

KINGSHIP IN EARLY IRELAND

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THE earliest reference to the presence of kings in Ireland is in the geography of the known world compiled by Claudius Ptolemaeus c.AD 150 (generally referred to as Ptolemy's Map). He derived his information from earlier works – particularly that of Marinus of Tyre (*fl.* AD 90–110) following the Roman conquest of the north of Britain. Earlier information on the southern areas had been gathered at the time of the Claudian invasion of Britain in AD 43.¹

T.F. O'Rahilly provides the starting-point for analysing Ptolemy's geography of Ireland.² His identification of Irish placenames has recently been reassessed by Alan Mac an Bhaird and Gregory Toner.³ Of these names, seven identify 'cities' in the interior. Two are the Greek transliteration of the Latin *regia* 'king's court', while it is likely that the recurring reconstruction *Dunon* 'represents the proto-Irish for more or less the same thing'.⁴ *Isamnion* probably represents Emain Macha, Navan Fort, about one mile west of Armagh city,⁵ the site of the palace of the Ulster kings as recounted in the Ulster Cycle of tales. Interestingly, there is no mention of Tara in Ptolemy's Map.

In AD 97–8 Tacitus wrote the biography of his father-in-law, Agricola, the governor of Britain in the period AD 78–85. Tacitus claims that Ireland was well known to merchants: *aditus portusque per commercia et negotiatores cogniti* 'we are better informed, thanks to the trade of merchants, about the approaches to the island and its harbours'.⁶ He also tells of the Irish prince, expelled from Ireland as a result of a rebellion, who was given protection by Agricola under the guise of friendship. This would seem to have happened at the beginning of his fifth campaign, which he launched in AD 82 from Ayrshire or Galloway: *Agricola expulsus seditione domestica unum ex regulis gentis exceperat ac specie amicitiae in occasionem retinebat* 'Agricola had given shelter to one of the petty chieftains whom faction had driven from home, and under the cloak of friendship held him in reserve to be used as

1 For recent work on Ptolemy's Map see Jones and Keillar, 'Marinus, Ptolemy and the turning of Scotland'; Strang, 'Explaining Ptolemy's Roman Britain'; Parsons and Sims-Williams, *Ptolemy: towards a linguistic atlas*. For a review concerning the invasion see Frere and Fulford, 'The Roman invasion of AD 43'.

2 O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 1–42.

3 Mac an Bhaird, 'Ptolemy revisited'. For a recent re-assessment of Mac an Bhaird's identifications, see Toner, 'Identifying Ptolemy's Irish places and tribes'.

4 Mac an Bhaird, 'Ptolemy revisited', 15.

5 There is not general agreement about this identification. For a summary of the arguments see Mallory, 'Emain Macha and Navan Fort', 197–8; Toner, 'Identifying Ptolemy's Irish places and tribes', 78.

6 Hutton (Ogilvie revision), *Tacitus I: Agricola, Germania, Dialogues*, 70–1 (Chap. 24. 2).

opportunity offered'.⁷ The *regulus* was perhaps a 'petty king' or the 'son of a king'. Tacitus continues that Agricola had often said that Ireland could be reduced and held by a single legion with a fair-sized force of auxiliaries. The story of the Irish *regulus* may be a standard motif providing the excuse for invasion, since it is similar to the activity recounted by Dio Cassius concerning the prelude to Claudius' invasion of Britain in AD 43.⁸ Tincommius of the Atrebatians of southern Britain had fled to the protection of Rome and the similar flight of his relative (possibly brother) Verica to Rome in AD 42 was to be used as an excuse for the Claudian invasion.⁹ Whether the incident of the Irish *regulus* ever took place or not, it is still a contemporary reference to kingship in Ireland.

The next account comes not from external reports but from a resident in Ireland – St Patrick. In speaking of the progress of conversion in Ireland, he says: *fili Scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et uirgines Xpisti esse uidentur* 'The sons and daughters of the petty kings of the Scots are seen to be monks and virgins of Christ'.¹⁰ He repeats the phrase again in his 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus': *fili Scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et uirgines Xpisti*.¹¹ He says that he gave rewards to kings: *Interim praemia dabam regibus praeter quod dabam mercedem filiis ipsorum qui mecum ambulant* 'Meanwhile I kept giving rewards to kings, besides which I kept giving a fee to their sons, who walk with me'.¹² Since he has already written of giving presents to kings and their sons, in the following remark he is most likely speaking of the brehons:¹³ *Uos autem experti estis quantum ego erogavi illis qui iudicabant per omnes regiones quos ego frequentius uisitabam* 'You furthermore have proved by experience how much I have paid out to those who judged through all the regions which I kept visiting quite often'.¹⁴ From St Patrick's own writings it is clear that there were many kings living in different *regiones* 'districts' or 'small kingdoms'. It is likely that his *reges* were of a higher grade than his *reguli*. But in none of these early accounts is there the slightest hint of a king of all Ireland. As such, this accords well with the evidence of the law-tracts of the seventh and eighth centuries. Patrick's world was one of petty kingships, with a hint that some were more powerful than others.

Of particular interest is an aspect of Patrick's method of conversion mentioned in the record of his mission. He surrounded himself with the sons of kings to ensure his safe passage as he went about his business. These young men presumably made up his *dám* 'company, suite, retinue'¹⁵ and may have constituted part of his bishop's household. The later Middle Irish text

7 Ibid., 70–1 (Chap. 24. 3).

8 Millet, *The romanization of Britain*, 41.

9 Todd, *Roman Britain*, 47.

10 Howlett, *Saint Patrick the bishop*, 80–1.

11 Ibid., 32–3.

12 Ibid., 86–7.

13 It is possible that Patrick is also referring here to kings.

14 Ibid., 86–7.

15 Binchy, *Crith Gablach*, 82. See also McCone, 'The etymology of Old Irish *déis*'.

Acallam na Senórach designates *fian*-members as *maic rí* 'kings' sons' with regard to the preponderantly youthful and aristocratic make-up of such bands.¹⁶ As McCone has shown, with a great wealth of detail, the Church was an inveterate opponent of this institution in Irish society – not surprisingly since they preyed on the settled community.¹⁷ It was an institution that prepared young men as warriors and presumably allowed the natural leaders of the next generation to emerge. Operating on the margins of society in the forests and wilderness, they returned to the settled community on reaching adulthood and on coming into their inheritance. Was Patrick going on a circuit like a lord with his retinue; or was he attempting to create a Christian *fian* – soldiers of Christ, as opposed to the soldiers of the Devil (as *fian* members came to be regarded by the Church)?¹⁸ If this was Patrick's intention, then it was an experiment that did not succeed, as McCone's analysis makes very clear. Either way, Patrick had access to those who would be the elite of the next generation and some of whom would become kings. It is likely too that they would have received an education from him (some became monks), and some, at least, must have achieved a degree of literacy.

Patrick was concerned with a Christian form of government, as we can see from his comments in his 'Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus':

Unde enim Coroticus cum suis sceleratissimis rebellatores Xpisti ubi se uidebunt. Qui mulierculas baptizatas praemia distribuunt. Ob miserum regnum temporale quod utique in momento transeat. Sicut nubes uel fumus qui utique uento dispergitur ita peccatores fraudulentum a facie Domini peribunt. Iusti autem epulentur in magna constantia cum Xpisto iudicabunt nationes et regibus iniquis dominabuntur. In saecula saeculorum. Amen.

Whence, then, Coroticus with his most shameful men, rebels against Christ, where will they see themselves, they who distribute baptized little women as prizes because of a pitiable temporal realm which may indeed pass away in a moment? Just as a cloud or smoke, which indeed is dispersed by the wind, so fraudulent sinners will perish from the face of the Lord. But the righteous will feast in great constancy with Christ. They will judge nations, and they will lord it over unjust rulers for ages of ages. Amen.¹⁹

Patrick's reference to the *rex iniquus*²⁰ was a harbinger of the description of that character in documents of the seventh century. We have some idea, therefore, what Patrick taught the sons of kings. The mission of Palladius came to peoples who were likely to have been Christians already, probably living in the area of Leinster and the midlands. We do not

16 McCone, *Pagan past*, 206.

17 Ibid., 203–32.

18 See also Charles-Edwards on this matter in *Early Christian Ireland*, 464.

19 Howlett, *Saint Patrick the bishop*, 36–7.

20 The term *rex iniquus* possibly reflects the vernacular *anfhlait*, who is the opposite of the ideal king *firfhlait*.

know any details of that mission, but if Patrick is representative of the fifth-century clergy, then the message concerning rulers would have been essentially the same. This information is of the utmost importance because it means that from the very start of the spread of the Christian message in Ireland a discourse had begun between the old and new traditions concerning the institution of kingship.

