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978-0-521-13493-4 - The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age

Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson

Excerpt

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MEDIEVAL IRISH literary tradition contains material of very great diversity. There are lyric and panegyric poems, historical and pseudo-historical and antiquarian texts, stories of pure entertainment, a great deal of religious matter, and much else. The pseudo-historical literature includes tales about what it alleges were the various immigrant races who invaded and inhabited Ireland in ancient times, treated on the surface as if they were genuine historical peoples. Just below the surface, however, some of them if not all appear to exhibit the marks of pagan gods or other supernatural beings, and are therefore more or less comparable to the 'myths' of Greek literature. But as soon as one tries to fish for this mythology from under the surface much of it slips through one's net, leaving for the most part little but the names of characters unquestionably recognisable, from their Romano-Gaulish and Romano-British counterparts, or less certainly from some features of the stories about them, as having been Celtic gods at an earlier stage. About the religious beliefs connected with them we are largely ignorant, and of the manner of their worship completely so. Besides, it is evident that the medieval Irish anti-

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quarians who made these things into 'histories' were almost as ignorant of such points as we are, though needless to say their works have been a gold-mine for the speculations of scholars.

Side by side with these and various other classes of literary material there is another, and quite different, body of narrative in the very early Irish tradition; one which belongs to the genre of literature of entertainment and contains very little that can reasonably or safely be taken for myth, or ought to be interpreted as such. This is a group of prose tales purporting to describe a 'heroic' stage in Ireland's distant past, telling of the wars and adventures of a group of characters thought of as having been real people, living long ago in a setting which it is implied was a genuine one. To anticipate, the situation is very like that of the heroes of the *Iliad*, and like the *Iliad* the stories are told on the whole with straightforward realism as if they had really happened, though without any specific implication that this is history. This realism is nevertheless broken by at least two non-realistic elements. First, some few of the characters are clearly supernatural and some of the scenes involve supernatural events and motifs. But here we are on familiar ground in the comparison with Homer, of course *mutatis mutandis*, since his gods and semi-divine beings, and the episodes in which they take part, are equally of a supernatural kind. Second, the realism is often

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apt to be submerged in a burst of exaggeration, in deliberate fantasy, such as must have delighted the imagination of the early Irish audience but which is too often tedious and absurd to us, delaying and spoiling the straightforward vividness of the action. If we discount this side of the narrative, however, these stories are strikingly like the epics of other early literatures, as has often been pointed out; not only Homer but also *Beowulf*, the early German heroic poetry, and the rest. Indeed, except for the fact that the telling is mainly in prose—and this is really a detail—this whole body of tales is epic and ought to be discussed on the same footing, though too often it is ignored by students of epic literature. It is one of the many virtues of the work of the Chadwicks on early comparative literature that they have done full justice to this.

These epic tales, as they may be called, are relatively early even in their present dress; but the theme of this lecture is that in some form or other they have come down to us from a period which is a good deal earlier than that. It is not suggested for a moment that any of the people who act in them or any of the events described are historical, and indeed some of them are much too unreal for this to be possible. In any case there is no outside source which could corroborate the existence of any of the characters such as there is in the case of the German epics, with their Attila and Gunther and the others

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confirmed by the evidence of Greek and Latin authorities. What I do maintain is that the immediate setting of the oldest Irish hero tales, that is to say the state of endemic warfare between Ulster and the rest of Ireland, and various other features of the Irish political construction, material civilisation, and way of life, which are very archaic in appearance, very circumstantial, and on the whole very consistent, belong to a period some centuries earlier than the time when they were first written down—belong in fact to a ‘pre-historic’ Ireland. There is nothing in such a hypothesis which need alarm us. After all, it is commonly believed that the immediate setting of the *Iliad*, the warlike expedition by the states of Mycenaean Greece against a city of Asia Minor, is very probably more or less genuine; that the cultural and political background, or at least a stratum or strata within that background, really does illustrate the conditions and way of life of the Mycenaean and sub-Mycenaean civilisation of the fourteenth–twelfth centuries B.C.; and that Homer in the eighth century was adapting material of which part had come down to him from that time. Up to a point, the political geography and various features in the material culture of the *Iliad* do not suit early historical Greece and do strikingly suit what we now know about ‘pre-historic’ Greece at the period in question. And this is all that is claimed for Ireland in this lecture. There is not in fact anything new in

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this—it is familiar to Celtic scholars and seems to be generally accepted by them; but Celtic scholars are unfortunately few, and historians, archaeologists, and others interested in the early history of the British Isles are I think much less aware of this extraordinary archaic fragment of European literature, and it is to them that this lecture is directed.

