Supernatural Threats to Kings: Exploration of a Motif in the Ulster Cycle and in Other Medieval Irish Tales

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Introduction

The subject of this contribution is the belief in a sacral bond between the land and the ruler. This belief is connected with the concept known as 'sacral kingship', which is found in many cultures.[1] In the Tenach or Old Testament, for instance, the king is supposed to be chosen by God and anointed by a prophet before he is installed as a king. Kingship is linked with the divine in this way. If the relationship between God and king is purportedly disrupted, then another king may replace the king who falls out of favour. Disruption in the Old Testament is often caused by the transgression of the divine laws. When king and people sin against these laws, God is said to send signs in the form of punishments in order to make king and people stop sinning and return to the law of God. Foreign invasions are the most notable among these signs.

In medieval Irish texts, sacral kingship implies that the king should be just, truthful, wise, courageous and generous; he should keep his *gessi*, 'taboos', have no blemish on his body or honour, and excel in physical appearance and martial prowess. If these rules of sacral kingship are violated, the land suffers and the literature connects the unfortunate fate of the land in a causal link with the ill-performing king.[2] Sometimes this purported cause (violated sacral kingship) and effect (damage to the land) seem to be connected in an automatic way; sometimes they are believed to be linked through explicitly mentioned supernatural sanctions. Important studies by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and Tom Sjöblom show that often a contract with the Otherworld is portrayed as the basis of kingship.[3] This contribution builds on the work of these scholars by offering a preliminary survey of the relationship between the supernatural, the king, the land and 'foreign' invasions.

[1] See e.g. Widengren (1969, 360-93). Translations are mine unless otherwise stated. I am grateful to Gregory Toner and Kevin Murray for their advice on some translations. I am indebted to Tomás Ó Cathasaigh for giving me his unpublished translation of *Geneamuin Chormaic* (see below), which I have used although in some instances I have made changes. If these contain errors I alone am responsible.

[2] See e.g. Draak (1959, 651-63); McCone (1990, 121-23). Cf. Wormald (1986,151-83).

[3] See Ó Cathasaigh (1977−9, 137-55; 1996, 203-13: 206-7); Sjöblom (2000, 78-110).

The 'supernatural' is a complex category in medieval Irish texts. Predominant in the medieval Irish worldview is the overall scheme of things with God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as the entities that are believed to rule over life and death. They are symbolised by light and stand for what is good. The Devil and demons, supernatural beings associated with darkness and evil, are contrasted with the above-mentioned Trinity and their messengers, the angels. There are, however, more supernatural beings that belong to the medieval Irish symbolic universe. The texts display references to gods, ghosts and various kinds of supernatural being that are difficult to define and classify. Saint Patrick refers to the supernatural beings venerated by the Irish as 'idols and unclean things' (*idola et inmunda*; *Confessio* §41).[4] Some Irish texts, however, paint a more subtle and complex image of the supernatural beings other than the ones associated with Christianity. These are sometimes linked with darkness, sometimes with light; they may be associated with the demonic realm and with the pre-Christian past, but some of them also reveal hidden things pertaining to Christianity. In short: they serve as benign, neutral and malicious symbols in Christian mythology. It may, therefore, be more accurate to qualify them as 'beings from the religious twilight'. Because of the complex descriptions of the 'supernatural' in medieval Irish texts, I have pleaded elsewhere to describe the Irish belief system as 'inclusive monotheism' (forthcoming b).

My source of inspiration for this contribution is 'Aspects of Celtic mythology' by Anton Gerard van Hamel (1934). Much can be objected to in this article,[5] but at least two of his observations deserve further study. Ó Cathasaigh (1983, 1-2) has built on Van Hamel's notion of an 'exemplary myth'. I try to develop his idea of preservation and protection of the land as a religious undercurrent in Celtic mythology (Van Hamel 1934, 18) in this contribution.

This protection takes the form of hunting dangerous creatures, fighting off invaders and 'knowledge of the land' (Van Hamel 1934, 18-19). Van Hamel describes 'knowledge of the land' as follows:

> The conservation of traditions as to how all the natural phenomena, such as the wells, plains, lakes, and rocks, came into being, and what happened near them, secures a command of the demoniacal guardian power. This knowledge enables us to befriend them, or, if they should be wicked, to appease or subdue them (Van Hamel 1934, 18).[6]

[4] For an edition and translation of the *Confessio*, see Howlett (1994).
[5] See, e.g. De Vries (1958, 273-84), Murphy (1941 [1953], 213-17), Ó Cathasaigh (1983, 1-19: 1-2).
[6] This insight (or intuition?) deserves further study but is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Heroes and especially the king are exemplary protectors of the land, but this is also a concern of supernatural beings (Van Hamel 1934, 18-31). I note that protection of the land is an area where human and supernatural concerns may coincide but also where conflicts and disruptions occur. The threat to the land posed by foreign invasions refers literally to a conflict and is a sign of the disruption of the cosmic order as well. In the examples to be discussed, we will see that 'foreign' not only refers to alien nations but also to the supernatural realm.[7] When the land is invaded, the king is in danger of failing in his duty of protecting the land and the contract with the supernatural is either at risk or is in fact broken.