It was a discourse that is found textually in documents written in Latin and in Irish. So interwoven is the residue of the old pagan religion with Christianity that Professor McCone has argued ostensibly for the emergence of a virtually new mythology.²¹ It is a discourse that has its counterpart on the landscape itself. Peter Brown, discussing the Christianisation of Europe, made the following sensitive observation:

We also look out on a natural world made passive by being shorn of the power of the gods. It seems to me that the most marked feature of the rise of the Christian church in western Europe was the imposition of human administrative structures and of an ideal *potentia* linked to invisible human beings and to their visible human representatives, the bishops of the towns, at the expense of traditions that had seemed to belong to the structure of the landscape itself. Saint Martin attacked those points at which the natural and the divine were held to meet: he cut down sacred trees, and he broke up the processions that followed the immemorial lines between the arable and the nonarable. His successors fulminated against trees and fountains, and against forms of divination that gained access to the future through the close observation of the vagaries of animal and vegetable life.²²

This is important because in Ireland this conflict does not appear to have taken place, at least not in the same violent way. Sacred trees are found on church sites. Wells were Christianised, and many of the old agricultural customs were mediated through the cult of a saint such as St Brigit. Is Peter Brown right here? How successful was this process in Europe? In Ireland the natural world was not made ‘passive’ (to use his phrase) – on the contrary, its energy was harnessed by Christianity through local cults.

There is a gap in our evidence between the time of St Patrick in the fifth century and the seventh century, when we get sufficient information to begin to see what is happening in Irish society. By this stage he who had been pagan, to use the words of Brown, found himself ‘in a world where his familiar map of the relations between the human and the divine, the dead and the living, had been subtly redrawn’.²³ That this process was not complete may

21 McCone, *Pagan past*, 218: ‘Preceding chapters have documented at some length the early Irish Church’s success in adapting or reinterpreting appropriate pre-Christian concepts and institutions as necessary, the upshot frequently being an antique shell, sometimes more fake than genuine, capable of housing a new or significantly modified ideology attuned to ecclesiastical requirements.’

22 Brown, *The cult of the saints*, 124–5.

23 Ibid., 5.

be seen in the works of the seventh-century hagiographers. The tenacity of the cult of the well with its healing capacity²⁴ may be seen in Tírechán’s account of the well of Finnmag called Slán in Co. Mayo. It was a well that Patrick had been told was honoured by the druids who offered gifts to it as to a god. They had given the name ‘king of the waters’ to it. Patrick blessed and then lifted a large stone from the opening of the well to prove that the bones of a man who feared burning by fire did not lie underneath. The well contained only water, and Patrick baptised a man who sat nearby with the water.²⁵ In Muirchú’s Life of Patrick a druid refused to enter into a test of water with Patrick because ‘water is a god of his’. Muirchú rationalises this in an aside: ‘He had heard, no doubt, that Patrick baptized with water.’²⁶

In Tírechán’s account of Patrick’s journeys he describes how the saint visited a number of wells. He visits the well of Mucno (Tobar Makee, Drumtemple, Co. Roscommon),²⁷ where he founded a cell; and there was a cross there marking the spot where Secundinus had sat under an elm tree.²⁸ He founded a church at Drummae in the vicinity of Lough Gara, Co. Sligo and dug a well there. No stream flowed either into or out of it.²⁹ He visited the well of Stringell, at Ballintubber, Co. Mayo. The most dramatic occasion was his visit to the well of Clébach to the east of Cruachu (Rathcroghan, tl. Toberrory, par. Elphin, bar. / Co. Roscommon). Patrick came with an assembly of bishops to the well. The daughters of Lóegaire mac Néill, king of Tara, came to wash and were amazed at sight of the assembly. *Et quocumque essent aut quacumque forma aut quacumque plebe aut quacumque regione non cognouerunt, sed illos uiros side aut deorum terrenorum aut fantassiam estimauerunt* ‘And they did not know whence they were or of what shape or from what people or from what region, but thought they were men of the other world³⁰ or earth-gods or a phantom’. Patrick, having suggested that they profess the true God, was questioned by one of the girls:

‘Who is God and where is God and whose God is he and where is his dwelling-place? Has your God sons and daughters, gold and silver? Is he ever-living, is he beautiful, have many fostered his son, are his daughters dear and beautiful in the eyes of the men of the earth? Is he in the sky or in the earth or in the water, in rivers, in mountains, in valleys? Give us an account of him; how shall he be seen, how is he loved, how is he found, is he found in youth, in old age?’

24 Ibid., 118. ‘They had the voiceless power of nature itself behind them.’

25 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 152–3: 39.

26 Ibid., 94–5: I 20 (8).

27 Ibid: Index, sub Mucno *fons*, 262.

28 Ibid., 150–1: 34.

29 Ibid., 148–9: 31.

30 *Side* in Tírechán’s text is taken to be gen. sg. of the OIr *sid*. Kenneth Jackson suggested to Patrick Sims-Williams that this instance of *sid* ‘might mean ‘fairies’ in the gen. pl. and be glossed *aut deorum terrenorum* accordingly’. See Sims-Williams, ‘Some Celtic otherworld terms’, 76 n.6.

Patrick replied:

‘Our God is the God of all men, the God of heaven and earth, of the sea and the rivers, God of the sun and the moon and all the stars, the God of high mountains and low valleys; God above heaven and in heaven and under heaven, he has his dwelling in heaven and earth and sea and in everything that is in them; he breathes in all things, makes all things live, surpasses all things, supports all things; he illumines the light of the sun, he consolidates the light of the night and the stars, he has made wells in the dry earth and dry islands in the sea and stars for the service of the major lights. He has a son, coeternal with him, similar to him; the Son is not younger than the Father nor is the Father older than the Son, and the Holy Spirit breathes in them; the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are not separate.’³¹

The question put into the mouth of the daughter of the king must give us a glimpse of the kind of discourse in which the clergy were engaged in the seventh century. The reply surely reveals the redefinition of the physical world that the seventh-century clergy were trying to bring about.³² Patrick preached to the girls. They were baptised and demanded to see the face of Christ. After receiving the Eucharist they fell asleep in death. Tírechán then tells of their burial beside the well in a round ditch after the manner of a *ferta* and he adds ‘but we call it *relic*, that is, the remains of the maidens’. The grave was made over to Patrick, and he built a church there.³³

From this evidence it seems that the Christianisation of wells was of major concern to seventh-century churchmen. The reference to the burial above indicates that they had other concerns too. Tírechán has Patrick come upon a huge grave 120 feet long in Co. Mayo.³⁴ His followers could not believe that a man of such size could have existed. Patrick struck a stone of the grave-mound and made the sign of the cross. A huge warrior, the son of the son of Cass son of Glass, arose and asked to walk with Patrick. Because he would frighten people, Patrick refused. He said that he had been killed one hundred years before. He was baptised, fell silent, and was returned to his grave.

On another occasion Patrick removed a cross that had been placed by mistake over a pagan grave and put it on the grave of the Christian for whom it had been intended. Another prehistoric tomb at Murrisk between Clew Bay and Croagh Patrick was said to be the spot where Patrick buried his charioteer, Tóthmáel.³⁵

There was clearly a concern for burial places and burial in a Christian fashion.³⁶ But

31 Ibid., 142–3: 26.

32 See the interesting discussion by Mac Mathúna, ‘Irish perceptions of the Cosmos’.

33 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 144–5: 26 (20)– (21).

34 Ibid., 154–5: 40.

35 Ibid., 152–3: 38 (2).

36 See the remarks of Bhreathnach, ‘Temoria: caput Scotorum?’, 78; see also the important work of O’Brien, ‘Pagan and Christian burial in Ireland’; O’Brien, *Burial practices reviewed*, 26–7.

there may have been more than that. In the same way in which Patrick is brought into contact with the ancestral figures of major dynasties in order to give them a Christian pedigree, his contact with prehistoric graves may have served a similar purpose. One of the concerns of converted people was the question of what would happen to their ancestors? Would they be saved? The mechanism by which Patrick awakened the dead was to baptise them or, in the case of the Lóegaire’s daughters by which they were placed in a ring-barrow on being converted to Christianity, was another way of providing a link between ancient tribal burial grounds and Christianity. The tribal or dynastic ancestors could still be saved.

The landscape, in particular those places where heaven and earth met, was being Christianised. Patrick erected crosses in a number of places. These, along with wells and graves, provided a visual reminder of particular events and are a counterpoint to the textual discourse. According to Muirchú, on the side of Slemish a cross marked the spot from which Patrick had his first view of the district and from where he saw the flames of Miliuc’s pyre.³⁷ Another story related by Muirchú finds an echo in the landscape. Patrick released a fawn in a glen to the north of Armagh, ‘where, as knowledgeable men tell us, there persist to the present day signs of his miraculous power’.³⁸

Nowhere, perhaps, did the meeting of heaven and earth have greater resonance than in places of the inauguration of kings. Some of the following references in the seventh-century hagiography may be references to such places. Tírechán says that Patrick stayed *iuxta Petram Coithrigi* ‘near Coithrige’s Stone’ at Uisnech, in Co. Westmeath.³⁹ When Patrick arrived at Dún Sobairche (Dunseverick, par. Billy, bar. Cary, Co. Antrim) ‘he sat on a rock which is called Patrick’s Rock (*petra Patricii*) until now’.⁴⁰ He went to Leinster ‘to Druimm Hurchaille’,⁴¹ and established there the House of the Martyrs (*Domus Martirum*) as it is now called, which is situated on the great road in the valley, and there is Patrick’s Rock (*petra Patricii*) at the road’.⁴² On going into Munster, Patrick baptised the sons of Nad Froích on Patrick’s Rock (*super Petram Coithrigi*) in Cashel.⁴³ Tírechán mentions the footprint of the angel on the hill of Scirit (hill of Skerry) in Co. Antrim.⁴⁴ It is mentioned also in Muirchú, who says that the angel’s footprint may be seen to the present day. It ‘is a place of prayer and there the faithful obtain most happily the things for which they pray’.⁴⁵

Patrick is brought to these places in order to bind them and the churches and dynasties associated with them more closely to Armagh. Professor Mac Eoin points out that ‘It should

37 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 80–1: I 12 (2); Tírechán refers to crosses in Mayo and Sligo. See 156–9: 43 (3), 45 (1).

