finn previously acquired knowledge from the salmon and foreknowledge at Cuanna’s house. Yet this motif of a woman bearing the cup distinguishes itself, appearing in two of the three stories—Finn’s jammed finger and the well of knowledge. Ritual drinking to seal a covenant has been explained from a Jewish perspective—the Passover meal and the four cups—and from a Christian perspective: “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”¹⁵⁸ Christian scribes would have been intimately aware of both traditions, and participated in the Christian tradition every time Mass was said.

From a European perspective, Michael Enright addresses the role of ritual, prophecy, and lordship in his book *Lady with the Mead Cup*, with sweeping attention to European warbands and Germanic culture. Rather than the sweeping scope, this study will examine several points noted by Enright, in regard to lordship, protection, and marriage, leaving aside the warbands, while addressing mirrored aspects in Irish literature.

Enright outlines an extensive scene in *Beowulf*, where the queen, who is wise in her words, offers the cup to the king first, and then proceeds to the others in his hall, greeting each one separately. The companions accept the liquor and by drinking from the cup, they assent to the precedence of the king.¹⁵⁹ Enright claims that “the

¹⁵⁶ O’Kearney, “Feis Tighe Chonáin,” 177.

¹⁵⁷ Nagy, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” 126.

¹⁵⁸ *RCSVE*, John 6:56.

¹⁵⁹ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 2–4. Cf. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 23. For an English translation, cf. Crépin, “Wealhtheow’s Offering of the Cup to Beowulf,” 45–58. This example found in *Beowulf* cannot be examined in full at present—the role of the hero, covenant, and mediation—as it is not conducive with the limitations of this study. However, it does present another

queen's movements are solemn in nature" and suggests that "at least her offering of the cup to the king is part of an archaic ritual of lordship which she must act out when the occasion warrants."¹⁶⁰ He compares this claim to *Maxims I*, which states: "at mead drinking she (the queen) must at all times and places approach the protector of princes first, in front of the companions, quickly pass the first cup to her lord's hand, and know what advice to give him as joint master and mistress of the house together."¹⁶¹

In Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, in AD 588, King Authari of the Lombards sought the daughter of the Barvarian ruler Garibald to be his wife, and in it, similar proceedings prevail as the daughter offers the cup of wine first to him who appeared to be chief before offering it to Authari,¹⁶² demonstrating this ritualistic behavior was not confined only to the Anglo-Saxons. Enright claims that the ritual feast, "long taken to be the purest expression of a communal bonding rite, is simultaneously an expression of lordship, hierarchy, and disparity of rank,"¹⁶³ and "like members of a kindred, the retainers of a lord are bound to him and to each other by ties expressed in terms of blood kinship ... created through a convivial communion at the feast, a drinking which serves as a substitute for blood."¹⁶⁴ Enright believes this kinship to be fictive, yet if Jewish and Christian traditions are considered, this bond of kinship through ritualistic drinking as a seal of legal agreement through covenant carry far sturdier realities.¹⁶⁵ Whether or not this kinship bond, in the European

example of contract, agreement, and the binding of two parties, actualized through ritualistic drinking in a tradition separate from Irish and Norse, thus, demonstrating that this method of binding is not limited to specific cultures and, simultaneously, is not solely Christian. Covenant is not restricted to Jewish and Christian cultures, rather, it also appears in varied and distinct forms in Irish, Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Germanic traditions. Perhaps, in time, an examination of these variances will surface, providing additional depth to understanding these pre-Christian cultures.

¹⁶⁰ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 7.

¹⁶¹ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 7. Cf. Hostetter, "Maxims I," §43–45; Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 68–69.

¹⁶² Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards: Historia Langobardorum*, Book 3, Chapter XXX, trans. William Dudley Foulke (University of Pennsylvania, 1907), §1, accessed May 12, 2020, PDF, [http://www.thule-italia.org/Nordica/Paul%20the%20Deacon%20-%20History%20of%20the%20Lombards%20\(1907\)%20\[EN\].pdf?lphisphreq=1](http://www.thule-italia.org/Nordica/Paul%20the%20Deacon%20-%20History%20of%20the%20Lombards%20(1907)%20[EN].pdf?lphisphreq=1). Cf. Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 12.

¹⁶³ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 16.

¹⁶⁴ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 16.

¹⁶⁵ An example of this gravity, from a Christian perspective, is the limitations placed on Christians in the state of mortal sin. In short, these Christians have committed a serious offense against God that has completely severed their relationship with him. They are still permitted to participate in the holy sacrifice of the Mass through attendance, but they are forbidden to consume the Eucharist and participate fully in the covenant until they have rectified their relationship with God. They broke the covenant completely through the seriousness of their sin and the relationship must be restored by the penitent seeking forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and God granting his mercy through his mediator—the priest—to which he passed on that authority via the Apostles in Sacred Scripture (cf. John 20:21–23). Participating in the covenant is not simply a symbolic or fictitious act, it's a grave act,

tradition, was purely fictive or carried binding legality, the symbol of the drink as representative of a kinship bond is valid and remains prevalent in the literature.

To emphasize the cultic aspects to this fictive kinship,¹⁶⁶ Enright outlines a tale in *Vita Vedastis*¹⁶⁷ when Vedast and the king went to a feast where both pagans and Christians were present. To accommodate this, barrels of beer were set out for both, some for Christians, some for pagans, “dedicated in heathen fashion.”¹⁶⁸ What Enright believes to be cultic aspects, likely, are ritual remnants to some form of covenant rite. Similarly, in a later episode in *Historia Langobardorum*, the queen’s husband dies and after taking counsel, she chooses Agilulf, Duke of Turin as her husband and king of the nation of the Langobards:

For he was a man energetic and warlike and fitted as well in body as in mind for the government of the kingdom. The queen straightway sent word to him to come to her and she hastened to meet him at the town of Laumellum (Lumello). And when he had come to her, she, after some speech with him, caused wine to be brought, and when she had first quaffed it, she handed the rest to Agilulf to drink. And when he had taken the cup and had reverently kissed her hand, the queen said smiling with a blush, that he should not kiss her hand who ought to imprint a kiss upon her lips. And straight away raising him up to kiss her, she unfolded to him the subject of their marriage and of sovereign dignity.¹⁶⁹

Here, as Enright notes, the queen symbolically sealed the agreement, establishing the “relationship between kingship, marriage, and drink-offering.”¹⁷⁰

In the Norse tradition, Stefán Einarsson describes several episodes in *Helga kviða Hjörvarðssonar* and in *Fagrskinna* where oaths are made over liquor, with specific reference to a hallowed cup, the Bragi cup, the banquet, and marriage, noting that the old custom of making an oath over the Bragi cup is found combined, in the prose, “with another very old looking custom of swearing over a sacrificial boar.”¹⁷¹

Enright deems that:

in which the participant enters into by consuming the actual sacrificial body and blood of Christ; cf. Hahn, “Kinship by Covenant;” Hahn, “The Fourth Cup.”

¹⁶⁶ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 17.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Krusch, Bruno, ed., *Ionae Vitae sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, in *MGH Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum*, Vol. 37 (Hannoverae and Leipzig, 1905), 314.

¹⁶⁸ Jonas of Bobbio, *Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réome, and Life of Vedast*, trans. Alexander O’Hara and Ian Wood (Liverpool University Press, 2017), 273. Cf. Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 16–17.

¹⁶⁹ Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*, Book 3, Chapter XXXV, §1. Cf. Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 25.

¹⁷⁰ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 88.

¹⁷¹ Stefán Einarsson, “Old English Beot and Old Icelandic Heitstrenging,” in *PMLA*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (1934): 975–993, 986, *JSTOR*, accessed May 12, 2020, doi: 10.2307/458120. Cf. Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 81.

No marriage it seems was fully legal without a feast at which intoxicating drink was served¹⁷² ... a specific ritual took place in which the woman presented her future husband with a drink. This was the formal symbolic statement by which she indicated that he was to be her husband. His acceptance of the cup signified his agreement as well as being a major part of the formal completion of the alliance.¹⁷³

This custom appears to be ancient, as Enright's earliest non-Mediterranean example is a Celtic custom, observed in the south of Gaul around the fourth century BC, when King Nanos' daughter chose a suitor by presenting him with a bowl (later described as cup) which she had mixed.¹⁷⁴ It is in this vein that examples of the lady and the drinking vessel in Irish literature will be examined, not from the perspective of warbands, but from the perspective of marriage, of kinship, of kingship, of binding, and of covenant.