1. To invade and to be invaded

Our first example is from an Old Irish narrative that is used as a precedent in a legal context, *Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti*, 'The adventure of Fergus mac Leite'.[8] King Fergus mac Leite goes abroad on legal business. After returning to his own land, he falls asleep on the coast near the sea.[9] This seems to have been a mistake on his part as the sea is the border of his land, where protectors of the land need to be alert. Presumably, his charioteer has also fallen asleep. The tale tells us that small people appear who carry the king without his sword into the water. Medieval etymologies associate these beings called *luchorpáin*, literally 'small bodies', and *abaicc*, 'dwarfs', with water (Borsje 1996, 77). We might infer that they want to abduct him to their own 'land' under water. This 'foreign' invasion threatens the king and thereby the land. When his feet become wet and cold, however, he awakens in time and grabs three of them. In order to save themselves they offer a pact, which is introduced by a ritualistic exchange of words and which is sealed by the sucking of nipples.[10] Thanks to this agreement, the king receives a charm with which he can survive under water. In other words: he gets a kind of 'passport' to travel in the 'foreign' lands under the waves.

[7] This broad view of the concept 'foreign' is also found in more recent texts and traditions; see Ó Giolláin (1987, 59-80); Bruford (1991, 116-41).

[8] This eighth-century tale was dated, edited, translated and discussed by Binchy (1952, 33-48). For a literary analysis, see Borsje (1996, 17-91), and the literature there cited.

[9] The manuscript readings differ on the proceedings. According to London, British Library, Harley 432, Fergus returns home and the adventure near the sea happens at another time. According to Dublin, Trinity College, H.3.18 (1337), the adventure happens immediately after his return to his kingdom.

[10] St Patrick condemns this ritual as being incompatible with a Christian way of life in his *Confessio* §18. For more about this ritual, see Ryan (1938, 293-99); Carney (1961, 53-83: 62-7); Maier (1999, 152-61); Bray (2000, 282-96).

It is important to note that this 'contract with the Otherworld' is here agreed upon during the king's reign instead of before his inauguration. We are more familiar with pre-inauguration contracts, such as the sexual union with a supernatural female who symbolises the sovereignty or the above-mentioned contract with supernatural beings that impose sacred rules, such as *gessi*, upon the king-to-be.

The contract between Fergus and the otherworldly beings not only expands but also limits his power, for one area is forbidden. Loch Rudraige (Dundrum Bay),[11] a sea-inlet or bay named after his ancestor, is a taboo area for him. When the dwarf expresses the interdiction, he explicitly describes the forbidden loch as being in the king's territory. The interdiction, however, removes the loch out of his sphere of influence and his eventual entrance into the forbidden loch makes him into a 'foreign invader'.[12] He breaks the contract, by which he endangers his kingship and thus his land. When he sees the monster that lives in the forbidden loch, his face becomes distorted, which is caused by the fear aroused by the monster: *Doluid as for tír ar omun*, 'he came out on land in terror' (Binchy 1952, 36, 38, 42). His mental state is at variance with martial prowess, which is demanded of a sacral king (McCone 1990, 121-3). On this occasion, he is not able to protect his land from danger. The blemish on his face is the visible sign that he is no longer fit to be a king. When he fulfils his sacral duty at last by fighting the monster, he does not survive.

Kings should be prepared to sacrifice their life for the sake of their land. We learn this from the first tale in the collection called *Tochmarc Étaíne*, 'The wooing of Étaín'.[13] It is on the day of Samain (1 November, the start of winter) that a supernatural being called Elcmar is threatened in his home, Brug na Bóinne, by Óengus, also known as in Mac Óc ('the young son') , another supernatural man. In order to save his life, Elcmar grants Óengus kingship for a day and a night. The word used for this 'contract'—*anacul*, 'act of sparing, giving quarter' (§§6, 8)—is the same as the one as used in the negotiations between Fergus and the small people: their life is spared when they offer to grant him his request. When Elcmar finds out that the formulation indicating the time implies 'for ever', he objects. Then the supernatural king of Ireland and the Túatha Dé, the Dagda, is called in to adjudge each man's contract (*cor*), and he decides that the Brug goes to Óengus, because *tartais do ferann ar th'anacal, ar ba caime lat do ainim oldas do thír*, 'thou gavest thy land for mercy shown thee (*anacul*), for thy life was

[11] See Binchy (1952, 42); compare Borsje (1996, 25-6.).