38 Ibid., 110–13: I 24 (16).

39 Ibid., 136–7: 16 (4).

40 Ibid., 160–1: 48 (3).

41 Dunmurraghill near Donadea, approx. 5 km to the north west of Clane in Co. Kildare.

42 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 162–3: 51 (2).

43 Ibid., 162–3: 51 (4).

44 Ibid., 162–3: 51 (1).

45 Ibid., 82–3: II 15 (3)– (4).

be remembered that standing stones and immovable rocks, with or without ogam inscriptions, were accepted as evidence of ownership in early Irish law.⁴⁶ Mac Eoin is no doubt correct in emphasising this aspect, but I would suggest that some of these rocks were special in that they were inauguration stones. The relatively low hill of Skerry referred to above lies across the valley of the river Braid from Slemish in Co. Antrim. On its southern approach it is of little significance. On the summit is a deserted church that was last used for burials in the early nineteenth century by the Church of Ireland. The church site itself is clearly very ancient. Just outside the church wall to the north the hill ends in a cliff at the bottom of which is a farmhouse. Beyond the farm the land rises in the great mass of the Antrim plateau. It is this that towers above the hill from the south, disguising it. Just outside the gate of the churchyard the rock is exposed and in the surface of the rock is a triangular depression – the footprint of the angel. From this position there is the most dramatic view of Slemish and the surrounding countryside for a considerable distance. This was the territory of Miliuc moccu Bóin, who immolated himself rather than accept Christianity. As a result, Patrick prophesied that none of his sons would be king after him and that his line would be subordinate forever. The rock is likely to have been the inauguration site of the Bóinrige.

This is surely a clear indication of the Christianisation of an inauguration site. The single footprint is a reflection of the international motif of kingship – the man of one sandal.⁴⁷ Since some of these rocks are associated with Coithrige, then, they are likely to have been Christianised at a very early date. There has been much debate about the origin of this name for Patrick. *Coithrige* would seem to be the earlier oral form of Patrick's name in Irish. The name *Pátraic*, based on *Patricius*, would appear to have supplanted it, perhaps as late as the seventh century and was derived from the written Latin form of the name as it was pronounced in the seventh century. This may have been largely as a result of the literary activity of the hagiographers⁴⁸ and may reinforce the generally held opinion that the country was at least nominally Christian by the middle of the sixth century. Tírechán's *Petra Coithrige*, as Mac Eoin points out is *Lecc Pátraic*, 'Patrick's Rock', in the *Vita Tripartita*.⁴⁹ For example, there is a Leckpatrick in the barony of Lower Strabane in Co. Tyrone.⁵⁰ It could be suggested that all flags or rocks named after Patrick are likely to have been inauguration sites. Limited though the evidence is, I would suggest that there was a concerted effort on the part of the Church to Christianise the inauguration sites of the local petty kings and that Armagh played a major role in this process.

The more powerful kingship of Munster at Cashel may have been Christian from an

46 Mac Eoin, 'The four names of St Patrick', 309.

47 O'Brien, 'Short notes', 351–3; Killeen, 'Fear an énaís', 202–4; Mac Cana, 'The *topos* of the single sandal in Irish tradition'; Ó Catháin, 'Ón laincis go dtí an leathbhróg'.

48 For a summary of scholarly opinion on this problem and a very important discussion of this name and that of Patricius/Pátraic see Mac Eoin, 'The four names of St Patrick'.

49 Ibid., 308.

50 *Census of Ireland*, 639.

exceptionally early period. Professor Byrne has pointed out that 'There are no myths or legends concerning the Rock of Cashel relating to pagan prehistory: we are told that the site (despite its obvious prominence in the Munster landscape) was found accidentally or revealed miraculously, and the story has a strong Christian coloration, even in its most archaic versions.'⁵¹ The association of the Rock of Cashel with Coithrige would suggest that the prestige of the name of Patrick was already in Munster well before the seventh century.

By the seventh century the clergy were not confronting paganism in order to oppose it, for institutional paganism seems to have been overcome a long time before. They were using aspects of the older tradition to further reinforce their own view of society. This is seen most clearly in relation to the institution of kingship. They were particularly interested in the most powerful form of kingship. It is for this reason that we encounter references to Tara in the work of the seventh-century hagiographers. In the literature⁵² Tara was the centre of the high-kingship of Ireland and in the hagiography it was the centre of paganism and idolatry.⁵³ Unlike the petty kingships, which were local and seem to have existed throughout the country, the kingship of Tara was exceptional and has engendered much scholarly debate over many years.⁵⁴

The most recent discussion of the kingship of Tara is by Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards.⁵⁵ He has provided a meticulous and invaluable analysis of the annals and relevant literature to try to establish just what is meant by the term 'king of Tara'. He has not discussed the mythological associations of Tara and thus has allowed the contemporary evidence to speak. In the earliest sources Tara could be claimed by any king but as time went on (between the late seventh and the tenth century) it became more and more the monopoly of the Uí Néill dynasty; even when the occupant of the position was relatively weak.⁵⁶ Edel Bhreathnach, in a very important article, has shown the psychological importance of Tara as the *caput Scotorum* 'capital of the Irish'.⁵⁷ Running through the work of scholars is the difficulty of relating the symbolical associations of Tara with contemporary reality and in particular the relationship between the institution of the high-kingship of Ireland and the site. One fundamental question in relation to the high-kingship is – did it ever exist?

Since the high-king is not included as the highest grade of king in the law of status, Professor Binchy was certain that:

[The] king of Tara, the *Ardri* or 'High King' of so many modern textbooks of Irish history is not mentioned in this context at all. He is not even cited as an example of

51 Byrne, *Irish kings*, 184. See also Ní Chatháin, 'Swineherds, seers, and druids', 203–11.

52 Bhreathnach, *Tara bibliography*.

53 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 84–5: I 15 (1)– (3).

54 For a comprehensive discussion and an extensive bibliography see Jaski, *Early Irish kingship*.

55 Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 469–521.

56 Ibid., 520.

57 Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: caput Scotorum?'

a *rí ruirech*, much less as the superior of the other provincial kings. Indeed on the only occasion when ‘supremacy over all kings’ is mooted in an early tract it is claimed for the king of Munster, although the statement probably means nothing more than that he was supreme over all other kings, *rig* and *ruirig* alike, in Munster.

This shows that the claim of the king of Tara to be ‘King of Ireland’, though it was put forward by Adamnán (who was himself a member of the dynastic kindred) at the beginning of the seventh century, had no more basis in law than it had in fact. In the text of the law-tracts there is not a single reference to any such high office.⁵⁸

As Liam Breatnach has shown, the term *ardri* [*ardri*] does exist in the law-tracts, although it is outside the law of status.⁵⁹ For Charles-Edwards, however, ‘The term *ardri*, ‘high-king’, is not of central importance, since it could be used of kings other than the king of Tara, but it is worth adding [citing Breatnach] that there is good evidence that the term itself is an old one.’⁶⁰ I would suggest that it is of importance when seen in the context of other terms to be discussed below. Charles-Edwards further shows that the concept of a king of Ireland is to be found in other texts, as in the reference to the *triath* found in the eighth-century *Míadslechta*, ‘a burdensome *triath* who penetrates Ireland of peoples from sea to sea’, although he concludes that he ‘is an ambiguous figure and it may be unwise to draw any firm conclusions on his relevance to the kingship of Tara’.⁶¹ I will return to this point below. However, Charles-Edwards must be very close to the reality when he states: ‘The absence of a regular rank of king of Ireland from the laws on status may thus recognise, first, the variability in the authority of the king of Tara, and, secondly, the consequent necessity of reckoning each king of Tara’s status by his power, so that, in the words of *Míadslechta*, his due “is measured by his fist”’.⁶²

Another ambiguity about Tara is reflected in Edel Bhreathnach’s statement that ‘[The] change in Tara’s nature from a political and possibly religious centre to a political and (perhaps solely) symbolic centre, effected by the Uí Néill and their protagonists, is crucial to our understanding of Tara as it emerges in the early medieval period.’⁶³ This is fundamentally important. In the words of Francis John Byrne, author of the classic book on this subject: ‘But we cannot evade the problems set by myth and legend about the prehistoric past, because it is to that past that we must look for an explanation of Tara and its kingship.’⁶⁴ Indeed, if we are to get some idea of the religious function of Tara in the pagan period, then we must examine this legendary and mythological material. It may be unwise to

58 Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, 32–3.

59 Breatnach, ‘*Ardri* as an old compound’.

60 Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, 519.

61 Ibid., 519–20.

62 Ibid., 520.

63 Bhreathnach, ‘*Temoria: caput Scotorum?*’, 77.

64 Byrne, *Irish kings*, 53.

make too clear a distinction between politics and religion. Everything that we know about kingship throughout the world shows that the creation of a king is a religious act.⁶⁵ It is his capacity as a mediator between his people and the gods that ensures their safety and good health. Since this institution was of such fundamental importance to the people, its Christianisation must have taxed the early clergy to the limit.