3b—Examples Found in Irish Literature

Once again, the *Baile in Scáil* provides excellent material. When Conn is in the phantom's house, and the phantom reveals himself as Lug, the seed of Adam, returned from the dead to prophecy to Conn the duration of his lordship and every lord to descend after him, a girl with a golden cup sets out a meal before him, and this girl is the Sovereignty of Ireland. The meal consisted of an ox rib and a boar rib, mirroring the meal at *Samain* with the garlic. Then the girl inquires "to whom shall the cup of red ale be given?" The phantom then named every lord, one after another, from the time of Conn onwards, and the poet cut the incantation in ogham on four staves, whereupon the house vanished, but the vat, the vessel, the cup, and the staves remained. Then the girl prompts the phantom, "Upon whom shall this golden cup of red ale be bestowed and who shall drink it?" The phantom says, "on Conn Cétchatchach," followed by a lengthy foretelling of his deeds. The girl keeps repeating the question and Lug keeps foretelling the following kings, their deeds, and the length of their reign until the final king of Ireland and the completion of the narrative.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 82.

¹⁷³ Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 82.

¹⁷⁴ *Béaloideas*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (An Cumann Le Béaloideas Éireann, 1937): 143–145, 143, *JSTOR*, accessed May 12, 2020, doi: 10.2307/20521959. Cf. Zwicker, *Fontes historiae religionis celticae*, 2; Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 82.

¹⁷⁵ Murray, *Baile in Scáil*, 50–67.

Not only does Conn share a meal of ox and boar, two animals previously shown to be bound in ritualism, yet he will also drink ale from the golden cup given to him by the Sovereignty of Ireland, thereby binding himself to the Sovereignty of Ireland, becoming the father of many lords, as prophesied by Lug. It should be noted that Cormac mac Art's cup, designed to discern falsehood from truth, which would be wonderfully suited for a king, was also a golden cup.¹⁷⁶

As previously mentioned, Ó hÓgáin claims, "Sovereignty was posited as a gift proffered by the goddess, a gift of herself to the king who was thus her mystical spouse,"¹⁷⁷ sometimes symbolized by a ritual drink, and the "theme of her marriage to the proper ruler of a territory is a perennial one in Irish tradition ... it is likely that the complex imagery and lore pertaining to kingship in Ireland should be regarded as residue of ancient rituals which accompanied the installation of kings."¹⁷⁸ Considering Enright's findings in *Beowulf*, in *Maxim I*, and in the *Historia Langobardorum*; considering the role of the Old Covenant in the Old Testament, made with Abraham and his descendants, made with Jacob and his descendants, made with king David and his descendants, fulfilled, from a Christian point of view in the New Covenant and Christ uniting all people in one family as kin—to himself, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father—and considering that the Sacrament of Matrimony in pre-Reformation Christianity is a covenant between baptized persons and raised, by Christ, to the dignity of a sacrament,¹⁷⁹ it seems plausible that the ancient rituals referred to by Ó hÓgáin, in some capacity, resembled those of shared meals, oaths, covenants, and rituals meant to bind people and kings in kinship with each other or occasionally, as in Irish literature, between them and the otherworld.

In Christian teaching, Christ is the bridegroom and his Church is the bride,¹⁸⁰ enriching this marital union between creator and creation, between hidden and revealed, between supernatural and natural. This episode in the *Baile in Scáil* mirrors this idea, yet through pre-Christian ideals, possibly linked to the residue of ancient rituals.

¹⁷⁶ Stokes, Whitley, *Irische Texte*, 214–216.

¹⁷⁷ Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend & Romance*, 264.

¹⁷⁸ Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend & Romance*, 264.

¹⁷⁹ "The Sacrament of Matrimony," in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Part Two, Section Two, Chapter Three, Article 7, §1601, *The Holy See*, accessed March 26, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm.

¹⁸⁰ "The Sacrament of Matrimony," §1621.

In *The Birth of Cú Chulaind*, Deichtine drinks from a copper vessel, in which a tiny creature would leap toward her lips, and afterwards Lug spoke to her in a dream saying she had entered his house, she was pregnant by him, and she would bear a son. Marriage is never mentioned, but kinship, binding, and family certainly are, and it is only enacted after Deichtine drank from the copper vessel with the tiny creature.¹⁸¹ In *The Wooing of Étaín*, a rider stopped on the river bank to look at Étaín and he recited this poem: “It is she who healed the king’s eye / from the well of Loch Dá Licc; / it is she who was swallowed in the drink / in the vessel of the wife of Étar.”¹⁸² Here, the vessel is, once again, a golden cup and is linked to a woman, Étaín’s mother (wife of her father Étar), and once again conception is mentioned as she, Étaín, in the form of a fly, was swallowed and conceived in the drink.¹⁸³

In *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, the seventh sentence reads: “*Roferad failte friu huili, ocus ructha cuci-sium isin mbrudin.*”¹⁸⁴ Essentially, “was poured a welcome with them all, and they were taken to him into the hostel.” This use of the word *feraid* (“was poured”) is interesting because in the narrative, the men of Leinster and the men of Ulster are in the same place vying for the same hound—a hostile environment considering Macc Da Thó’s description of an Ulaid custom: “every one of you who takes arms makes Connachta his object.”¹⁸⁵ To dissuade violence, a welcome is *poured* and consumed before they enter the *bruden*, a place meant for peace, feasting, and hospitality.

According to Enright, accepting a drink is accepting the authority of the leader who drank it first. In the tale of Finn and maiden at Loch Dogra, it is King Cuilleán who comes out of the *síd* and offers the drink to Finn, submitting to his authority to stop the Fenians from digging out his *síd*. The cup is then passed around, presumably first to the next greatest warrior, like in *Beowulf*, before it falls and disappears into the ground. In *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, a hostile situation was mediated by pouring out a welcome before entering the *bruden*, as the men presumably all participated in a ritual drink. Later, when Macc Da Thó decided to give the hound to Ailill and Medb, he

¹⁸¹ Gantz, “The Birth of Cú Chulaind,” 132–133.

¹⁸² Gantz, Jeffrey, trans., “The Wooing of Étaín,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin Books, 1981): 37–59, 48.

¹⁸³ Gantz, “The Wooing of Étaín,” 47.

¹⁸⁴ Thurneysen, Rudolf, ed., *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, in *Medieval and Modern Irish Series*, Vol. 6 (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1935), 1. Cf. Lehman and R.P.M., *An Introduction to Old Irish*, 3.

¹⁸⁵ Gantz, Jeffrey, trans., “The Tale of Macc Da Thó’s Pig,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin Books, 1981): 179–187, 183.

instructed them to “bring a large, magnificent host to fetch it, and they will have food and drink and presents, and the dog will be theirs.”¹⁸⁶ Once again, sharing a meal and gifts symbolizes an agreement between two people, like sharing the meal and the exchange of gifts symbolized the binding between the two *síde* when Finn killed the murderer carrying the pig, the calf, and the garlic.

However, at the end of the story when the two parties reconvene—the Ulaid and the men of Connachta—the pig is cooked, yet they cannot agree on who shall carve, likely another reference to the champion’s portion, similar to the pig meant for Finn which was stolen three times. The meal is not shared, a drink is not poured, and a slaughter breaks out, with the hound making its choice as to which side to support.¹⁸⁷

It seems likely, then, that the woman who “met him [Finn] coming out of the knoll with a dripping vessel in her hand, having just distributed drink” is the same woman who “jammed the door against the knoll, when Finn squeezed his finger between the door and the post,”¹⁸⁸ and that this woman was previously enacting a similar ritual prior to jamming Finn’s finger—namely, serving the drink and binding those in the *síd* together, likely on the feast of *Samain* considering all the to-and-fro happening between the thief and the *síd*. Therefore, when Finn sticks his finger in his mouth, he drinks the same drink, and is bound to the otherworld through covenant and ritual.

3c—Finn and Derg Corra

The second half of *Finn and the Man in the Tree* contains another example of sharing a meal and ritualistic drinking, as a form of binding, yet this time it involves the servant Derg Corra. The text transfers between the first half of the story and the second half simply by saying, “some time afterwards,”¹⁸⁹ which, for all intents and purposes, is a rather vague sentence, yet it will play a role. In the narrative, a beautiful maiden whom Finn desired was carried off, yet she set her heart on the servant Derg Corra who, while the food was being cooked, jumped to-and-fro across the cooking hearth.¹⁹⁰ Nagy argues that this leaping over the pit “symbolizes his going from raw to

¹⁸⁶ Gantz, “The Tale of Macc Da Thó’s Pig,” 182.