[12] For more on this, see Borsje (1996, 83-6).

[13] Edition and translation: Bergin & Best (1938, 137-96: 142-61). This ninth-century text was revised in the second half of the eleventh century (Thurneysen 1921, 598).

dearer to thee than thy land' (Bergin & Best 1938, 146-7). The Dagda gives Elcmar Cleitech instead. As we will presently see, this supernatural dwelling place plays a role in the demise of another king, whose birth-tale is our next example.

2. The birth of a king

The Middle Irish tale *Geneamuin Chormaic,* 'The Birth of Cormac ua Cuinn',[14] describes how Etan, daughter of a smith called Olc Aiche, is a queen for one night, when she spends it with King Art son of Conn Cétchathach. As a result, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to Cormac mac Airt, future king of Ireland. The delivery takes place during a journey on the border of the land that is her destination.[15] After giving birth, she falls asleep. Just as in the case of King Fergus mac Leite, it appears that sleeping outdoors is not without risk. Her attendant falls asleep as well and a she-wolf abducts the baby.

When we compare this scene with the events in *Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti*, we note the following similar structure (see table 1):

Table 1.

Echtrae Fergusa maic Leiti	**Geneamuin Chormaic**
King & male charioteer	'Queen' & female attendant
fall asleep	fall asleep
on the border of sea and land	on the border of land of destination
in a 'wild' area	in a 'wild' area
A 'foreign' invasion occurs:	A 'foreign' invasion occurs:
small humanoid water beings	a female wolf (*sod meic tire*)
threaten to abduct the king	abducts the king-to-be
Pact sealed by sucking nipples	Survival of baby by suckling
Contract with Otherworld	'Contract' with wolves

A person associated with royalty travels in a chariot and falls asleep outdoors in the company of an attendant, away from civilisation. A 'foreign' invasion takes place, in the first case by small humanoid water beings, in the second by an animal, associated with the land: a she-wolf (*sod meic tíre*, literally 'the female of the son of the earth'). The ritual of sucking nipples in the first tale parallels a life-saving reality for the baby in

[14] Edition: Hull (1952, 79-85); translation: O'Grady (1892, Vol. II, 286-9). I am grateful to Tomás Ó Cathasaigh for giving me his unpublished translation of the text; my translations are based upon this. Hull (1952, 80-1) points out that the text may go back to an Old Irish source and that the 'rhetorical' prophecies are older than the prose text.

[15] See Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 42).

the second tale.[16] When the baby is found, he is on all fours, which means that the she-wolf has adopted and nourished him until he is at an age at which he could crawl. The invasion that first seemed to be life-threatening leads to a contract that protects the abducted king or king-to-be. Cormac will be accompanied by wolves during his life, as a boy and as a king. Thus we read in this tale that when the baby is discovered among the wolves, he is taken together with his wolf foster-siblings to his foster-father Lugna Fer Trí. As soon as Cormac finds out the identity of his father, he goes to Tara and his wolves accompany him. When he becomes king, his wolves continue living with him in honour of his fosterage by wolves as a baby.

This 'birth tale' in fact comprises what happens before the birth of Cormac to the events after his death. Cormac is supposed to have lived in the third century—two centuries before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. It is, therefore, not surprising that the text gives two examples of the passive notion of Fate:[17]

> *'Fæd lam ingin-sea anocht, a Airt,' ol in goba, 'ar ata i tairrngiri dam-sa ordan mor do geineamain uaim'. Ba fir on. Ba mor int ordan .i. Cormac Mac Airt Meic Cuind Chetchathaich* (Hull 1952, 82).
>
> 'Spend the night with my daughter tonight, Art' said the smith, 'for it is prophesied of me[18] that a great noble will be born from me.' That was true. The noble was great, that is: Cormac son of Art son of Conn Cétchathach.
>
> *'Ni fir sin,' or Lugna. 'As tu mac na fir-fhlatha .i. mac Airt meic Cuind Cetchathaich ⁊ is duit ata i tairrngiri stiuir th'athar do luamairecht ar ni·bia ith na blicht na mes na muir-torad na sin i core cein co ro·be-siu hi Temraig i tigernus* (Hull 1952, 84).'
>
> 'That is not true,' said Lugna, 'you are the son of the true ruler, that is: the son of Art son of Conn Cétchathach, and it is prophesied of you to take the rudder of your father, for there will not be grain nor milk nor the fruit of trees nor the fruit of the sea nor weather in season until you enjoy dominion in Tara.