We know that the latest archaeological expression of the pre-Roman European Iron Age, the so-called La Tène culture, lasted in a vestigial form in Ireland, where there was no Roman occupation to swamp it, until at least the time when the introduction of Christianity in the fifth century brought with it considerable changes in intellectual and to some degree social organisation and particularly in art styles and motifs. I shall attempt to show that the background of the Irish epic tales appears to be older than these changes, and hence that when all due allowance is made for later accretions the stories provide us with a picture—very dim and fragmentary, no doubt, but still a picture—of Ireland in the Early Iron Age. If this strikes anyone present as an excessive claim, perhaps an unquestionable instance of a feature belonging to the Iron Age which can be proved to have survived into the Irish early Christian culture may help to make out a *prima facie* case. I refer to the motifs called collectively the ‘trumpet pattern’ which are so characteristic of the decorative style of the pre-

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Roman Celtic Iron Age. These beautiful flowing curves, whose origins can be traced back to the fifth century B.C., typify La Tène art, particularly in the British Isles, as long as it lasted. Now, what replaced the La Tène art styles in Ireland was what is called 'early Christian' art, chiefly of Mediterranean origin, with its highly elaborate interlacing strap-work, chequer patterns, vine-scrolls, animals and birds of eastern textile inspiration, and Byzantine-looking human figures, which fused with other motifs into the 'Hiberno-Saxon' art of the seventh and later centuries as we see it in the great manuscripts like the Books of Durrow, Lindisfarne, and Kells and the early Christian metal-work and sculpture. Yet in almost any of the fully illuminated pages of Kells, and markedly also in Durrow, to quote only these, one finds panels partly decorated with unquestionable La Tène trumpet-pattern designs. The motif must have passed in Ireland from pre-Christian to Christian art at a single leap in its full vigour; and this is not really surprising when we remember that in Ireland there were no intervening centuries of Roman civilisation to destroy it and the La Tène culture to which it belonged. If so, it is surely also not so surprising that some of the *literary* traditions belonging to the Iron Age in Ireland should have lasted long enough to be adopted into the written literature of this very same early Christian period, once the use of writing became applied to

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the recording of the native literature. I shall hope to show that this is what did happen, and how it happened.

The body of heroic narrative in question is called the Ulster Cycle because it centres round the king of Ulster and his warriors. The greatest tale, and by far the longest, is the famous Cattle Raid of Cooley,¹ which tells of an expedition from Connaught to carry off a celebrated bull from Cooley near Dundalk on the borders of Ulster. Some of the others are the Story of Mac Dathó's Pig,² the Feast of Bricriu,³ the Drunkenness of the Ulstermen,⁴ and above all the classic tragedy of Deirdriu and the Exile of the Sons of Uisliu.⁵ The Ulster of these stories is a great and powerful kingdom—*Ulaid*, 'the men of Ulster'—able to take on the rest of Ireland in war, the enemy being constantly referred to as *fir Érenn*, 'the men of Ireland'. Their capital fortress, the Irish Mycenae, was Emain Macha, now Navan Rath, a ruined hill-fort near Armagh. Their

¹ 'Version I' = *TBC I*; 'Version II' = *TBC II*. The first translated by Winifred Faraday, *The Cattle Raid of Cualnge* (Grimm Library, no. 16; London, 1904). The second translated into German by Windisch, *TBC II*, and into English by Joseph Dunn, *The Ancient Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúalnge* (London, 1914).

² Edition, see *SMMD*. Translation, *CS*, pp. 199 ff.