¹⁸⁷ Gantz, “The Tale of Macc Da Thó’s Pig,” 182–187.

¹⁸⁸ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 346–347.

¹⁸⁹ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 347.

¹⁹⁰ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 347.

cooked, from nature to culture, from childhood to adulthood ... and the leaping gilla's repeated exposure to fire, whereby he becomes almost roasted food himself."¹⁹¹ Yet, in examining this incident of cooking and fire in light of the rest of the tale and to the parallels in Finn's own childhood, a different picture materializes.

When Derg Corra refused the maiden's advances to lie with her, on account of Finn, she incites Finn against him, to which Finn commands Derg Corra:

“Go hence, said he, out of my sight, and thou shalt have a truce of three days and three nights, and after that beware of me.” ... Then Derg Corra went into exile and took up his abode in a wood and used to go about on shanks of deer (*si uerum est*) for his lightness. One day as Finn was in the wood seeking him he saw a man in the top of a tree, a blackbird on his right shoulder and in his left hand a white vessel of bronze, filled with water, in which was a skittish trout, and a stag at the foot of the tree. And this was the practice of the man, cracking nuts; and he would give half the kernel of a nut to the blackbird that was on his right shoulder while he would himself eat the other half; and he would take an apple out of the bronze vessel that was in his left hand, divide it in two, throw one half to the stag that was at the foot of the tree, and then eat the other half himself. And on it he would drink a sip of water in the bronze vessel that was in his hand, so that he and the trout and the stag and the blackbird drank together. Then his followers asked of Finn who he in the tree was, for they did not recognize him on account of the hood of disguise which he wore.

Then Finn put his thumb into his mouth. When he took it out again, his *imbas* illumines him and he chanted an incantation and said ... Tis Derg Corra son of Ua Daigre, said he, that is in the tree.¹⁹²

Many of Derg Corra's abilities emulate Finn's abilities almost exactly. Derg Corra leaps to-and-fro over the fire, demonstrating the same nimbleness Finn used to chase the thief to-and-fro over the river. Derg Corra travels in exile on the shanks of a deer where Finn demonstrates, in the *Boyhood Deeds of Finn*, that he is as fast as a deer, and is known elsewhere as Lad of the Skins.¹⁹³ Derg lives in a tree whereas Finn was raised by two female Fennidi until he grew old enough to hunt, and at one point was found by his mother sleeping in the *fían* hut in the forests of Sliab Bladma¹⁹⁴—likely another reference to a home hidden in a tree. Conclusively, Derg Corra possesses abilities of shape-shifting and of nimbleness linked to the otherworld as Finn's origin is linked to the otherworld.

¹⁹¹ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 133.

¹⁹² Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 347–349.

¹⁹³ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 135.

¹⁹⁴ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 211.

However, a detail of note is the blackbird resting on the hidden man's shoulder, when Finn spots him in the tree. After consuming the salmon, the first poem composed by the *fili* Finn, was a poem in praise of springtime: "May-day season surpassing! / Splendid is colour then. / Blackbirds sing a full lay, if there be a slender shaft of day."¹⁹⁵ Nagy's translation is quite similar: "Mayday, fair appearance, a very fine time, / Blackbirds sing a complete poem / if there is a meager shaft of day."¹⁹⁶ The first of May is the Celtic religious festival Beltaine, which marked the beginning of open pasturing and was linked to fertility.¹⁹⁷ It's also associated with *bil-tene* (lucky fire).¹⁹⁸ This time held specific meaning to the Fenians.

According to the seventeenth century historian Geoffrey Keating, "the men of Ireland would house and feed the *fián* from Samain (November 1) to Beltaine (May 1), and in turn the *fián* would preserve order and prevent wrongdoing for the kings and lords of Ireland."¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, they would hunt from Beltaine to Samain and during this time, Finn and his men (according to an Early Modern Irish Fenian tale) were entitled to "game, fish, and unused edible fruit ... nor did anyone dare to pick up a salmon, fawn, or any other game that he found on the road."²⁰⁰

In light of this, perhaps the narrative of *Finn and the Man in the Tree* is essentially describing the role of Finn and the Fenians, using festivals as bookends—Samain and the thief in the first half, *some time passed*, then Beltaine and Derg Corra in the second half. Beltaine was a fire festival,²⁰¹ linked to fertility. The beautiful maiden was carried captive from Dún Iascaig because "Finn's mind desired the woman for himself,"²⁰² and when Derg Corra jumped to-and-fro across the cooking hearth, "she set her heart on"²⁰³ him. Curiously, in Southern Leinster, in comparatively modern history, "the flames on this eve or the day were also used to

¹⁹⁵ Meyer, "The Boyish Exploits of Finn," 186.

¹⁹⁶ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 27–28.

¹⁹⁷ Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, 72.

¹⁹⁸ O'Donovan, John, trans., *Sanas Chormaic: Cormac's Glossary*, ed. Whitley Stokes (Calcutta: Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1868), 19.

¹⁹⁹ Keating, Geoffrey, *The History of Ireland*, Vol. II, ed. and trans. Rev. Patrick S. Dinneen (London: Irish Text Society, 1908), 327. Cf. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 53.

²⁰⁰ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 54.

²⁰¹ "Beltaine," in *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, trans. Cyril Edwards (The Boydell Press, 1997).

²⁰² Meyer, "Finn and the Man in the Tree," 347.

²⁰³ Meyer, "Finn and the Man in the Tree," 347.

bless and protect humans, who leaped over them.”²⁰⁴ Sir William Wilde’s describes this custom in the country districts occurring in 1852:

With some, particularly the younger portion, this was a mere diversion, to which they attached no particular meaning, yet others performed it with a deeper intention, and evidently as a religious rite. Thus, many of the old people might be seen circumambulating the fire, and repeating to themselves certain prayers. If a man was about to perform a long journey, he leaped backward and forwards three times through the fire, to give him success in his undertaking. If about to wed he did it to purify himself for the marriage state.... As the fire sunk low, the girls tripped across it to procure good husbands.²⁰⁵

Arguably, the episode described by Sir William Wilde may be a continuation of a pre-Christian festival, as fire is considered a purifier in pre-Reformation Christianity. With this symbolism in mind, it seems doubtful that the episode with Derg Corra is about the raw versus cooked but is rather setting the scene for a fertility feast, displaying Finn’s mediation throughout the seasons. The blackbird symbolizes spring and the coming of May, as expressed in Finn’s praise poem; the fish, the deer, and the fruit seen with the man in the tree are word for word the food the Fenians were entitled to between *Beltaine* and *Samain*, as noted by Keating. The leaping over the fire and the desire of the woman for Derg Corra, her tempter, and the desire of Finn for the woman, corresponds with marriage and fertility, and serve to escalate the proceedings. Derg Corra is not the innocent bystander—he is tempting the woman, knowing full well she is meant for Finn, and then he spurns her advances once she sets her heart on him. Finn, once again, must mediate between the mortal realm and the otherworld. Perhaps this was why Finn gave Derg Corra a three-day head start, perhaps he was waiting for the festival of *Beltaine* to be over before pursuing him.

Once the man in the tree is spotted, the scene is again set with a shared meal and a drink. Derg Corra gave half a nut to the blackbird and ate the other half. He would take an apple out of the bronze vessel, throw one half to the stag and eat the other. Whether or not the nut is the hazelnut imbued with wisdom is not mentioned, yet its paring with the apple, as marked by the Garden of Eden, is worth some speculation. Also, the white bronze vessel resembles the bronze vessel that Cú Chulaind was conceived from. Following the snack, Derg Corra drank the water from “the bronze vessel that was in his hand, so that he and the trout and the stag and the

²⁰⁴ Hutton, Ronald, *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 219, Kindle.