The course of Cormac's life has been predestined, but by what or whom remains unknown. His birth is marked by a heavenly sound—thunder—

[16] This tale does not mention the suckling by the she-wolf explicitly, but we find this motif in the eighth-century Old Irish version, entitled *Scéla Éogain ⁊ Cormaic*, 'The stories of Éogan and Cormac' (see Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 116, 121, 125).

[17] See Gwynn (1910, 152-65); Borsje (2002a, 214-31).

[18] A possible alternative translation is: 'it is in store for me'. For more about the passive notion of Fate as expressed by the construction: the preposition *i*, combined with the verbal noun of **tocaid*, the verbal noun of *cinnid*, or *dán*, *tairngire* or *scoth*, often followed by the preposition *do* in the sense of 'is fated for, is in store for', see *DIL* s.v. *cinniud* II (b), dán VIII (b); cp. Borsje (2002a, 225-7). This construction is also given in the quotation following this one.

and a prophecy by his foster-father, explaining the thunder as a welcome sound brought forth by heaven for the son of the ruler.[19] Cormac shows that he is a true prince when he corrects the false judgment of the king of Tara, Lugaid Mac Con. The thunder welcome to the new-born king, Cormac's beauty and excellence, Lugna's above-quoted prophecy of fertility of the land, Cormac's righteous judgment, the well-being of the land and abundance of food during Cormac's reign are the signs of his sacral kingship in this text, but there is no mention of either a sexual union with a supernatural female or a contract with the supernatural as the basis for his kingship.

There are, however, two further noteworthy elements with regard to our theme of protection of the land. First, the false judgment is said to cause a 'blemish' to the landscape: the part of the house in which this judgment is pronounced collapses and the area involved is known as *Cloenfherta Temrach*, 'the Crooked Mound of Tara', ever since.[20] This place name seems to imply that not only the house but also the earth is damaged. Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 64) notes that according to the Middle Irish *Aided Meic Con*, 'The Death of Mac Con', this collapsing stopped thanks to Cormac's judgment,[21] and hence, the truth of the true ruler protects the land from further damage. Second, the contract with the supernatural may have been replaced by a pact with wolves. They are literally 'the sons of the land' in Irish. When the ruling power is given to Cormac, his sacral kingship is described, which is immediately followed by a reference to the wolves in his company:

> *Ba lan in bith do cach maith iar sin cen bai Cormac beo. Badar, imorro, a choin la Cormac iar tain ⁊ as ead fod·era in cadus mor bai la Cormac for conaib .i. dia oileamain do chonaib* (Hull 1952, 84).
>
> The world was full of every good thing after that as long as Cormac was alive. His wolves[22] were then, moreover, with Cormac, and it was this that caused the great affection that Cormac had for wolves, that is, because of his rearing by wolves.

This text thus portrays Cormac as a sacral king bringing prosperity to and protecting his land but he differs from other kings with regard to his relationship with the supernatural.

[19] This is the first of two prophecies by Lugna Fer Trí (see Hull 1952, 82, 83). O'Grady did not translate them, but there is a summary in Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 42-3).
[20] Hull (1952, 84); O'Grady (1892, 288); see further Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 64), on this tradition.
[21] Edited and translated by Dillon (1945, 340-5); dated to the eleventh century (ibid. 340).
[22] On *cú*, 'dog, hound, wolf', and other more specific terms for wolves, see McCone (1990, 213).

3. Blemished land and a king at fault

The tradition about Lugaid Mac Con, his false judgment, and Tara's crooked mound is also found in the Old Irish tale *Cath Maige Mucrama*, 'The battle of Mag Mucrama', §§63-65.[23] This text as a whole represents several instances of our themes of kingship, destruction and protection of the land, and the relationship with the supernatural world; I refer to the excellent analysis by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1980-1, 211-24).