As a result of recent excavation, we have been given a unique glimpse of a prehistoric, pagan religious ceremony that took place at Emain Macha, now Navan Fort beside Armagh.⁶⁶ In 95/94 BC (a precise date obtained from tree-ring analysis of a massive central post) a large ritual mound of tripartite construction was constructed on top of the remains of a Late Bronze Age settlement. It was also fitted deliberately within an earlier enclosure ditch. Dr Chris Lynn, who completed and edited the excavation report, stated that ‘It can be concluded that the evidence of excavation can be interpreted in ways which completely accord with the portrayal of the site as a place of kingship and as a regional sanctuary in the Early Iron Age and that alternative explanations are difficult to develop.’⁶⁷ The excavation revealed five phases of activity. A summary of phases 4 and 5 by Lynn touches on the complexity of the activity that took place.

Phase 4

A ‘multi-ring timber structure’, 40m in diameter, was built directly on the phase 3 occupation surface and was fitted approximately within the circuit of the old phase 3 (i) ditch, which by this stage can have been visible only as a slight annular hollow ... The structure was formed of five concentric rings of oak posts set in deep sockets, some 280 in total. On the west the circular arrangement of the rings gave way to four rows running from the outer perimeter, probably a timber wall in a slot, towards and around a central post. The post was erected using a 6m-long ramp sloping down into a socket more than 2m deep. The massive axe-felled butt of the post survived in the damp subsoil, offering an opportunity for dendrochronology which demonstrated that it last grew in 95 BC, offering an exact date for phase 4 No evidence for any activity was recovered from this phase, nor were any artifacts.

Phase 5

While the timber building was standing it was filled with a large flat-topped cairn of limestone boulders The rotted-out uprights of the multi-ring timber structure left vertical voids in the cairn. The cairn was 2.8m high and its outer edge rested against

65 Hocart, *Kingship*; [no named editor], *La regalità sacra*. The religious nature of kingship was still strong in modern times. The English Reformation had a traumatic impact upon the nature of kingship in England and this trauma was intensified when the English executed kings in the seventeenth century. See McCoy, *Alterations of State*. For a wider European perspective see Bertelli, *Sacred rituals of power*.

66 Waterman, *Excavations at Navan Fort*.

67 Lynn, ‘Comparisons and interpretations’, 229. See also Lynn, *Navan Fort. Archaeology and myth*.

the inside of the wall of the timber structure. The timber structure was then deliberately burned around and over the cairn.

The cairn and the burnt remains of the timber structure were covered immediately by a 2.5m-high mound of layered turves and varied soils, apparently derived from a variety of environments. Apart from a few finds, no evidence survived in the deep topsoil on the mound for any activity after its construction.⁶⁸

Lynn has made extensive archaeological comparisons with similar sites in Ireland, Britain and Europe. He has also examined native and other literature for evidence that might help us to understand the significance of this unique event. His general conclusion that kingship lies at the core of the interpretation of the site must surely be correct. It was an event that plainly left its mark on the minds of the Irish, even if its religious import was no longer clearly understood by the time traditions about it were committed to writing. If the young *regulus* did meet Agricola in the 80s of the first century AD, he could have heard about this extraordinary event from his father or grandfather. It may account for the record of this named site (the ‘holy mountain’ from **isa* and **mon* if Gregory Toner’s etymology is correct)⁶⁹ from the interior of the north in Ptolemy’s Map.

If it is generally accepted that the event has to do with kingship, then what kind of kingship was involved? It did not involve the inauguration of a local king. The suggestions that follow are very tentatively put forward in the same spirit as Lynn’s theories with the intention of simply contributing to the debate.⁷⁰ Extraordinary care was given to every aspect of the ritual. The filling of the 40m house with limestone boulders was completed in such a way as to create a circular flat-topped cairn that was wedge-shaped when viewed from above. The entire structure took on the appearance of a wheel – a point made by Lynn.⁷¹ The wheel was ultimately the representation of the sun and is reflected in the mythical name Mug Roith.⁷² It was a symbol used by Muirchú when telling the story of the daughter of a British king whose parents tried to coerce her into marriage: ‘she kept asking her mother and her nurse whether they knew the maker of the wheel (*rotae factorem*) by which the world is illuminated, and when she received the answer that the maker of the sun was he whose throne was in heaven...’⁷³ Patrick, of course, is our primary witness that the Irish worshipped the sun.⁷⁴

Life on earth is due to the sun. In Indian tradition the king should ‘behave like the

sun which protects (*pati*) and destroys all creatures by its rays’.⁷⁵ The king’s duty was to further ‘the moral and material welfare of the people’.⁷⁶ ‘But the person who always protects the good and checks the wicked deserves to become a king and to govern the world.’⁷⁷ The greatest of kings in ancient India was the *cakravartin*, or emperor, ‘world-king’. The *cakravartin* is the manifestation of the king in the Buddhist tradition. It is ancient Indian kingship transformed through contact with the new religion. As I will argue below this process provides a useful analogy for the impact of Christianity upon early Irish kingship. The *cakra*– in this word means ‘wheel’.⁷⁸ Gonda has suggested that ‘a *cakravartin*– originally was a king who participated in the conquering efficacy of the ‘wheel’, i.e. of the sun, of the *vajra*-winning and ‘imperialistic’ chariot, of a power center of universality, of universal dominion.’⁷⁹ Gonda goes on to say: ‘So the term *cakravartin*– might have come to denote a universal king – a king who according to Buddhist sources rules the earth surrounded by the ocean or the *pathavimandala*, “the circle of the earth”: “he who is placed in the *cakra*–” is he who like the sun is the center, lord and sustainer of the world, its eye and life-giver; coinciding with the *axis mundi* the sovereign could reside only in the middle’⁸⁰; ‘*cakravartin* possesses on his body divinely characteristic attributes, in casu the thirty-two marks of a great being’.⁸¹ ‘In other sources the idea of divine kingship finds expression in the belief that the ruler puts on five different forms according to five different occasions.’⁸²

These ideas are of interest in relation to the structure at Navan. The interpretation of the great central post as an *axis mundi* must be correct. The final covering of the mound was the creation of a king’s seat⁸³ – a *forad*, which may be cognate with Welsh *gorsedd*.⁸⁴ The soil that provided the final covering at Navan came from a variety of locations.⁸⁵ We may have an echo of what happened on the mound in a ceremony creating a *cakravartin* in India in which bags of salty earth are thrown upon the king.⁸⁶ The final structure would appear to be equivalent to the Indian *prasada*– ‘the residence of gods and kings. The true sense of the word is still larger: it can denote a sacred building or monument, a seat of divinity.’⁸⁷ Further, Gonda quotes Kramrisch⁸⁸ :

75 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 3.

76 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

77 *Ibid.*, 3.

78 *Ibid.*, 124.

79 *Ibid.*, 126.

80 *Ibid.*, 126–7.

81 *Ibid.*, 60; see Lynn, ‘Hostels, heroes and tale’, 7–11.

82 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 31.

83 Lynn, ‘Hostels, heroes and tale’, 12.

84 Rees and Rees, *Celtic heritage*, 183–4; Sims-Williams, ‘Some Celtic otherworld terms’, 64–7.

85 Lynn, ‘Site B excavation: phase 5’, 58–9.

86 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 87 n. 546.

87 *Ibid.*, 54–55.

88 Kramrisch, *The Hindu temple*, 135ff.

68 Lynn, ‘Summary’, xvi.

69 As quoted by Mallory, ‘Emain Macha and Navan Fort’, 199.

70 Lynn, ‘The Iron Age mound in Navan Fort’; ‘Hostels, heroes and tale’, 18–9; *Navan Fort*.

71 Lynn, ‘Hostels, heroes and tale’, 16; For a detailed description of the construction of the cairn see Lynn, ‘Site B excavation: phase 5’, 50–2.

72 O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 519–22.

73 Bieler, *Patrician texts*, 98–9: I 27 (3).

74 Howlett, *Saint Patrick the bishop*, 91–2 line 38; *Sed et omnes qui adorant eum in poenam miseri male deuenient*, ‘but even all who adore it will come badly to the punishment of the pitiable’.

‘It denotes a settling down (*pra-sad-*) and a seat made of that which has settled down and acquired concrete form, the form of a dwelling, a residence, the seat of God.’ In substantiation of her view the learned authoress quotes a passage from the Isanasivagurudevapaddhati. ‘The *prasada* is made up of the presence of Siva and Sakti, and of the principles and forms of existence (*tattva-*) from the elementary substance Earth and ending with Sakti; the concrete form of Siva is called house of god (*devalaya-*).’⁸⁹

Both *forad* and *pra-sad* contain the element **sedos* ‘seat’ (cf. Latin *sedes*). It is also the earlier form of *sid*.⁹⁰ Such places are the king’s seat, the home of the gods, the home of peace.