²⁰⁵ Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*, 219. Cf. Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, 39–40; 47–49.

blackbird drank together.”²⁰⁶ Derg Corra is binding himself to the otherworld, and on this account, Finn’s followers could not recognize him because of “the hood of disguise which he wore.”²⁰⁷ Yet when Finn put his thumb into his mouth, his *imbas* illumines him, because he is also bound to the otherworld, serving as mediator between the revealed and hidden, and as such, he reveals who the man is in the tree: “Tis Derg Corra son of Ua Daigre, said he, that is in the tree.”²⁰⁸

Chapter 4: *Völsunga saga*—Parallels Between Finn and Sigurðr

In the Norse tradition, Sigurðr’s consumption of the dragon’s blood by sucking his burnt thumb and attaining otherworldly insight strikes close to that of Finn and the Salmon, at least as the initiating incident setting the heroes on their respective journeys. Yet the personas, motives, and characters of these pre-Christian heroes are as alike as oil and water. Sigurðr’s quest for the dragon’s destruction begins with his tutor Regin’s desire to slay his brother Fafnir. Regin and Fafnir were dwarves, and after Fafnir killed their father to attain a golden treasure and Odin’s ring, which their father had taken in compensation from Loki for the murder of his son Otr. Their father cursed the treasure, saying “that to possess the ring, or any of the gold, meant death.”²⁰⁹ Fafnir killed their father, hid the murdered body and took the treasure, which upset Regin because he did not get any of it—his father’s death echoes as Regin’s pale excuse rather than his authentic motivation for seeking his brother’s demise. Fafnir went to live by himself and hoard his riches, and grew so malevolent that he turned into a terrible dragon that lay on the gold.²¹⁰ This is the history Sigurðr becomes a part of—one of blood, deception, kin-slaying, and curses.

When Regin outlines his plan to slay Fafnir, he deceives Sigurðr on how large the serpent is, and then forgoes giving him an escape route, hoping the lad will be

²⁰⁶ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 347–349.

²⁰⁷ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 349.

²⁰⁸ Meyer, “Finn and the Man in the Tree,” 349. This tree bears an interesting parallel to the Tree of Mugna in the poem *Mag Mugna*, a tree fashioned by God and blest with “various virtues, / with three choice fruits. / The acorn, and the dark narrow nut, / and the apple—it was a goodly wilding.” The poem describes this enormous tree as sheltering a thousand warriors in secret until it was overthrown by poets, not dissimilar to Derg Cora being overthrown by the poet Finn. Cf. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas, Part III*, 145–147.

²⁰⁹ Sigurdur Nordal and G. Turville-Petre, eds., *Völsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. R.G. Finch (London & Edinburgh: Nelson, 1965), 26.

²¹⁰ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 26.

drowned in the dragon's blood.²¹¹ Sigurðr takes precautions and digs a number of pits, and upon stabbing Fafnir's underbelly when the beast crawled over his pit, Sigurðr is soaked to the shoulder in blood but leaps from his pit and lets the blood drain into the others he dug. A long discourse with the dragon follows, who warns him that this gold will be the death of him,²¹² but Sigurðr desires wealth and chooses it anyway.²¹³ When Regin approaches, Sigurðr cuts out the heart while Regin drinks the dragon's blood. Then Regin asks Sigurðr:

“Do something for me—it's a small matter for you. Take the heart to the fire, roast it and give it me to eat.”

Sigurd went and roasted it on a spit. And when the juice sputtered out he touched it with his finger to see whether it was done. He jerked his finger to his mouth, and when the blood from the dragon's heart touched his tongue he could understand the language of birds. He heard some tits twittering near him in the thicket.

“There sits Sigurd, roasting Fafnir's heart. He should eat it himself, and then he'd be wiser than any man.”

“There lies Regin meaning to play false the man who trusts him,” said a second. Then said a third:

“Let him then strike off his head. Then he can have the great treasure all to himself.”²¹⁴

Sigurðr follows their advice. Rather than being a humble recipient of the power, he strikes off Regin's head, eats some of the heart, then rides to Fafnir's lair and takes all the vast hoard.²¹⁵ Rather than inheriting a prophecy, *the salmon was meant for you*, the birds echo the serpent in the Garden, tempting Eve: “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”²¹⁶ Rather than composing a praise poem, Sigurðr's first act after gaining this otherworldly ability was to behead his tutor. Further on, when Sigurðr comes to Brynhild, he passes through the flames to reach her, his body heedless of fire due to the blood of the dragon—he is becoming like the thing he consumed, he is taking on the strength of his fallen foe, becoming like the dragon, but doomed to die. Like Sigurðr, Adam and Eve sought the apple's knowledge for

²¹¹ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 30.

²¹² Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 30.

²¹³ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 32.

²¹⁴ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 32–34.

²¹⁵ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 34.

²¹⁶ RCSVE, Genesis 2:4–5.

personal gain and became like God, possessing the knowledge of good and evil, but they too were doomed to die.²¹⁷

4a—Cup, Covenant, and Garlic in the Norse Tradition

Later in the narrative, Sigurðr asks Brynhild for advice and she says she'll teach him gladly and states:

“Let us both drink together, and may the Gods grant us a good day, so that my wisdom may profit you and bring you fame, and that you may remember what we two talk of.” Brynhild filled a cup, brought it to Sigurðr and said: “Ruler of battles, / I now bring you ale / mixed with great power, / mingled with fame....”²¹⁸

The poem is complete after eighteen stanzas, but stanzas ten and eleven should also be noted: “Ale runes you must know, / lest another’s wife / betray trust if you trust her.”²¹⁹ Once again, the role of the woman is linked to ale and, in this instance, possible adultery if Sigurðr does not understand ale runes. “Filled cup you must bless / against bane to guard, / cast garlic into the goblet. / Then this I promise, / that poisoned mead / will not fall to your fate.”²²⁰

Brynhild continues her counsel in prose form, and the conversation ends with Sigurðr’s proclamation: “‘No one is wiser than you,’ said Sigurd, ‘and I swear it is you I shall marry, and we are ideally suited.’ ‘I should wish to marry you,’ she answered, ‘even though I might have the choice of all the men there are.’ And this they swore, each to the other.”²²¹ In this narrative, Sigurðr participates in kin-slaying, eats the flesh of the serpent by burning his thumb, murders, takes the cursed treasure for his own heedless of warnings, takes on the embodiment of the dragon, and then participates in a ritual with the Valkyrie Brynhild, in which she presents him with a cup of ale, speaks wisdom to him, and seals the conversation by making oaths of betrothment, each to the other. Also, it seems that garlic is deemed as a purifier in the Norse literary tradition as well.

²¹⁷ Cf. *RCSVE*, Genesis 2:17; 3:19.

²¹⁸ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Vǫlsunga saga*, 35.

²¹⁹ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Vǫlsunga saga*, 36.

²²⁰ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Vǫlsunga saga*, 36–37.

²²¹ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Vǫlsunga saga*, 40.

Several parallel episodes of a shared meal and ritual drinking, in the Norse tradition, are found in *Heimskringla*. In *Saga of Olaf Haraldson*, after Thorgny's speech, the text reads:

The murmur among the bondes then came to an end, and the chiefs, the king, the earl, and Thorgny talked together, and concluded a truce and reconciliation, on the part of the Swedish king, according to the terms which the king of Norway had proposed by his ambassadors, and it was resolved at the Thing that Ingegerd, the king's daughter, should be married to Olaf Haraldson. The king left it to the earl to make a contract feast, and gave him full powers to conclude this marriage affair.²²²

In this episode, peace, reconciliation, and marriage all will be finalized at the contract feast, a shared meal between hostile parties, binding themselves to one another through legality and kinship.

In *Olafs Saga Helga*, Óláfr is bringing war against a number of kings and Hrcerekr speaks to them: "It seems to me about this decision, that we shall need to make our alliance firm, so that no one may fail in loyalty to anyone else.... The kings agreed to this, to keep now all together. They have a feast prepared for them out at Hringisakr, and they drank with the cup passing round the whole company."²²³

In *Hákonar saga góða*, an ancient custom is described: "When a ritual feast was to take place, that all the farmers should attend where the temple was and bring there their own supplies for them to use while the banquet lasted. At this banquet everyone had to take part in the ale-drinking."²²⁴ This episode shimmers through a Christian prism—going to a temple and, later, describing the *hlaut*-twigs dipped into blood as being fashioned like "holy water sprinklers"²²⁵—yet as demonstrated by previous examples of integration, shimmering through a Christian prism doesn't necessarily mean false, but rather, in some cases, a reordering of the relationship between the recipient and the hidden. Later in *Heimskringla*, there is literary evidence of this integration:

During the pagan period, (King Sigurðr) was accustomed to hold three sacrificial banquets every year, one at the winter nights, the second at midwinter, the third in the summer. And when he accepted Christianity, he still kept up his established custom with the banquets. Then, in the autumn he

²²² Snorre Sturluson, *Heimskringla: A History of The Norse Kings*, Vol. 1, trans. Samuel Laing (London: Norrœna Society, 1907), 351.