There is yet another king who has been connected with the landmark of the crooked mound in Tara. According to Version C of the pseudo-historical Prologue to *Senchus Már*, 'The great [legal] tradition',[24] the hill at Tara collapsed as a result of another supernatural punishment for the killing of Saint Patrick's charioteer as ordered by King Loegaire:[25]

> *7 ro fergaided in clerec 7 ro togaib a lamu suas docum a tigerna 7 ro bi i crosfigill 7 tainig crithnugud 7 talumcumhsgugud mor isin baile 7 dorchaidetu arin ngrein 7 tarin soillse; 7 iss ed aderuit-sem co n-oslaictea dorus ithfirn and in uair-sin 7 go rabus ag impod na Temrach 7 conid ann-sin ro clænta Temuir* (Carey 1994c, 31).
>
> And the cleric was enraged, and lifted up his arms to his Lord, and was in a cross-vigil. And a trembling and a great earthquake came upon the place, and darkness upon the sun and the daylight; and they say that the gate of Hell was opened then, and that Tara was being twisted around, so that it was then that Tara was made crooked (Carey 1994c, 32).

This narrative formulates the human reaction to the supernatural punishment of the transgressing king in biblical quotes (Mk 4:40; Lk 2:9; Mt 28:4; cp. Carey 1994c, 21), which describe intense fear: *Et timuerunt timore magno 7 facti sunt uelut mortui 7rl* (Carey 1994c, 11), 'And they feared with a great fear and were made like dead men, etc' (Carey 1994c, 18).

These two contemporary etiological myths are rooted in an anthropocentric view on life. A demarcation in the landscape is ascribed to destructive events in which the behaviour of the king is said to perform a pivotal role. His transgression—be it an unjust judgment, be it an attack on a holy man and his company—is believed to call forth a supernatural sanction that changes the landscape. In the first tradition, a verbal uttering related to *fír*, 'truth, justice', is said to lead directly to the collapse; in the second, God is supposed to have reacted to the prayer and gesture of the offended saint.

[23] Edition and translation: O Daly (1975); she dates the text to the first half of the ninth century (ibid. 18).

[24] Edition and translation: Carey (1994c, 1-32); Carey (ibid. 10) dates the composition of the exemplar in the eighth or, more probably, the ninth century.

[25] See also the analysis of this episode in Patrick's biography by Joseph Falaky Nagy (1997, 200-208).

In this anthropocentric view of the world, human words and acts are believed to trigger off supernatural interference—represented by an anonymous and a named supernatural entity respectively—with the land.

4. Protecting the land by counting

A similar violent encounter between King Loegaire and Saint Patrick is found in an older source from the seventh century, the Latin *Life of Saint Patrick*, written by Muirchú moccu Macthéni.[26] Here, the king commands the killing of the saint himself, which results in divine punishment. After a scene of darkness, an earthquake and death, the king and queen see themselves abandoned by most of their followers. The queen begs the saint to spare her husband. The king prostrates himself in submission to Patrick. Muirchú tells his readership that this is only pretence: he plans to kill the saint and his followers in an ambush. Then a miracle happens:

> *Sciens autem Patricius cogitationes regis pessimi benedictis in nomine Iesu Christi sociis suis octo viris cum puero venit ad regem ac numeravit eos rex venientes statimque nusquam conparuerunt ab oculis regis, sed viderunt gentiles octo tantum cervos cum hynulo euntes quasi ad dissertum, et rex Loiguire mestus, timidus et ignominiossus cum paucis evadentibus ad Temoriam versus est deluculo* (Bieler 1979, 90, I.18).
>
> Patrick, however, knew the thoughts of the wicked king.[27] He blessed his companions, eight men with a boy, in the name of Jesus Christ, and started on his way to the king, and the king counted them as they went along, and suddenly they disappeared from the king's eyes; instead, the pagans merely saw eight deer with a fawn going, as it were, into the wilds. And king Loíguire, sad, frightened, and in great shame, went back to Tara at dawn with the few who had escaped (Bieler 1979, 91, I.18).

Let us consider this episode from the perspective of sacral kingship.[28] We can understand the sadness and fear when the king's plan fails, but his shame needs further consideration. Joseph Nagy connects this episode with Celtic kingship mythology, pointing out that a hero may win kingship through a successful deer hunt (Nagy 1997, 88; see also Bromwich 1961, 439-74). This explains why Loegaire feels humiliated: the escape of the saint and his followers signifies not merely a failing plan but also exposes a failing king. Such events are apparently not only of relevance before inauguration but also during the reign of the sacral king. We saw how Fergus mac Leite made a contract with supernatural beings during his reign; similarly, King Loegaire is confronted with a pre-inauguration test

[26] Edition and translation: Bieler (1979, 62-123).