³ Edited and translated by G. Henderson, *Fled Bricrend, the Feast of Bricriu* (London, Irish Texts Society, vol. II; 1899).

⁴ Edited by J. C. Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, *Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series*, vol. XIII (Dublin, 1941); translated *CS*, pp. 215 ff.

⁵ Edited and translated by V. Hull, *Longes Mac n-Uislemn* (New York, 1949); translated *CS*, pp. 239 ff.

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over-king, the Agamemnon, is Conchobar, and under him is a group of aristocratic warriors like Homer's Achaeans; Cú Chulainn, the young heroic champion, the Achilles; Fergus, the wise old warrior, the Nestor; and so on. On the other side, the confederacy of 'the men of Ireland' is led by the king of Connaught, Ailill, and his strong-minded Amazon wife Medb, whose name means 'She who makes men drunk' or 'The Drunken Woman'. With these are their seven sons all called Maine, but distinguished by nicknames, and their daughter Findabair whose hand in marriage is used several times as a bribe; also various heroes from Connaught and elsewhere and the kings and armies of the rest of Ireland. These are the Trojans of the Irish epic, and their Troy is Cruachain, now the ruins of Rathcroghan in Co. Roscommon.

These stories constitute a classic case of what the Chadwicks defined as a *heroic society*.¹ The principle of it is a primitive aristocracy, a warrior aristocracy in the sense that it is organised for the warfare which is its business. Economically speaking it is chiefly a cattle-rearing community in Ireland, and cattle are the staple form of wealth and the aim of much of the raiding and fighting. We learn more about the structure of the earliest traceable Irish society from the Law tracts, which themselves contain a very ancient stratum and represent a very archaic state of

¹ See *GL*, chapter 4.

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affairs.¹ Here the king comes at the top of the aristocratic pyramid, his chief nobles immediately below, the inferior nobles below that, and then the non-noble freemen who are primarily a landowning class but include also superior craftsmen; notably the blacksmith, who as maker of weapons, and perhaps reputed to have supernatural powers, was a person of real importance in this structure. Below this came the unfree, men who had no franchise and no right to bear arms; property-less men, tenant farmers, labourers, inferior craftsmen, and so on. Among freemen the relation of the vassal or client and his lord, which was a voluntary association terminable by agreement, was a fundamental institution. The vassal borrowed capital from the lord and repaid it with interest; he also gave him military service and attended and supported him as part of his retinue on public occasions. In return, the lord looked after the vassal's interests, particularly his interests at law, and protected him in time of trouble. It was the possession of vassals which gave the lord the rank of noble and so distinguished him from other freemen; moreover it gave him considerable influence, the greater as the number of his vassals was greater. The whole relation, with its reciprocal advantages and duties, reminds one of that

¹ For a full discussion of the structure of early Irish society see E. MacNeill, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions* (Dublin, n.d.; London, 1935).

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between a Highland chief and his principal clansmen before 1745. The word for 'vassal' in early Irish is *céile* which means literally 'companion', no doubt used because of his important duty of taking part in the lord's retinue. So much is seen in the Laws; in the Ulster tales the institution is occasionally mentioned by name, as for instance where the Connaught messenger Mac Roth asks Cú Chulainn's charioteer whose *céile* he is, and he replies '*Céile* to that man yonder', pointing to Cú Chulainn, and when Mac Roth goes to him and asks him whose *céile* he is, the answer is '*Céile* to Conchobar', that is, to the king.¹

A further aspect of the connection between lord and client is seen in the institution of fosterage. It was the practice that the young sons of an inferior noble were sent to live in the household of the superior, or in that of the king, to be brought up there and trained in the arts of war and the other duties of an aristocrat; which meant in effect that the inferior had given hostages to his chief. This established a bond between foster-father and foster-son, and particularly between foster-brothers, which was very close and sacred. The most truly tragic aspect of the tragic story of how Fer Diad was obliged to challenge Cú Chulainn and Cú Chulainn was obliged to fight and kill him is the fact that they were foster-brothers, and consequently the act was

¹ *TBC* I, ll. 1115 ff.