²²³ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. II, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (University College London: 2014), 66.

²²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. I, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (University of College London, 2011), 98.

²²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. I, 98.

held a great party for his friends, and also a Yule feast in the winter and then again invited many people; a third banquet he held at Easter, and then too it was well attended.²²⁶

4b—Summary of Analysis

Both Irish and Norse traditions present shared meals and ritual drinking as necessary means to symbolize and finalize an agreement, a covenant, binding two parties together through ritual. Both Finn and Sigurðr received their abilities through participating in a meal imbued in pre-Christian wisdom or abilities, binding themselves to the other, and, in a certain sense, Finn became the true salmon and Sigurðr became the true dragon. Yet, therein, does the comparison rest, for Finn attained this wisdom humbly and composed a praise poem whereas Sigurðr hacked the head off his tutor and claimed the cursed treasure for himself, heedless of warnings. These two choices have drastic consequences for the heroes, their role, the role of their family, their legacy, and their mediation, which will all be examined in the next section.

One final note—Nagy describes a *fili* ritual associated with Finn Mac Cumhaill, outlined in *Sanas Chormaic*, observing the “shamanic dependency of the fili upon the otherworld:”²²⁷

Imbas forosna [‘knowledge that enlightens’] i.e. it discovers everything which the poet likes and which he desires to manifest. Thus is it done. The poet chews a piece of (the) flesh of a red pig, or of a dog or cat, and puts it afterwards on the flag behind the door, and pronounces an incantation on it, and offers it to idol-gods, and afterwards calls his idols to him and then finds them not on the morrow (*e*), and pronounces incantations on his two palms, and calls again unto him his idol-gods that his sleep may not be disturbed.²²⁸

This ritual of chewing raw meat parallels closely to Finn chewing “his own thumb, raw human flesh,”²²⁹ followed by chanting. This practice was banned for Christians: “Patrick abolished [banished?] this and the *teinm lægda*, and he adjudged [testified?] that whoever should practice them should have neither heaven nor earth, because it was renouncing baptism.”²³⁰ Regarding Nagy’s interpretation of raw versus cooked, it

²²⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Vol. II, 127.

²²⁷ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 25.

²²⁸ O’Donovan, *Sanas Chormaic*, 94. Cf. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 25.

²²⁹ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 26.

²³⁰ O’Donovan, *Sanas Chormaic*, 95.

seems rather stretched as Finn's thumb is never fully cooked, certainly not the inside, and he is always chewing raw meat and the marrow of his thumb always remains raw. Instead, Christian scribes would be aware of Patrick's ban as well as the previous ritual of the *fili*, which would make Finn chewing his thumb and chanting, at most, another symbol of participating in pre-Christian ritual to receive *imbas forosna*—knowledge that enlightens.

Part 3—Mediation

Chapter 5: Legacy of Finn and Sigurðr

Upon the outset, these two heroes embark on their journeys from analogous origins, rising as unique, mighty pillars in pre-Christian mythology—the sage Irish poet and the fearsome Norse dragon slayer. The fruits of their labor, however, tell a more diverse tale, providing an additional perspective for their respective cultures and how to interpret the valiant pre-Christian hero. In the Irish tradition, Demne received his gift from happenstance and through humility is renamed Finn. He composes a praise poem, echoing David and the psalms, and travels to the man Cethern to further his craft of poetry,²³¹ seeking greater wisdom in the art and once again demonstrating the humble virtue of a student. Effectively, Finn becomes a mediator between the people of Ireland and the otherworld, leading (and in some ways fathering) a mighty band of Fenians, who perform great works throughout Ireland for many years. His descendants carry on this tradition, concluding with their interaction with Saint Patrick—the salmon of heaven—who blesses them, shares a meal with them, learns their history, records it, and then assumes their role as mediator between the invisible and the visible, elevating it to a relationship with the Christian supernatural. The mediation role of the Fenians will be fleshed out momentarily.

Sigurðr, by comparison, begins his journey in full knowledge of its treacherous origins and in the desire of self-glorification. This is not to say that Sigurðr does not possess any virtue or that Finn does not possess any vice, however, their motives from the outset are strikingly dissimilar. Regin plays on Sigurðr's vanity when he first asks him to slay the dragon: “You've too little wealth. It annoys me to

²³¹ Cf. Meyer, “The Boyish Exploits of Finn,” 187; Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 216.

see you running around like a peasant lad. But I can tell you where great wealth is likely to be found.”²³² Upon hearing Regin’s tale, Sigurðr acknowledges that: “You’ve lost a great deal ... and your family has been very evil.”²³³ He knows he is entering into an arrangement with a dwarf who wants aid in killing his brother. This theme continues when the second sword Regin forges for Sigurðr breaks and Sigurðr exclaims: “You are like your forebears—untrustworthy.”²³⁴ Again, Regin proves his untrustworthiness when he doesn’t tell Sigurðr how to drain the dragon’s blood from the pit, hoping to drown the hero. Therefore, when Sigurðr tastes the hot dragon’s blood while cooking the heart and understands the bird’s speech, Regin’s impending betrayal should not be a surprise to him. It’s a confirmation: “‘There lies Regin meaning to play false a man who trusts him,’ said a second (bird). Then said a third: ‘Let him then strike off his head. Then he can have the great treasure all to himself.’ ‘He would be wiser to do as they advised,’ said a fourth.”²³⁵

Sigurðr is willingly participating in kin-slaying with a deceiver for the sake of vengeance, renown, and furthering his own name and wealth, which was considerable already—he had recently avenged both his father and King Sigmund. His motives are further realized during his conversation with the dying dragon: “‘Everything I say you take to be said in hate,’ answered Fafnir, ‘but the gold I possessed will be your death.’ ‘Everyone wants to keep hold on wealth until that day comes, but everyone must die some time,’ replied Sigurd.”²³⁶ The dragon repeats the warning, saying that Regin has brought about what he wanted, Sigurðr’s death through a back channel, as the treasure will be the death of Sigurðr and every man after. Sigurðr repeats: “If I knew I’d never die, I’d ride back ... even though I were to forfeit all the wealth. But every valiant man desires to have wealth until that day comes.”²³⁷

Later in the tale, Sigurðr travels richly adorned in plated gold and on all his treasures—shield, helm, saddle, surcoat, hauberk, and weapons—was emblazoned a picture of the dragon so “all those who had heard that he’d killed the great dragon the Værings called Fafnir, would know on seeing him who he was.”²³⁸ When the greatest heroes and famous leaders were spoken of, he was always mentioned foremost of all,

²³² Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 24.

²³³ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 26.

²³⁴ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 27.

²³⁵ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 34.

²³⁶ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 31.

²³⁷ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 32.

²³⁸ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 40.

“and his name is current in all the languages spoken north of the Greek Ocean, and so it will be for as long as the world endures.”²³⁹ Yet for all his fame and wealth, his tale ends in betrayal, despair, kin-slaying, the obliteration of the Völsunga line, the annihilation of his family, and grief. Perhaps, to the Christian monk, the telling of Sigurðr’s story wasn’t simply a continuing of tradition but also a parable of warning: “for what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?”²⁴⁰ It is also plausible, that the Norse society related better to a fearsome dragon slayer than to a mighty poet, despite their strong poetic tradition, which may imply deeper intricacies lining both these societies, outside the scope of this study.

Nagy’s asserts that:

Finn’s acquisition of knowledge and Sigurd’s acquisition of wealth are only temporary triumphs of accident over the rigid and predictable working of cultural institutions. Despite their final failure, both figures bring essential new life into the systems which they disrupt and enter. Their tool of disruption is cooking, a paradigmatic cultural activity which in these myths produces a positive and liberating kind of disorder. Such sabotage ultimately glorifies the saboteur: Finn and Sigurd are famed in their respective traditions not as bumbling cooks and thieves but as heroes.²⁴¹

This assertion is darkened by the lens of the individual and individualistic glory, rather than covenant, family, and legacy, paralleled by Abraham and his descendants. Sigurðr’s tale ends in failure and death, yet Finn’s legacy, his family, and his kindred live on. Both heroes established a covenant with the invisible through a meal and attained otherworldly power—Sigurðr for self-glorification, Finn through humility and something akin to virtue and the will of the otherworld. Instead of hoarding treasure, Finn seeks further knowledge. Unlike Sigurðr’s wealth, which is the bane of every man, Finn’s knowledge doesn’t end with his death but continues and is passed on, eventually to Saint Patrick, and unlike the Volsungs who perished, the role of Finn’s people is cemented in Irish lore and later integrated into Christianity. It is the potential role of the Fenians which this study shall examine next, as well as the possibilities therein.