[27] Bieler translates 'the wicked thoughts of the wicked king', but *pessimus* is only mentioned once and qualifies the king.

[28] For more about Saint Patrick's blessing as 'words of power' and the transformation or illusion, see Borsje, 'Druids, deer and 'words of power' (2008 and forthcoming a).

when in power as king. He sees himself powerless in an area where he should have been successful. Deer in Celtic kingship mythology often are transformed supernatural beings (Nagy 1997, 88). An interesting parallel in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 'The cattle raid of Cúailnge', refers to harpers, who turn out to be druids with great supernatural knowledge and who transform into deer when pursued by men of the king (O'Rahilly 1976, 30, 151).

The king is counting his opponents. We could interpret this as a military strategy in that the king is estimating how many warriors he should send out. It is also possible that the motif of counting is used to highlight the fact that there are just as many deer as there were Christians. There is yet another way to read this scene, and for this we need to compare it with an episode in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, which also occurs in the *dindshenchas* (the etymological traditions on place-names; O Daly 1975, 48-9; Stokes 1894, 272-336, 418-84: 470). The narrative episode that explains the etymology of the place-name Mag Mucrama discusses a destructive event in which supernatural swine come out of the cave of Crúachan and lay waste the land. The earth they touch becomes barren for seven years (*Cath Maige Mucrama)* or they blight grain and milk (*dindshenchas*). They cannot be killed, but the text suggests another way to end this evil: counting the pigs would make them leave the land. This, however, turns out to be impossible: nobody arrives at the same number. Then King Ailill and Queen Medb try to count them. When one pig jumps over their chariot, the queen grabs a leg. The pig leaves it in her hand together with his skin. As a result of this, the swine disappear forever. The place thus derives its name Mag Mucríma from this 'pig (*muc*) counting (*rím*)'. This is, incidentally, of interest with regard to Van Hamel's reference to 'knowledge of the land' as another form of protecting the land.

The king and queen are here portrayed in their sacral function of protecting the land, and counting is their method. The variant version in the *dindshenchas* refers to 'the hunt' by the king and queen (Stokes 1894, 470). Evil 'invaders' destroy the fertility of the land. They could even be classified as 'foreign'. They are not normal swine but belong to a supernatural category: *Cath Maige Mucrama* §34 uses the designation *mucca gentliuchta* (O Daly 1975, 48-9). The adjective *gentliucht* is a term derived from Latin *gentilis* and means 'gentilism, heathenism; especially heathen lore, wizardry, heathen spells etc;'[29] Latin *gentiles* may also refer to 'foreigners'. The *dindshenchas* tradition refers to them as 'a herd of druidic swine' (*muctrét*) *drúidechta*; Stokes 1894, 470). They dwell in the land under

[29] See *DIL*, s.v.

the earth or the underworld. *Cath Maige Mucrama* points out that the cave of Crúachan is considered to be Ireland's gate to Hell (O Daly 1975, 48-9).

Just as the king and queen tried to banish the destructive invaders by counting, so did King Loegaire try to count the evil invaders who threatened his land. Viewing the scene from this perspective overturns the usual hagiographic ideology, in which the saint symbolises 'good' and not 'evil'. Muirchú explicitly states that Patrick's advent means evil to the king and the status quo. In a flashback he tells of the druids who have been prophesying the revolution that will be brought about by Christianity and Patrick. A foreign way of life, a new kingdom will come. This new teaching will 'overthrow kingdoms, kill the kings who offer resistance, seduce the crowds, destroy all their gods, banish all the works of their craft, and reign for ever' (Bieler 1979, 77: I.10). Thus, Saint Patrick is described as a foreign, evil invader, bringing death and destruction. Previous to the episode about the king's ambush, Patrick is indeed described as calling forth darkness, an earthquake and death. King Loegaire, however, is not able to protect his land against this invasion.

5. Revenge from the Otherworld

The cave of Crúachan is not only considered to be the Door to Hell: according to the Old Irish tale *Echtrae Nerai*,[30] it also leads into a *síd*, or a hollow hill, where supernatural beings called *áes síde*, 'the people or inhabitants of a *síd*', dwell. This narrative portrays the adventures of the warrior Nera in this hollow hill of Crúachan, and his dealings with its inhabitants and with a thirsty, speaking corpse. There is a certain overlap in terminology between phantoms and the *áes síde* in medieval Irish literature.[31] One of these terms is *síabair* (plural: *síabrai*), which signifies both 'spectre, phantom', and 'supernatural being (usually in a pejorative sense)'. There are several traditions that refer to a specific threat to Irish kings by violent *síabrai*, some of which will be discussed now.