We find a parallel for the ‘ambulatory’ in the structure in the Indian festival that was the concern of the king – ‘Indra’s tree or banner, a fertility ceremony par excellence’⁹¹ in which the king circumambulates the tree. The ramp that guided the central post home may have been more than a technical device, since ‘The process of erecting the tree should be carefully watched by the astrologer, for any accident or deviation from the prescribed course of action is significant for the future of the ruler and the realm.’⁹² ‘By celebrating this festival the kingdom becomes, day by day, greater, the king attains to the position of sole ruler of the earth and shall live a full lifetime.’⁹³ In making these suggestions it is important to remember the words of Gonda:

There can on the other hand be no doubt that the sacred nature of kingship assumed, in India, a much more definite character than may be assumed to have existed in prehistoric Indo-European antiquity. This kingship seems to have been one of those elements of so-called primitive or non-modern culture, which were in the West – mainly under the influence of Greek rationalism – gradually superseded, but in India – which culturally developed on its own lines – not only preserved but even fostered and systematized. It would therefore be wise, not to rely on the *argumentum e silentio* and to ascribe to the prehistoric Greeks, Romans, and Germans all beliefs and customs found in the ancient Indian documents, but rather to regard both the eastern and the ancient western conceptions of royalty and rulership as, in the first place, representative of a generally human belief, and secondly as a continuation of common Indo-European ideas and practices: and not to attribute to the prehistoric Indo-Europeans those details which we know only from the Indian sources.⁹⁴

89 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 55–6.

90 Wagner, *Studies in the origins of the Celts*, 245 note 107; Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The semantics of ‘sid’; Doherty, ‘The monastic town in early medieval Ireland’, 51–2; Sims-Williams, ‘Some Celtic otherworld terms’.

91 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 74.

92 Ibid., 76.

93 Ibid., 76–7.

94 Ibid., 143.

While keeping this in mind, it is in the Irish sources that we find remarkable echoes of what is more clearly described in Indian sources.

Only the greatest of kings could perform the *Aśvamedha*, the ‘horse-sacrifice’, the supreme rite in the hierarchy of sacrifices. ‘The *Aśvamedha* therefore really was the most important manifestation of kingship.’⁹⁵ We have a remarkable reference to it in Ireland from the pen of Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Topographia*:

Sunt et quedam, que nisi materie cursus expeteret, pudor reticenda persuaderet. Verumtamen, historie seueritas nec ueritati parcere nouit nec uerecundie. Est igitur in boreali et ulteriori Ultonie parte, scilicet apud Kenelcunil, gens quedam, que barbaro nimis et abhominabili ritu sic sibi regem creare solet. Collecto in unum uniuerso terre illius populo, in medium producitur, iumentum candidum. Ad quod sullimandus ille non in principem sed in beluam, non in regem sed exlegem, coram omnibus bestialiter accedens, se quoque bestiam profitetur. Et statim iumento interfecto, et frustatim in aqua decocto, in eadem aqua balneum ei paratur. Cui insidens, de carnibus illis sibi allatis, circumstante populo suo et conuescente, comedit ipse. De iure quoque quo lauatur, non uase aliquo, non manu, sed ore tantum circumquaque haurit et bibit. Quibus ita rite, non recte completis, regnum illius et dominium est confirmatum.⁹⁶

There are some things which, if the exigencies of my account did not demand it, shame would discountenance their being described. But the austere discipline of history spares neither truth nor modesty. There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunil [Tyrconnell], a certain people which is accustomed to consecrate its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, embraces the animal before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion has been conferred.⁹⁷

Giraldus had come to Ireland in February 1183 in the company of his brother Philip de Barry, one of the early Norman adventurers in Ireland. He stayed for about a year. ‘His second visit lasted from 24 April 1185 to some time between Easter and Pentecost 1186, that is between

95 Ibid., 114.

96 O’Meara, ‘Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie’, 168.

97 O’Meara, *The first version of the Topography*, 93–4.

13 April and 1st June, and thus slightly over the year.⁹⁸ He had been to Cork and Waterford on his first visit to Ireland. On his second visit he most likely travelled by sea from Waterford to Dublin. He would appear to have had knowledge of Arklow and Wicklow. He was in Kildare and had visited Meath. He may have seen the Shannon in the vicinity of Athlone and may have seen Lough Ree and Lough Derg. But this would seem to have been the limit of his travels.⁹⁹ It is interesting that the setting of this ceremony was in a very remote part of the country from Gerald's point of view. Since Gerald was at pains to show how barbarous the Irish were in comparison to his adventurous relatives, one would have to be very sceptical in accepting this as a record of a contemporary event despite the quaint drawing of the activity in a manuscript of his work dating to c.1200 (National Library of Ireland, MS 700)¹⁰⁰. He shows an acquaintance elsewhere in his book with material that comes from the same milieu as *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, and it is very likely that this ceremony has been taken from a similar source or tale. The description suggests that an Aśvamedha-like ceremony was practised in Ireland at some time. It is not just the union with the horse and its subsequent killing that is analogous to Indian sources, but also the bathing of the king and the acclamation of the people.¹⁰¹

Giraldus may not be our only witness. There may be a reflection of the same ceremony in the text *Geinemain Moling acus a Betha* 'The Birth and Life of St. Moling' which in its current form belongs to the Middle Irish period. The saint and his gillie sought refreshment in a house:

Ticc fer in tighe *ocus* ferais failte friu. Ni fr̄th biadh doibh iarsin *acht* cés capuill ro bōi istigh do chor isin coire doiph. Ro bennach in clēirech an tegh *ocus* an coire, ar rofitir gur'bo féoil capuill ro bōi ann. Intan immorro ro himpadh in lucht [ro bóí isin coiri] isseidh ro bōi and, cethraimhthi muilt. Tuccadh i fiadnaissi in chlērigh. Ro raind dōibh comtar dāethanaigh. Ro bennach Moling an muintir iersin, *conidh* ūdhaibh airechus Laighen ō sin alle.

In comes the man of the house and bade them welcome. No food was found for them then save that a horse-steak which was in the house should be put for them into the cauldron. The cleric blessed the house and the cauldron, for he knew that what was therein was the flesh of a horse. Now when the charge in the cauldron was turned, what was there was a quarter of mutton! It was brought before the cleric. He divided it to them so that they were satisfied. After that Moling blessed the household, so that from them thenceforward is the lordship of Leinster.¹⁰²

98 Scott and Martin, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, xiv.

99 O'Meara, *The first version of the Topography*, 4–5.

100 Ibid., 7; Scott and Martin, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, xxxvii.

101 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 91.

102 Stokes, *The birth and life of St. Moling*, 42–3.

At a very remote period the Aśvamedha sacrifice was a fertility rite in which the priest had to die after his ceremonial intercourse with the queen. Later, according to Bhattacharyya, the horse was substituted for the priest.¹⁰³ He also suggests that this sacrifice even in ancient times must have been rare.¹⁰⁴ In the course of time the Aśvamedha, along with several other sacrifices, went out of fashion because their significance could no longer be understood. But Bhattacharyya points out that 'Even as late as the time of Bhavabhuti (eighth century AD) the Aśvamedha was looked upon as the only touch-stone to test the might of kings.'¹⁰⁵ He goes on to say that 'In all probability, the aforesaid kings who performed the horse-sacrifice took it as a chivalrous achievement.'¹⁰⁶ It was more of a pageant than a sacrifice in which much of the original meaning was lost. 'We are told that all the kings who were actually consecrated with the *Aindra Mahabhiseka* (Indra's great function consisting of five important ceremonies) were entitled to perform the Aśvamedha. In other words a paramount king (*Sarvabhauma Raja*) could perform it.'¹⁰⁷ He then became a *cakravartin* 'world king'.¹⁰⁸ Closer to home we find this concept in the personal names of two of the Gaulish kings, *Dumno-rix* and *Bitu-rix*.¹⁰⁹ I would suggest that the activity at Navan in 95/94 BC was a series of sacrifices that led to the creation of a *cakravartin*. Tara, with its *forad*, as is clear from the literature, was the inauguration site *par excellence* of this type of king.

The concept of the 'world king' may be found in the earliest poetry associated with Leinster. *Dī ōchtur Alinne | ort tr̄unu talman | trebun tr̄en tūathmar, | Mess-Telmann Domnon*, 'From the heights of Ailenn [Dún Ailinne, td. Knockaulin, par. / bar. Kilcullen, Co. Kildare], the powerful tribune great in dominions – Mess-Telmann of the Dumnonian tribe – slew the mighty of the earth.'¹¹⁰ The king, identified with the sun, is to be seen in the next poem: *Án gr̄en gr̄issach goires breo: Bressual – | bress Elce, aue Luirc, | lathras bith – Bēoliach* 'A brilliant burning sun that heats is the flame: Bressual – fair one of Elg [Ireland], descendant of Lorcc who lays waste the world – Beoliach'.¹¹¹ Again, in the poem *Nidu dír dermait* we have the line *Reraig Bresal Bregom bith buaibthech*¹¹² 'Bresal Bregom ruled the boastful world'.¹¹³ In *Nuadu Necht* we find the stanza *Nuadu Fuildon forfich fianas foensius | fābraib derggaib dagr̄ig domuin dōensius*¹¹⁴ 'Núadu son of Fuildiu conquered *fiana*, he flattened them; with red blades he made the brave kings of the world

103 Bhattacharyya, *Ancient Indian rituals*, 13.

104 Ibid., 2.

105 Ibid., 1.

106 Ibid., 1.

107 Ibid., 1.

108 Ibid., 68.

109 See Ellis Evans, *Gaulish personal names*, 85–6.

110 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 41–2.

111 Ibid., 42.

112 O'Brien, *Corpus*, 8: l. 18.

113 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 42.