5a—Three Roles of Mediation: Priest, Prophet, and King

²³⁹ Nordal and Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 41.

²⁴⁰ *RSVCE*, Matthew 16:26. Cf. Mark 8:35–36.

²⁴¹ Nagy, “Intervention and Disruption in the Myths of Finn and Sigurd,” 131.

In *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, Nagy describes the poet in Early Christian Ireland as “the inheritor (or one of the inheritors) of the functions and attributes of the *druí* (‘druid’), the priest of pagan Celtic society, who along with the *rí* (‘king’), was the mediator between the human realm and the world of the gods, and who continued to play a prominent role in the Irish tales recorded during the Christian era.”²⁴² For the Christian monk, mediation between the invisible and the visible has three distinct and typically separate, roles: priest, prophet, and king. It is why in Christian Tradition, Christ is the fulfillment of all three. This distinction is especially prominent in the biblical story of Samuel and Saul.

Samuel is a unique character in the Bible, as he grew up ministering to the lord under Eli,²⁴³ the priest, and in adulthood, he becomes a prophet and judge of Israel, leading them into battles, which puts him in the unique position of serving as priest and prophet—upholding the law and performing sacrifice on one side, and mediating God’s word and will to Israel on the other. But he never served as king, nor was he presumed king.

When he was old, Samuel made his sons judges over Israel, but they took bribes and perverted justice and so the elders of Israel asked Samuel to appoint a king to rule over them, like the other nations. Samuel warns them against this, but they persist, so Samuel acts as mediator and repeats their petition to the Lord: “And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’”²⁴⁴ Samuel repeats this sentiment in his farewell address after Saul has been anointed king:

And when you saw that Na’hash the king of the Am’monites came against you, you said to me, “No, but a king shall reign over us,” when the Lord your God was your king. And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the Lord has set a king over you.²⁴⁵

The Israelites are afraid of what they have done, saying, “Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king.”²⁴⁶

²⁴² Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 27.

²⁴³ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 3:1.

²⁴⁴ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 8:7.

²⁴⁵ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 12:12–13.

²⁴⁶ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 12:19.

Saul becomes God's human representative for the Israelites, he becomes the Lord's anointed and the people's choice by lots, but he is a human king, subject to the Almighty, as Samuel informs Israel: "If both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not listen to the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king."²⁴⁷ Saul is never blessed with the authority of being a prophet or a priest. He never serves as a mediator between God and the people. When the Philistines are attacking him with great force, he grows fearful at Samuel's absence and offers the burnt offering to God himself, a grievous sin since he had no authority to do so. Samuel rebukes Saul, saying, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you; for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever. But now your kingdom shall not continue."²⁴⁸ Later, during another war against the Amalekites, Samuel comes to Saul, again serving as mediator, and says: "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord,"²⁴⁹ yet Saul disobeys God's decree, and does not slaughter the best of the sheep and oxen, but rather saves them for himself, and loses the favor of the Lord entirely.

This role as mediator of God's law and offering sacrifice—priest—and relaying God's word—prophet—as being separate from kingship is continued in Christianity. Only a deacon or priest reads from one of the four Gospels at Mass (as distinct from other readings in the Bible), proclaiming God's word from the Scripture, and only a priest offers up the holy sacrifice of the Mass. It is a grievous sin for an unanointed lay person to offer the sacrifice in a priest's stead. In the *Life of Saint Columba*, Aedh the Black is sentenced, in prophecy, by Columba to a horrific, and possibly threefold, death²⁵⁰ for blasphemy against the priesthood, impersonating a priest, and being falsely ordained: "But Aedh, improperly ordained, will return as a dog to his vomit, and be again a bloody murderer; and at last his throat shall be

²⁴⁷ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 12:14–15.

²⁴⁸ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 13:13–14.

²⁴⁹ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 15:1.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Evans, David, "Agamemnon and the Indo-European Threefold Death Pattern," in *History of Religions*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1979), 153–166. *JSTOR*, accessed 1 May 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/1062271.

pierced by a lance and falling from wood into water, he will die by drowning.”²⁵¹ By masquerading as a priest, Aedh is committing sacrilege, as Saul did.

Curiously, in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, this threefold death appears involving people whom Conare possesses a *geiss* against: three deirgs, described as blood-red, proceeding him into the house of Da Derga.²⁵² These blood red warriors are revealed to be “the three nephews that lied in the *síd*”²⁵³ who were sentenced to be “destroyed three times by the king of Temuir.”²⁵⁴ Potentially, this could be another form of sacrilege, to violate a sacred place without possessing any authority in that realm. It may suggest why Conare had a *geiss* specifically against these three, as the *geiss* were placed on him by the bird-people and it was their realm that this offense occurred in.

Nevertheless, there seems to be some precedent in Irish literature for different roles between druids and kings, in no way identical with Judaism or Christianity, but under the guise of mediation and ruler—the former having further knowledge and jurisdiction over the invisible—the otherworld. In *Cormac's Dream*, Cormac mac Airt, king of Tara, awakes terrified, “and his druids and sages are brought to him and he relates the dream to them, namely Melchend the druid and Óengus mac Bolcadáin and Ailbe mac Delind and Fíthal, the latter being Cormac's poet and judge.”²⁵⁵ The description of poet and judge is intriguing. Joseph Nagy notes that in Finn Mac Cumhail's immediate family, “Cumall left only three sons after him, and two of them were not known for their heroism, namely, Fítheal the seer-judge and the good fellow Díthramhach.”²⁵⁶ *Díthramhach* means “‘inhabitant of the wilderness,’ an appropriate designation for a fénnid, who in literature is frequently an exile.”²⁵⁷ For a Christian, these titles of *inhabitant of the wilderness*, and *poet*, *seer*, and *judge* are prophetic titles. Samuel and his sons served as Judges of Israel beneath God their king,²⁵⁸ and Samuel serves as seer and prophet, mediating between God and man, the invisible and the visible.²⁵⁹

²⁵¹ Saint Adamnan, *The Life of Saint Columba*, trans. Huyshe, Wentworth (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1905), 63.

²⁵² Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,” 70.

²⁵³ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,” 100.

²⁵⁴ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,” 100.

²⁵⁵ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 135.

²⁵⁶ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 19.

²⁵⁷ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 19.

²⁵⁸ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 1:7.

²⁵⁹ RSVCE, 1 Samuel 9:9.

The role of mediation for the Jewish priest between God and Israel, the Christian priest between Christ and the laity, or the Irish druid between the otherworld and the king may not be identical, but for the Christian, the role of mediation is necessary and the bond between pre-Christian prophet and Fenian is a strong one. This possible relationship and distinct roles of mediation, articulated by druids, by Fenians, and by kings also begs the philosophical question: if the Irish king serves as mediator between the otherworld and the material realm, what is the practical role of druids? Why does Cormac mac Airt go to druids and seers to interpret his dreams? The simple fact that druids existed in Irish history insinuates they played a necessary role in society. If their role was superfluous, why exist?

5b—Mediation and *Fír Flathemon*

In *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, a man partakes in “a prophetic bull-feast or *tarbféis*,”²⁶⁰ which Ralph O'Connor describes as the “*tarbféis* ritual,”²⁶¹ to choose a new king for Ériu:

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 in his bed. Whosoever he would see in his sleep would be king, and the sleeper would perish if he uttered a falsehood.²⁶²

Nemglan, the bird-king, instructs Conare to go to Temuir for “there is a bull feast there, and it will make you a king.”²⁶³ According to the tale, the ritual is the necessary agent to make Conare a king. The bird-king cannot bestow kingship on Conare without it, and presumably, it is a druid who partakes of the flesh and broth of a slaughtered bull and then lapses into a deep sleep²⁶⁴ considering the entire proceedings deal with prophecy.

Kingship is mediated to Conare through ritual and prophecy, presumably by a druid partaking in *tarbféis*, and the kingship of Ériu is conferred on Conare, despite

²⁶⁰ O'Connor, Ralph, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 315.

²⁶¹ O'Connor, *Kingship and Narrative Artistry*, 285.

²⁶² Stokes, Whitley, trans., “The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel, c 1100,” in *Epic and Saga*, Harvard Classics, No. 49 (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1910), Part I, §22, Fordham University History Department, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, 1998, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1100derga.asp>.