The kingship of Conaire Mór (Conaire the Great) is based on a contract with the supernatural (Ó Cathasaigh 1977-79, 142-4; 1996, 206-7). and he also appears to have a contract with 'sons of the land' or wolves (Sjöblom 2000, 83-4), as we read in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, 'The destruction of the hostel of Da Derga', §66:[32]

[30] Edition and translation: Meyer (1889, 212-28).

[31] For more about this overlap, see Borsje (2003 and forthcoming b).

[32] Edition and translation: Stokes (1901, 9-61, 165-215, 282-329, 390-437); edition based on the Yellow Book of Lecan by Knott (1936), which was translated into Dutch by Draak & De Jong (1979, 148-201), and into English by Gantz (1981, 61-106).

> *7 ní foruích mac tibhri*[33] *ina flaith tar ag fireand cacha indise ón chind mblíadnae co araill. 7 ataat .vii. meic thíri i ngiallnai fri raigid ina thigseom fri coimét in rechtai sin 7 atá cúlaitiri íarna cúl .i. Macc Locc 7 is é taccair tar a cend hi tig Conaire* (Knott 1936, 18).
>
> And in his reign, from year's end to year's end, no wolf has attacked aught save one bullcalf of each byre; and to maintain this rule there are seven wolves in hostageship at the sidewall in his house, and behind this is a further security, even Maclocc, and 'tis he that pleads (for them) in Conaire's house (Stokes 1901, 167-8).

Despite this, everything goes wrong: his foster-brothers steal, plunder and go 'wolving' (§§18-20).[34] Conaire harms his land by uttering an unjust judgment and realises that his life will be short as a consequence (§§20-21). His new judgment banishes his foster-brothers from Ireland, which immediately leads to their meeting with a foreign king's son, the one-eyed Ingcél Cáech (whose name means 'One-eyed Bad Omen' or 'One-eyed Bad Luck'), with whom they make a pact (*cairdes*) to destroy a target in the two respective lands together (§§22-23). Conaire violates two *gessi* (§24), and then visible signs of the collapse of his reign appear: plundering men and burning land (§25). These signs are explained as evidence that the law has been broken (§26). Two more of Conaire's *gessi* are broken and then *síabrai* are mentioned (§26):

> *Is é rí insin loingsige siabrai didiu din bith fo bith imus-rola in t-omon íar sin* (Knott 1936, 8, ll. 250-1 and n. 1).
>
> That is the king whom *síabrai*, 'phantoms', (therefore) banished from the world/land because (the) fear bewildered them then …

The version in Lebor na hUidre seems to describe the fire as a phantom illusion and does not mention expulsion here:

> *Is iat dodróni in smúitcheó ndruidechta sin din bith síabrai fo bithin ar ro corpait géssi Conaire. Immusrala trá in t-ómon mór sin do Chonaire …* (Best & Bergin 1929, 207).
>
> They that made of the world that druidic smoke-mist were *síabrai*, because the *gessi* of Conaire had been violated. That great fear bewildered them then for Conaire ...

Great fear is experienced when a king breaks his contract with the supernatural world. We saw this in the case of King Fergus mac Leite, who was also overcome by fear after breaking his '*geis*' and encountering the *muirdris.* The same word for fear—*omun*—is used in the case of Fergus and of Conaire. A reference to the expulsion caused by the supernatural entities is found at a later place in Lebor na hUidre—in the extract[35] from the lost manuscript, known as Cín Dromma Snechta. Here, a more sinister reason

[33] Lebor na hUidre reads: *tíre*.
[34] Ó Cathasaigh (1996); see further West (1997, 950-64); Carey (2002, 37-72), and the literature to which these articles refer.
[35] See Ó Cathasaigh (1990, 103-14: 104).

for the supernatural punishment is given: the *áes síde* kill Conaire in revenge for a crime committed by his ancestor, King Eochaid.