114 O'Brien, *Corpus*, 2: ll. 44–5. See also Meyer, *Älteste irische Dichtung*, I, 38–50.

his subjects'.¹¹⁵ In §15 of the same poem we have *Crothais domnu dia iallaib aircnith* 'The destroyer shook worlds with his armies'; §16 *Mōraib frassaib folcais domuin demdad* 'With great showers of blood he cleansed the swarthy world.'¹¹⁶

In §4 of *Nidu dír dermait* Óengus Amlongaid is called *Ollam Elgga āigthide* 'dreaded master of Ireland'.¹¹⁷ He is given the same epithet in *Nuadu Necht* §33, *Ollam ān Oengus* 'the lordly Óengus Ollam'. *Ollam* in these cases is probably to be taken in the sense of 'greatest of kings'.¹¹⁸ The reference to the *ardri* in §36 of *Nuadu Necht* may also be understood in this sense *glass glēthach Nuadu, nīthach ardrī* 'young and radiant was Núada, the fierce high king'.¹¹⁹ These words with others (such as (*BCC* §35) *is é reithe Muman márlaithe i Temuir* 'he is the overlord of Munster of great princes in Tara', with *reithe* here meaning possibly something like 'courser' based on *rith* 'to run') are used of those who have reached the highest of their ranks in the various professions. When used in terms of kingship, they refer to the highest rank of king. This poetry would seem to date to the seventh century, but is almost certainly drawing upon earlier traditions. Edel Bhreathnach has pointed out that '*Nidu dír dermait* is not simply a regnal list. It is a combination of an exhortation to the Leinstermen not to forget their heroic ancestors and their claim to the kingship of Tara, and is probably contemporary, thematically at least, with a somewhat similar text *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig*, which exhorts Sí nÁedo Sláine to hold onto their claims to Tara.'¹²⁰ We are clearly in the worlds of the gods and those greatest kings who seek to emulate them. This is not 'normal' kingship. *Nidu dír dermait* and *Nuadu Necht* occur at the beginning of the twelfth-century codex Rawlinson B 502 among poems that form a preface to the genealogies of the Leinstermen. They are panegyrics of their ancestral kings and gods. *Nuadu Necht*, however, ends with the Biblical ancestors and finally with the Christian God:

Though Japhet was fair, a famous lordly battle-warrior; more illustrious than the men of the world was the saintly Noah.

It was not a petty fellowship of kindred brothers, (but) a mighty splendid company of fathers and mothers.

Sons of the lofty God, angels of cloud-white heaven, Noah, Lamech, bright white Methuselah.

Enoch, Jared, Malaleel of worthy race, Cainan, Enos, nobly born (?) Seth.

115 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 44.

116 O'Brien, *Corpus*, 2: ll. 48, 50; Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 44.

117 Meyer, *Älteste irische Dichtung*, I, 17: §13; O'Brien, *Corpus*, 8: l. 14; Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 42.

118 For further references see Jaski, *Early Irish kingship*, 99–102.

119 Meyer, *Älteste irische Dichtung*, I, 41: §36; O'Brien, *Corpus*, 3: ll. 37; Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 45.

120 Bhreathnach, 'Kings, the kingship of Leinster', 303.

Nobler was Adam, father of mortally descended men; a man shaped by God, a noble unique offspring.

Only offspring of the God of the mighty peopled earth, a hero who inhabited the dwelling of the strife-filled world.

Triple God, lofty single three, wondrous sole king of Heaven, infant, holy champion.¹²¹

Even in this most archaic of material the Church has a firm base. This amalgam¹²² is no better illustrated than in the poem *Mōen óen*.¹²³ It occurs as the first poem of the Rawlinson B 502 genealogical collection, and it is introduced by the question of how the Leinstermen got their name. It is also in praise of Loegaire Lorcc the ancestor of the Leinstermen. The following text is taken from O'Brien's *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae*:

Mōen óen ó ba nōed | nī bud noos ardrīg;
ort rīgu | rout ān | hūa Luircc Labraid.

Lāithe Gailēoin | gabsat inna lāmaib lāigne;
Laigin de sin | slōg Galiain.

Glinnsset coicthe | codda ler lergga iath nĒremōin,
iar loingis Lōchet fiann | flaithi Gōedel gabsus.

Grīb indrid | iath n-anēoil | hūa Luircc Lōegaire
arddiu dōenaib | acht nemrí nīmi.

Ór ós grēin gelmair | gabais for dōenib domnaib;
scīo deeb Dia óen | as Mōen mac Āine óenrīg.¹²⁴

The king in the poem is better known as Labraid Loingsech, who, according to O'Rahilly, was the ancestor-deity of the Leinstermen.¹²⁵ Having been expelled from Ireland, he returned from Gaul and slew his enemies and became king of Ireland. The first stanza has been translated differently by various scholars. Dillon in his Rhys lecture has 'Mōen the only one, since he was a child – not as a high king – slew kings, a splendid throw, *Labraid* grandson of Lorcc.'¹²⁶ In a later publication he ignored *nī bud noos ardrīg*, but this may have been a typographical error.¹²⁷ John Carey translated it as 'Moen, alone since he was an infant – it

121 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 46.

122 Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', 72–3 argues that this section of the poem is secondary. See also Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy', 58–60.

123 Meyer, *Älteste irische Dichtung*, II, 10; Dillon, *The archaism of Irish tradition*, 18 dates the poem to the sixth century.

124 O'Brien, *Corpus*, 1: ll. 7–14.

125 O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 101–17.

126 Dillon, *The archaism of Irish tradition*, 18.

127 Dillon, *Celt and Hindu*, 11.

was not the custom of a high king – smote kings, a splendid spear-cast, *Labraid* grandson of Lorc.’¹²⁸ The epithets of this personage, *Labraid* ‘speaker’, *Móen* ‘dumb’, and *Loingsech* ‘exile’, *Lóchet* ‘lightning’, are all played upon in the poem. The word *nós* is a borrowing of British *naws* and may have been used to emphasise the motif of the return of the exile, that he came from overseas. Perhaps the first line should be translated more specific to the context as ‘Móen, unique since a child – it was not the nature of a high-king – slew kings, a fiery circuit, Labraid grandson of Lorc.’ A king should be unblemished, yet his dumbness set him apart until he could speak, hence his name Labraid. One destined to become a great king should bear marks as indicated for the *cakravartin* above.¹²⁹ The word *án* ‘glorious’ has been discussed by O’Rahilly, and here again the association is with the sun, or perhaps with Labraid’s other epithet *lóchet* ‘lightning’.¹³⁰ Whatever the proper translation, we are dealing with exceptional beings. Gonda has pointed out that ‘the king is identical with the *Aśvamedha*’.¹³¹ It may be noted that the king professes ‘himself to be a beast also’ in the description of Giraldus Cambrensis quoted above.¹³² The identification of king and horse is found also in the tenth century tale edited by Kuno Meyer:

Faicfe do mnai ⁊ do horbhai ⁊ t’atharthir ⁊ do righi donn lo so, a capail
chluasmhár brenchinn!¹³³

From this day you shall leave your wife and your inheritance and your land
and kingship, you big-eared foul-headed horse!¹³⁴

This may account for the story that Labraid Loingsech had horse’s ears. The late Máirtín Ó Briain, who wrote an important article on ‘horse-eared kings’ in literature and folklore, was unable to trace the origin of the tale.¹³⁵ I believe, however, that an aspect of the kingship ritual may account for the story that Labraid Loingsech had horse’s ears. This was a story that was at least as old as the eleventh century.¹³⁶ In order to preserve this secret, every barber who cut his hair was put to death.¹³⁷ A preliminary to the *Aśvamedha* required the king to have his hair cut.¹³⁸ A further point in the account of Giraldus is the reference to drinking the broth.

128 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 46.

129 See Dumézil, *The destiny of the warrior*, 163. I think that this interpretation is more likely than that proposed by Ó Cathasaigh in his article ‘The oldest story of the Laigin’, 16.

130 O’Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology*, 286–94.

131 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 114.

132 O’Meara, ‘Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie’, 168; translation O’Meara, *The first version of the Topography*, 94.

133 Meyer, ‘King Eochaid has horse’s ears’, 47.

134 Ibid., 51.

135 Ó Briain, ‘The horse-eared kings of Irish tradition’.

136 Ó Cuív, ‘Some items from Irish tradition’, 170 where he points out that O’Rahilly ignored this aspect of the tradition. See also Meyer in previous notes.

137 Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, legend and romance*, 267–9.