²⁶³ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,” 66.

²⁶⁴ Gantz, Jeffrey, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 9.

his young age and naivety. To quell the people of Temuir's objections—"it seems to us that our bull feast and our incantation of truth have been spoilt, for it is a young , beardless lad who has been brought to us"²⁶⁵—Conare assures them: "I will inquire of wise men that I myself may be wise."²⁶⁶ This is a curious statement for a king to make if the characteristic of a just and righteous king is *fír flathemon*—the ruler's truth—which Tomás Ó Cathasaigh argues is sourced in the otherworld, and is marked by peace and plenty in the land,²⁶⁷ which begs another question: is *fír flathemon* embodied by the king upon his being chosen? If so, why does young Conare seek the wisdom of wise men after he becomes king? Wouldn't he embody this phenomenon already? Likewise, why was the *tarbféis* ritual necessary, when Nemglan, the bird-king, already selected Conare as king?

Perhaps *fír flathemon* is sourced in the otherworld, as Ó Cathasaigh suggests, and it is passed on directly? If it is, then a king blessed with the three gifts of sight, hearing, and judgement like Conare would have no use of druids, who are described elsewhere as wise men,²⁶⁸ yet it is their wisdom he says he will seek. However, if the wisdom and truth of the king is sourced in the otherworld, and this wisdom is mediated by wisemen through prophecy, ritual, and sacrifice, wise men who make the otherworld their domain, who develop a relationship with the otherworld, then perhaps the role of the druid is significant to the king. It would explain why in *The Intoxication of the Ulaid*, Conchubur, king of the Ulaid, treated the druid Cathub with such respect.

When Cú Chulaind is at feast with Conchubur, Conchubur stands and there is silence in the hall. "It was a geiss for the Ulaid to speak before their king did, but it was also geiss for the king to speak before his druids did. Thus, the most excellent druid Cathub said, 'What is it, Conchubur, noble high king of Ulaid?'"²⁶⁹ The authority of the hall is still the king's, shown by the respect Cathub gives his king, yet there is a mutual respect and subordination between the differing roles within this scene: the people to the king, and the king to the druid, despite the authority of his

²⁶⁵ Gantz, "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel," 66.

²⁶⁶ Gantz, "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel," 66.

²⁶⁷ Ó Cathasaigh, "The Semantics of 'Sid,'" 140.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Gantz, Jeffrey, "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981): 256–267, 258.

²⁶⁹ Gantz, Jeffrey, "The Intoxication of the Ulaid," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981): 188–218, 196.

hall. The druid is not ruler, he does not rule as ruler or give commands as ruler, as he does not possess the authority to give them, yet he speaks first.

Kim McCone believes that “the three most comprehensive extant wisdom texts purporting to belong to the pre-Christian period (*Audacht Morainn*, *Tecosca Cormaic*, and *Senbriathra Fithail*) ... very ascriptions indicate that their authors regarded the texts in question as fundamentally compatible with Christian teaching,”²⁷⁰ yet he criticizes Roland Smith’s view that these texts hail from “a distinctly pagan tradition: wherever Christian elements have crept in, as they have in several cases, they must be considered late additions due to the desire on the part of Christian scribes to overcome the pagan traditions by tempering them with Christian motives.”²⁷¹ Roland Smith may have the right of it, considering integration was rampant in Irish and Christian tradition.

The need for sacrifice, the need for ritual, and the need for mediators between the invisible and the visible was prevalent in many religions before the Reformation: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, as well as pagan Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia—seers, oracles, prophets, magicians, and so on. For Christian purposes, the Reformation did away with the need for priests and the need for sacrifice as necessary forms of worship, a need still imperative in Catholic Christianity. Without the need for anointed mediators, for sacrifice, for Sacred Tradition, and for ritual, the Reformation reduced reformed Christianity to a religion of the book, where Christ mediates directly to the individual solely through his Word as printed in the Bible, subject to personal interpretation, and thus alienated reformed Christianity further from these other religions, in which, ritual, sacrifice, and mediation, in some capacity, were necessary.

McCone believes that “pre-Christian sacral principles had been assimilated at least as early as the mid-seventh century to a biblical concept of kinship by divine grace,”²⁷² which would explain why the later kings were anointed. The clerical authorship of *Audacht Morainn* and its “learned ecclesiastical sophistry” being tied with “a concept of ruler’s truth bound up with due regard for the Almighty”²⁷³ only strengthens Ó Cathasaigh’s notion that the source of *fír flathemon* originated in the

²⁷⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 142.

²⁷¹ Smith, Roland Mitchell, “The *Speculum Principum* in Early Irish Literature,” in *Speculum*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1927): 411–445, 412–413, *JSTOR*, accessed May 13, 2020, doi: 10.2307/2847517.

²⁷² McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 142.

²⁷³ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 141.

otherworld. The *Auducht Morainn* presented an image of a society, favorable to the interests of the elite, but “reflected more closely the aspirations of the learned orders, including the Church. Early Irish literature did not merely entertain or praise kings and nobles, it instructed them.”²⁷⁴

If the relationship between the king and the otherworld and the druid and the otherworld was not significant, why would the monks have taken the trouble of reordering the source of *fir flathemon* to God and heaven, and, by default, adjust the role of mediator from the wise druid to the Christian priest? Mac Cana echoes this, noting:

In most of its aspects the story of Irish Christianity is one of compromise and syncretism with indigenous tradition and usage, but in some matters the conflict was more total, and nowhere more so than in those areas where the Church encroached on the traditional precinct of the druids. Ecclesiastical legend, particularly that associated with the Patrician claims of Armagh, gives considerable prominence to confrontations between druid and cleric leading inevitably and dramatically to the humiliation and displacement of the former.²⁷⁵

This concept adds new gravity to Nagy’s description of the poet in Early Christian Ireland as one of the inheritors of druidic functions which continued in Christianity. Priests like Saint Patrick and Saint Columba would have integrated some of these functions as well. Perhaps this also throws new light on Diodorus’ observations of the Gauls, specifically druids:

Philosophers, as we may call them, and men learned in religious affairs are unusually honoured among them and are called by them Druids. The Gauls likewise make use of diviners, accounting them worthy of high approbation, and these men foretell the future by means of the flight or cries of birds and the slaughter of sacred animals.... And it is a custom of theirs that no one should perform a sacrifice without a “philosopher;” for thank-offerings should be rendered to the gods, they say, by the hands of men who are experienced in the nature of the divine, and who speak, as it were, the language of the gods, and it is also through the mediation of such men, they think, that blessings likewise should be sought.²⁷⁶

The Celts are being described through a classical lens, true, and the description of bloody human sacrifice (left out in the above citation) is likely an extreme scenario, perhaps to shock the reader or to barbarize the Celt. However, the role of the druid

²⁷⁴ Charles-Edwards, T.M., *Early Christian Ireland*, 140.

²⁷⁵ Mac Cana, “The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*,” 96.

²⁷⁶ Diodorus, *Diodorus of Sicily*, Vol. III, trans. C.H. Oldfather (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1939), Book V, Chapter 32, 179.

remains perfectly plausible, as there are many forms of sacrifice, not all involving human sacrifice, and their role as mediators should be carefully considered, if for no other purpose than to ask the question: why did druids exist?

The above citation parallels the example of *tarbfeis* in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* closely—diviners foretelling the future through the slaughter of a sacred animal—and its author, Diodorus, lived in the 1st century BC and refers to mediation (or describes mediating roles), releasing this implication from Christian influence as Christianity did not exist. Since religion, absent mediators, rituals, and sacrifice, is largely a post-Reformation concept, this is unsurprising. Charles-Edwards notes the *druí* as the principal opposition to the Church: a “powerful group in Irish society [who] lost that position as a result of conversion.”²⁷⁷ They lost this position because the position cannot be integrated—it is incompatible. The druids mediate to an order placing natural powers above supernatural Christianity, something unacceptable to the Christian. However, the conflict between them and the Church is telling—if druids were not instrumental in mediation before Christianity, and they did not serve a primary function within pre-Christian religion, then the conversion would not have removed druids from their position and the conflict would not exist. Yet, an “early eighth-century lawtract on the responsibility of caring for the injured declares that the druid [along with reaver and satirist]²⁷⁸ is to enjoy no privilege on account of any sacred status he may claim.”²⁷⁹ This is not to say the druid would not receive aid, although the text recommends they be repudiated,²⁸⁰ simply that this aid would not increase to reflect any equivalence to the sacred dignity born by a priest, which means integration was still ongoing despite Christianity coming to Ireland in the fifth century.