138 Bhattacharyya, *Ancient Indian rituals*, 3.

Professor Kim McCone points out the ‘the oldest attested meaning of the second term of the compound *asva-medha* is ‘broth’, which may be significant in relation to the rite described by Giraldus.’¹³⁹

The final two stanzas of *Móen óen* have been translated as ‘A gryphon attacking unknown lands was the grandson of Lóegaire Lorc: exalted above men save for the holy King of Heaven. Gold brighter than the great shining sun, he conquered the worlds of men; Moen son of the sole king Áine is one god among the gods.’¹⁴⁰ There could hardly be a more explicit reference as to who Labraid was. This is the euhemerised god, higher than men but under the Christian God. Churchmen, therefore, had an interest in this most unusual form of kingship. These king-gods were the prehistoric kings of Tara. This is essentially what the kingship of Tara was about. If the king of Tara or the high-king does not appear in the law-tracts as a category of king, that is because the institution was utterly exceptional. Even in ancient India it was a rarity. Only the most exceptional of historical kings – those who could extend their arms, who could conquer – could hold the *Aśvamedha*. Such a king was expected to make adequate space for his peoples to live in.¹⁴¹ The Church clearly disapproved of this ceremony in which the horse played a central and sexual role. The cult of the horse was strong in early Ireland, as Próinséas Ní Chatháin has shown.¹⁴² The prohibition on the eating of horse-meat by the Church must relate to the role of the horse in the *Aśvamedha*-like ceremony and in particular to the eating of the flesh of the horse, as related by Giraldus Cambrensis and as reflected in the ‘Birth and Life of Moling’ quoted above. Stuart Piggott has suggested that scholars have not stressed this aspect sufficiently, ‘and though the hieros gamos, the ritual marriage of horse-god to human, may be specifically Indo-European, the sacrificial horse-feast may have quite other and even more ancient roots’.¹⁴³

If the Church disapproved of the ceremony so much, why did seventh-century clergymen develop the idea of Tara as a capital of the Irish and the concept of a high-king or king of Ireland? The answer lies, I think, in what the ‘world king’ stood for. It was exceptional, and, according to Gonda, ‘It must, however, be emphasized that the idea was largely theoretical and perhaps even utopian in character.’¹⁴⁴ It was in the utopian or theoretical aspects that the clergy found ideas that could be of use. To take the example of the *triath* mentioned above from an archaic poem in the laws:

Triath .i. rig, amail isber:

Triath trom tremaetha | Erind tuath o thuind co tuind; | taircella tomus condi | iar
na durn toimdither

139 McCone, *Pagan past*, 118.

140 Koch, *The Celtic heroic age*, 46.

141 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 101.

142 Ní Chatháin, ‘Traces of the cult of the horse in early Irish sources’.

143 Piggott, *Wagon, chariot and carriage*, 117; Piggott’s ‘Conaile province’ should, of course, be Cenél Conaill.

144 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 127.

A chieftain, i.e. a king, as it is said:

A mighty chieftain penetrates | Ireland from wave to wave; | he goes around its measurement, | so that by his hand it is measured.¹⁴⁵

The word *dorn* ‘hand, fist’ is probably used here figuratively in the sense of ‘seizure’ or ‘possession’ as used in legal formulae.¹⁴⁶

Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn called Lugh Lámfhada *triath Teambra*.¹⁴⁷ I think there is little doubt that the *triath* is another word for the ‘world king’. *Triath* can also mean ‘wave’, although the two words must have distinct etymologies.¹⁴⁸ In the Life of Brigit by Cogitosus dating to the mid-seventh century it is claimed that her *parrochia per totam Hiberniensem terram difussa, a mari usque ad mare extensa est*¹⁴⁹ ‘her parochia is spread throughout all Ireland, and it extends from sea to sea’. The phrase *a mari usque ad mare* is surely a calque on the Irish *ó thuind co tuind* of the poem and resonates with the implied sovereign jurisdiction of the whole island. Similarly, in the hagiography of St Patrick, the saint is brought to Tara so that his jurisdiction will be coterminous with that of her kings. But there was more. Since the creation of kings was a religious act, it was essential that the religion of kingship be Christianity.

What were the priorities of clergymen in the seventh century? Perhaps our best access to this question is through the work of possibly the greatest European churchman of the time – Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona. His Life of St Colum Cille provides a window through which we can glimpse matters which were of importance to him. It is a work that operated on many levels—as a model of the life of a great saint, of an abbot, of a monk, and as propaganda on behalf of his community.¹⁵⁰ It is also concerned with the relationship between the Church and society and with the nature of government.

Adomnán attached great importance to sanctuary and the violation of it. For example, he describes how local people fled within the precincts of Derry to escape raids in the area and how a woman drove her sheep over a grave.¹⁵¹ In another incident the saint requested protection for a man. This was initially accepted but was later ignored and he was killed.¹⁵² The concept of the saint himself as a focus of sanctuary is also explored.¹⁵³ In the latter case a young girl was killed by a man who pierced her through the protecting robes of Colum Cille and his teacher Gemman. There were a number of legal points at issue: there was the violation of the girl; there was the violation of the honour of those who sought to protect her; and since her protectors symbolised the Church, there was an act of sacrilege. The question

145 Wagner, *Studies in the origins of the Celts*, 244, n. 105.

146 *DIL* D 360.

147 *DIL* T 308.

148 Vendryes, *Lexique* s.vv., especially 7–143.

149 Colgan, *Triadis Thaumaturgae*, 518.

150 Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*.

151 *Adomnán*, VSC, I 20.

152 *Ibid.*, II 23.

153 *Ibid.*, II 24–5.

of the release of slaves receives attention¹⁵⁴ and Adomnán also reflects the saint’s concern for the plight of hostages.¹⁵⁵ In one of the longest episodes in the Life, that relating to ‘Libran of the Reed Patch’, Adomnán showed anxiety about the abuse of sanctuary. This is very precisely constructed and is full of legal detail.¹⁵⁶ In all of this he has shown his solicitude for the vulnerable in society. The episode of the young girl is a forerunner of perhaps the greatest achievement of his career – the Synod of Birr, at which he had the *Lex Innocentium* promulgated. We can see his concern for captives in his diplomatic mission to have the Irish people captured in a Northumbrian raid on the coast of Brega in June 685. In 687 he led sixty of the captives back to Ireland.

It is against this background that we might consider the references to kings in the Life. It was clearly a constant topic of conversation for the monks of Iona.¹⁵⁷ The saint prays for kings in battle.¹⁵⁸ He displays interest in royal succession.¹⁵⁹ In the same episode he prophesies that one of a number of sons will be a great king. But the essential point is that the son ‘whom the Lord has chosen from among them to be king will run at once to my knee’. In other words the king, that submits to the teaching of the Church will have a successful reign. The same idea is expressed in the section where it was said of a king that ‘He himself will never be delivered into the hands of enemies, but will die by a peaceful death, an old man, among friends.’¹⁶⁰ The name of this king-in-waiting was Óengus, called Bronbachal.¹⁶¹ The epithet may be important. One might speculate that it consists of Latin *pronus* > *bron* ‘inclined forward, bent’, and *bachall* < *baculum*, ‘staff, crozier’,¹⁶² and the implication must be that this is a king who submitted to the Church. Elsewhere a king who was a friend of the saint dies in his bed.¹⁶³ Kings that follow the teaching of the Church are preferred.

The texts dealing with kingship, such as *Audacht Morainn*,¹⁶⁴ the Cormac mac Airt saga,¹⁶⁵ and those texts discussed recently by John Carey¹⁶⁶ and Edel Bhreathnach,¹⁶⁷ are not merely political propaganda. They are political theory and are concerned with utopia, the ideal state. At the basis of this ideal was the concept of truth, cosmic truth, *fír flathemon*

154 *Ibid.*, II 33.

155 *Ibid.*, I 11.

156 *Ibid.*, II 39.

157 *Ibid.*, I 12.

158 *Ibid.*, I 1, 7–8.

159 *Ibid.*, I 9.

160 *Ibid.*, I 13.

161 This was Óengus mac Áedo Commáin who became king of Cenél Coirpri. He died in 649. The kingdom of Cenél Coirpri Gabra’s royal centre was at Granard, Co. Longford and was under the control of the Southern Uí Néill.

162 *DIL* B 201.

163 Adomnán, VSC, I 15.

164 Kelly, *Audacht Morainn*.

165 Ó Cathasaigh, *Cormac Mac Airt*.

166 Carey, ‘Some *Cín Dromma Snechtai* texts’.

167 Bhreathnach, ‘Temoria: caput Scotorum?’.

‘the truth of the prince’, ‘the just judgement of the king’.¹⁶⁸ This is what lay at the basis of the natural order. The inauguration of a ‘world king’ is what ensured that that natural order remained in balance. One of the forces for stability was the institution of suretyship based on oath-taking (*lugae, luige*). Wagner has suggested that this word is cognate with the name of the god Lug, the ancestor deity of kings,¹⁶⁹ although this suggestion offers but one possibility as to the origin of the term. Much of the ideals of kingship, truth, justice, mercy, protection of the weak, caring for peoples such as are expressed so eloquently in *Audacht Morainn* could have presented no problems to churchmen. Indeed, on the contrary, they provided the basis for a specifically Christian form of kingship. The act of writing in the early Middle Ages is in the hands of churchmen. The question that has been asked of our texts in the past is: are they pagan or are they Christian? – but perhaps this is not the right question. Since clergymen compiled these documents the question is: why?

In stark contrast to the idealised picture of kingship is the reality of incessant warfare which produced, to use a term coined by Max Gluckman for African states, an ‘oscillating equilibrium’.¹⁷⁰ Occasionally an exceptional king could rise above his fellows and dominate the island and could then claim to be a ‘world king’. As Derrett has stated,¹⁷¹ ‘A psychologist would probably diagnose a professional paranoia amongst Hindu monarchs, at least if he were confined to their public documents and acts, for when they were too weak to go to war they boasted of their imaginary achievements over far distant foes and dreamed of their toes reflecting the light from the jewels in the crowns of conquered kings.’¹⁷² In ancient India the duty of a king was to progress. ‘From being a *raja* he ought, if he can, try to be a *maharaja*, a *samrat*, or, finally a *cakravarti*.’¹⁷³ His duty was to rule the earth. The road to such a pinnacle of power was bloody, since it meant the rigorous elimination of competition. Once there, it led to the *Aśvamedha*. ‘The average Hindu needed his ruler to be a great king, an overlord of kings, or an emperor, not merely that he might feel some vicarious pride, but that he should be able to sleep quietly in his bed.’¹⁷⁴ Peace, but even greater *abhaya* ‘freedom from fear’ is the result of strong kingship. The *abhaya-dana* ‘gift of security’, according to the *Vishnu-smṛiti*, is the greatest of all gifts.¹⁷⁵ This motif is echoed in the image of the lone woman travelling from Tory Island in the north-west to Cape Clear in the south carrying a ring of gold without being molested during the reign of Brian Bóruma.¹⁷⁶

It was in this aspect of the ideal of kingship that the Church saw the key to a perfect,

168 Wagner, *Studies in the origins of the Celts*, 1–45; Watkins, ‘*Is tre fhír flathemon*’.

169 Wagner, *Studies in the origins of the Celts*, 22; On suretyship see the very important book by Stacey, *The road to judgement*.

170 Balandier, *Political anthropology*, 189.

171 Derrett, ‘The maintenance of peace in the Hindu world’.

172 Ibid., 153.

173 Ibid., 167.

174 Ibid., 172.

175 Ibid., 174, n. 1.

176 Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 138 (lxxx).

or at least a well-ordered, society in which the weak alongside the rich of this world would enjoy peace and freedom from fear. St Jerome was quoted by the Irish canonists of the seventh century: *Tres personae juxta punitionem reorum vocandae sunt: rex, ut reprimat scelus, episcopus, ut temperet iram regis, populus, ut hoc exemplo terreatur*¹⁷⁷ ‘Three *personae* are summoned for the punishment of wrongdoers: the king so that he will punish the criminal, the bishop so that he will temper the anger of the king, the people so that they will be deterred by this example.’ The three *personae* are also cited in a specifically Irish synod as those who consecrate the boundaries of a holy place: king, bishop and people.¹⁷⁸

Kingship was government. The references that Adomnán has to the king of Ireland I would suggest represented an attempt to channel the concept of the ‘world king’ into a Christian mould. He warns Áed Sláine lest ‘by reason of the sin of parricide you lose the prerogative of monarchy over the kingdom of Ireland, predestined for you by God’ (*a deo totius Everniae regni praerogativam monarchiae praedestinatum*).¹⁷⁹ Like the idealised king of pagan times, he had to be close to God. This is probably the reason for the use of the concept of ordination that we find in the work of Adomnán.¹⁸⁰ M.J. Enright’s conclusions are important: ‘Adomnán not only employs *ordinatio* to mean anointing, he actually presents a new theory of clerically mediated kingship based upon the unctio created covenant of the Old Testament.’¹⁸¹ Of course, such divinely *ordained* kings, the Lord’s anointed, should not be touched. Adomnán even employs what must be a ritual formula in describing the killer of Diarmait: *totius Scotiae regnatorem deo auctore ordinatum* ‘ordained by God’s will the ruler of all Ireland’. ‘And Aid, unworthily ordained, will return like a dog to his vomit, and he will again be a bloody killer, and at last, pierced with a spear, will fall from wood into water, and die by drowning. He has deserved such an end sooner, who has slaughtered the king of all Ireland.’¹⁸²

With such a king a law could be enacted, not just in a local *túath*, but over a vast area. There was no better example of this than the promulgation of the *Lex Innocentium* and the extraordinary number of kings that attended from such diverse places.¹⁸³ This legislation was achieved under the auspices of Loingsech mac Óenguso, of the Cenél Conaill, Adomnán’s own kin. Loingsech was killed in battle in Corann (a location somewhere in bars. Corran,

177 Wassersleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung*, XXVII: 4, 85.

178 Ibid., XLIV: 3, 175.

179 Adomnán, *VSC*, I 14. Cf. Bertelli, *Sacred rituals of power*, 10: ‘Hellenistic political thought elaborated the idea that the sovereign was the compassionate manifestation of God to humanity, the shepherd of his flock, father and benefactor, font of law, or better still the very personification of law. Since the sovereign was *pater*, any regicide was judged a parricide, in fact the greatest parricide.’

180 For an important discussion of this see Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*; Enright, ‘Further reflections on royal ordinations in the *Vita Columbae*’.

181 Enright, ‘Further reflections on royal ordinations in the *Vita Columbae*’, 35. I am not happy with every aspect of Enright’s theory.

182 Adomnán, *VSC*, I 36. See Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The threefold death in early Irish sources’.

183 Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin*’; O’Loughlin, *Adomnán at Birr AD 697*.

Leyney, Co. Sligo and Gallen, Co. Mayo) ‘on Saturday, the fourth of the Ides of July, at the sixth hour’ (*AU* 704). This must be the most precise record in the early annals. One can almost hear the sigh of disappointment of the Iona clergy on the death of their patron. In the same entry (which must originate in Iona) this king is called *rex Hibernie* ‘king of Ireland’. He was the Church’s man. Fínnachta Fledach was in the same position. It is significant that he took clerical orders in 688 and recalls Óengus Bronbachal mentioned above. John Carey has suggested that his name, ‘*Snechta Fína* “Snow of wine” might ‘... be intended to suggest a particularly close association between Fínnachta and the imagery of drinking which dominates the prophecy [*BCC*] as a whole.’¹⁸⁴ This must be important, but it may perhaps be viewed also in the light of a statement made by Gonda: ‘Just as Indra nourishes the people on earth with showers of water, so should a king nourish them with largesse.’¹⁸⁵ It may also be of interest in this context to consider that the next stanza in *BCC* to *flaith ó Niell co Néll* may have a resonance with the word *nél* ‘cloud’.¹⁸⁶

In seventh-century Ireland, therefore, there was a discourse concerning kingship. It may be of use at this point to look towards the Indian world for a possible analogy. Ancient Indian kingship was transformed through its contact with Buddhism. There emerged, therefore, two models of kingship – one reflecting the pre-Buddhist model and one that was influenced by the moral and world view of Buddhist teachings. I suggest that this mirrors a pre-Christian model of kingship in Ireland and one that was transformed by contact with Christianity.

The Indian development has been carefully revealed by James S. Duncan’s brilliant analysis of the kingdom of Kandy in Sri Lanka. In the Sri Lankan kingdom of Kandy there were two models of kingship: one was the Sakran based on the Hinduised god-king in which the king is seen as a kind of god on earth modelled upon Sakra, also called Indra. Under Buddhism he was ‘transformed from a violent warrior king into a benevolent Buddhist monarch who achieved his military victories and right to rule through righteousness.’¹⁸⁷ ‘The Asokan model was based on the Mauryan emperor Asoka (third century BC) who was looked upon as an ideal Buddhist king. According to this view a king should be mild-mannered, righteous, and unfailingly protective of Buddhism and responsible for the welfare of his people.’¹⁸⁸ If we reckon the Sakran model with the pagan in early Ireland, and the Buddhist

with the Christian, then we have an almost exact analogy. The good kings submitting to the Church are contrasted with the others who by their lifestyle are the antithesis of righteousness. Professor McCone, quoting *The Fragmentary Annals*, concerning the two sons of the king of Tara, Fergal mac Maíle Dúin, highlights this discourse. The father tests both sons to see who will succeed. The older engages in a night of debauchery, while the younger spends it in thanksgiving to God and singing praises to the Lord. The father prophesises that his younger son will reign and that his descendants will become famous and royal.¹⁸⁹

As in Sri Lanka, the literary discourse left its mark in the landscape. Tara, the *sid* mounds and other visible signs were still potent in the landscape. But there was now a Christian layer. As Óengus the Céli Dé pointed out the old *civitates* of the pagans had been replaced by Christian cities.¹⁹⁰ Kings patronised them. The church of Kildare was rebuilt by the Uí Dúnlainge, and it became their capital. High-kings built churches and erected high-crosses. When Óengus uses the word *borg*¹⁹¹ (first found in Ulfilas’s translation of the Bible into Gothic) to describe Tara where earlier writers had used the word *civitas*, he was reinforcing the contrast that now existed. Tara was seen as a ‘high fortified place’ frequented by the warriors of the past. It was no longer a home of religion, but a symbol of the political centre of Ireland. Adomnán may have been premature in his use of the term *rex Hiberniae*, but he saw where kingship should go. In the future kings who had exceptional power had this term carved on the high-crosses they erected. But it was to take centuries before political and social conditions were right for such an institution to become a reality.

184 Carey, ‘Some *Cín Dromma Snechtaí* texts’, 88.

185 Gonda, *Ancient Indian kingship*, 31; See also Duncan, *The city as text*, 46 where he points out that the beverage of the immortals flowing from the Ocean of Milk ‘flows through all things in the Universe. According to the hymns of the *Rig Véda* it is in the waters, it is likened to rain and to milk that flows from clouds or cows.’

186 It is to be noted that the spelling with double l seems to be Middle Irish. The diphthongisation in *Niall* shows that the vowels in *Néll* and *nél* must always have been pronounced somewhat differently. While aware of this difference, the view of Parkes that the Irish ‘apprehended it [Latin] as much by the eye as by the ear’ may be of importance here. Cf. Parkes, ‘The contribution of Insular scribes’, 2.

187 Duncan, *The city as text*, 39.

188 *Ibid.*, 38.

189 McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present*, 222–3.

190 For Óengus’s use of parallels from the archaic Leinster poems see Schneiders, ‘Pagan past and Christian present’, 168.

191 Schlesinger, ‘Stadt und Burg im Lichte der Wortgeschichte’.