Both druid and Fenian act as mediators, yet through different roles: the druid in a foretelling, sacrificial capacity, imparting otherworldly wisdom to the king, and the poet Fenian residing in a clanless, transitory state absent family bond, yet imbued with *imbas forosna*, with the ability to mediate between the otherworld and the material realm to assist many people. To the Christian, the druid mediates as a pre-Christian priest and the Fenian as a prophetic pilgrim. Jan Erik Rekdal argues that the

²⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 190–191.

²⁷⁸ Binchy, D. A., “Bretha Crólige,” in *Ériu* 12 (1938): 1–77, 41, *JSTOR*, accessed May 16, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/30008071.

²⁷⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 191.

²⁸⁰ Binchy, D. A., “Bretha Crólige,” 41.

“concept of pilgrimage as a transitory state of restless wandering was for the Irish intensified by the association of pilgrimage with the life of an outlaw,”²⁸¹ and who better to facilitate this role than Finn Mac Cumhail and his band of Fenians—a people without ties, a people between states. The dangers of mediating, or perhaps the ineptitude of mediating with too many ties is exemplified in brutal fashion in *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*.

5c—Serving Too Many Masters

Conare seems like the perfect king. He is a descendant of the human king Echu Feidlech and the beautiful *síd* woman Étaín, Sovereignty of Ireland; he is the son of the bird king and the woman Mess Búachalla, granddaughter of Étaín; he is in fosterage with the plunderer and *fían*-champion Dond Désa;²⁸² he possesses the three gifts of hearing, seeing, and judgment; he quite literally possesses kinship with all peoples, and he is the mediator between all peoples—the otherworld and the human realm. What begins as the perfect scenario degenerates into the worst family reunion ever at the Hostel of Da Derga.

Although Conare attempts to please all sides, his *gessa*, exacted by the otherworldly bird people, prevent him from performing his kingly duties, especially in regard to hospitality and justice. Four *gessa*, in particular, doom Conare from the start.

First: “you are not to pass the night in a house where firelight may be seen from within or from without after sunset.”²⁸³ A king is required to provide grand hospitality, and when traveling to Da Derga’s hostel—a place of community, hospitality, and safety, a literal crossroads where beings of the otherworld and the human realm could gather—Conare is fulfilling his kingly duties and presiding over the festivities. The hostel of Da Derga possessed seven entrances to the house, and seven apartments between each two entrances, yet only one door.²⁸⁴ It is small wonder Conare’s *geiss* was broken: “the hostel was always open, and that is why it was called a hostel, for it was like the mouth of a man when he yawns. Each night, Conare

²⁸¹ Rekdal, Jan Erik, “The Irish Ideal of Pilgrimage,” 10.

²⁸² “Fosterage united not only the foster-parents and foster-child, but also the foster-parents and the natural parents as well as the foster-children and the natural children.” Cf. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 82.

²⁸³ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 66.

²⁸⁴ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 69.

kindled a huge fire, a boar in the forest. Seven outlets it had, and when a log was taken from its side, the extend of the flames at each outlet was that of a burning oratory.”²⁸⁵ When Ingcél asks Fer Rogain to explain this sight, Fer Rogain claims “I do not know it, unless it is the fire of a king,”²⁸⁶ meaning a fire of this size would only be fitting for a king. It would be unfitting for a king not to use it.

Second: “no plunder is to be taken in your reign.”²⁸⁷ This severs Conare’s foster-brothers, the sons of Dond Désa, from their livelihood: “Conare’s foster-brothers grumbled about losing the prerogatives of their father and their grandfather,”²⁸⁸ and due to his family ties, he is unable to justly punish them when they start plundering the land. Third: “a company of one man or one woman is not to enter your house after sunset.”²⁸⁹ Once again this infringes on the King’s hospitality, which the seer Cailb rebukes him for in sharp savagery,²⁹⁰ forcing Conare to break his *geiss* and adequately behave as a king should. Fourth: “you are not to interfere in a quarrel between two of your servants.”²⁹¹ Conare is refused the authority to provide peace in his own house.

Without fail, Conare cannot act properly without imparting grievous offense to one party or the other. He cannot simultaneously mediate to his own people and to the bird people—he cannot serve both worlds with equality, as both worlds oppose each other in several fashions, yet both worlds must flourish to maintain peace and well-being in Ireland.

Ralph O’Connor draws the astute comparison between Conare and Saul in his fascinating study on *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*; however, there is one crucial detail O’Connor overlooks. O’Connor believes that “Samuel seems to be enraged by Saul’s usurpation of his cultic authority, but Saul’s chief crime before God here is his failure to obey the letter of a rather arbitrary injunction.”²⁹² Saul’s crime is anything but arbitrary. It is sacrilege of the highest degree. He steps into a role of priesthood, over which he has no authority, and a similar parallel may be drawn to the tragedy of Conare—a king with too many masters. He attempts to be mediator to all

²⁸⁵ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 77.

²⁸⁶ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 77.

²⁸⁷ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 66.

²⁸⁸ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 67.

²⁸⁹ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 67.

²⁹⁰ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 76–77.

²⁹¹ Gantz, “The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel,” 67.

²⁹² O’Connor, *Kingship and Narrative Artistry*, 255.

people, in both worlds, and fails in spectacular fashion. Despite his best efforts, Conare is royally stuck.

In this regard, who better to mediate between the otherworld than Finn Mac Cumhail and his descendants, people on the outskirts of society. Caílte and Oisín describe this mentality best in the *Acallam na Senórach*:

[Caílte:] “‘A king, named Feradach Finnfhechnach ‘the Righteous,’* took the kingship of Ireland. He had two sons, Túathal and Fiacha, and when Feradach died his two sons divided Ireland between them. One of them took the treasures, the jewels and wealth, the cattle and herds, the bracelets and ornaments, the forts, strongholds, and manors, and the other had the cliffs and estuaries, the mast and produce of the sea, the beautiful speckled salmon and the beautiful surface-speckled deer, the heavy-sided boars, the plump, red does and the fierce stags.’ ‘Where did they make this division?’ asked the King of Ireland. ‘The hill on which we sit is the place where the two sons of the King of Ireland divided it all between them.’ ‘Those two shares are not comparable,’ said the nobles of the men of Ireland. ‘Which share would you prefer?’ asked Oisín, ‘the feasts of Ireland, the houses and wealth and fishing on the other?’ ‘The share that was the worse, in your opinion,’ said Caílte, ‘we think the better.’”²⁹³

Little ingenuity is required in deciphering which portion Sigurðr would take, yet to the Fenians, as to the Old Testament prophets, what good is material gain at the loss of the otherworld?

Conclusion

In conclusion, to deepen understanding of medieval mythology and sagas in any tradition, it is paramount to approach these tales without delusion of pre-Reformation Christianity, as their ink trails over the manuscripts. It is vital to perceive Christianity as religion requiring ritual, sacrifice, mediators, covenants, Sacred Scripture, and Sacred Tradition, with numerous instances of integration. Through integration, the relationship from the natural is lifted to the supernatural, providing a plausible glimpse into the pre-Christian’s relationship with the invisible—integration does not sever the relationship, but reorders it. Is it only coincidence that great heroes like Cú Chulainn, Conare, and Finn Mac Cumhaill descend from women of unique, powerful, and otherworldly circumstance when pre-Reformation Christians believe that Christ was mediated to the world through the Virgin Mary, who herself

²⁹³ Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 176.

was conceived without sin, is the daughter of two saints, and is venerated as the Mother of God?

In the tales of Finn and Sigurðr, two heroes participate in a ritualistic meal and form a covenant with the other world. Two heroes mediate to their societies: the former mediates wisdom and aid, the latter, greed and death, yet both are held as great pre-Christian heroes. Christianity is the vein running through these traditions, yet it is not a shroud binding all cultures beneath its mighty and universal cloth. It resides in the subtleties of the tales, in the differences, offering deeper perspectives as to how these cultures and traditions are similar or dissimilar.

Finn Mac Cumhaill and Sigurðr are foils to one another—the noble mediator and the self-serving mediator—who gain their attributes and their authority to mediate by consuming a sacred meal, uniting themselves forever in covenant to the otherworld, a reality deepened and symbolized through the prism of pre-Reformation Christianity.

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