Eochaid Airem, king of Tara, thought he could use the people of the *síd* and their great supernatural power (*cumachtae*) in order to improve the landscape but lost his wife to them. In his attempts to retrieve her, he destroyed their dwellings. This tale is extant as the third version of *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Bergin & Best 1938, 174-93). Midir of Síd Brí Léith, king of the *síde* of Ireland, woos Eochaid's wife Étaín and describes his land and people in a poem to her (Bergin & Best 1938, 180-3). He tells her that his people have no blemish; conceptions happen without either sin or lust. This seems to indicate that according to this tradition, the *áes síde* do not descend from the mythical first human being, Adam.[36] They are different from the human race: they can see everyone, but they themselves are invisible. Moreover, they cannot be counted (!) because of the 'darkness of Adam's transgression' (Bergin & Best 1938, 180-1). We see once more how the motifs of kingship, protection of the land (the effort to improve the land), foreign invasion (here the destruction of the hollow hills by the king), and the supernatural world are interconnected. The thread of this tale is linked up with the tales about Conaire, who becomes the victim of the supernatural revenge.

For this reason, the *síabrai* appear[37] to destroy the land and they banish and kill Conaire:

> *Is ed fodrúair a orcain hi Cinta Echdach ar is áes síde Breg Leith dorinólsat in n-orgain fo bíth tonaidbecht forro a síd oc cuinchid Étaíne la Echdaig. Ros dolbsat iarom lucht in tsíde sin hi slúagu 7 dollotár do inriud Maige Breg 7 tarfás samlaid do Chonaire. Ecmaing ba tír dudlotar ar is hé rí insin loingside siabrai* (Best & Bergin 1929, 244, ll. 8014-19).
>
> That (i.e. the fact that he was descended from Echaid) was what caused him to be killed for the crimes of Echaid, for it is the beings from the *síd* (*áes síde*) of Brí Léith who mustered (for) the slaying because their *síd* had been broken up by Echaid as he sought Étaín. The persons of the *síd* shaped themselves then into armies and they devastated Mag mBreg and thus it appeared to Conaire. That was the land[38] they happened to come to, for he is the king whom phantoms (*síabrai*) banished (Ó Cathasaigh 1990, 107).

The text proceeds with mentioning that Conaire became king after his father and some prohibitions of his reign, announced by a druid, are listed.

[36] There are various medieval Irish views on how to classify the *áes síde*; see Carey (1999, 1-38); Borsje (2003 and forthcoming b).
[37] The destruction of the land may be an illusion in this version, because the Cín Dromma Snechta abstract explicitly says that it appeared like this to Conaire.
[38] Ó Cathasaigh translates 'country'.

Síabrai and *áes síde* seem to be identical in this tradition. The same identification is found in the Old Irish tale *De Shíl Chonairi Móir*, 'On the descendants of Conaire Mór'.[39] The people from the *síd* of Brí Léith help Conaire to get the kingship of Tara. They are thus the same as the *síabrai* in the following statement: *Ise in Conairi sin iarum ri bertatar siabrai hirrige* (Gwynn 1912, 136), 'That Conaire then is the king whom phantoms raised to kingship'. The tale gives the impression that they help him for the sake of his maternal side but punish him because of his paternal side. In this version, his father Eterscél retrieves his wife Ess from the *áes síde* by violating their dwelling.

This mutual violence against mounds and the land fits in the broader frame of invasions. In the Old Irish tale *De gabáil in tshída*, 'On the seizure of the *síd*',[40] the human invaders of Ireland found the grain and milk continuously destroyed by the Túatha Dé until they made a pact (*cairdes*) with their king, the Dagda. Contract and protection, conflict and invasion are recurring motifs in the literature. Thus, in *Airne Fíngein* §9, 'Fíngen's night watch', the Morrígain, Bodb, Midir and Mac ind Óc expel four Fomoire from Ireland and protect the land against invading, plundering Fomoire that destroy the crops as long as the descendants of Conn Cétchathach live.[41] In *Baile in Scáil* §1, this king rises early every day to watch out for an invasion of men of the *síd* or the Fomoire.[42]

To return to Conaire: his fate is sealed because he is no longer seen as a trustworthy protector of the land. Foreign invaders play a role in his demise, and according to Recension III of the tale, they are instruments of the supernatural beings: *Ocus iss iat robatar ann, sluag síde Breg Leth, ocus is íat ro tinoil in n-argain* (Stokes 1901, 32, n. 8, the last line of §25), 'And they were there—the army of the *síd* of Brí Léith, and they were the ones who had assembled the destruction'.

6. Portrait of a Foreign Invader

Síabrai are not only mentioned in relation to the death of Conaire but also with regard to Cormac's death. The extant texts, however, do not give us a clear insight into how we should see this connection. When Lugna Fer Trí, the foster-father of Cormac, prophesies for a second time in *Geneamuin*

[39] Edition & translation: Gwynn (1912, 130-43); Thurneysen (1921, 619) dates this text to the eighth century.

[40] Edition and translation: Hull (1931, 53-8); dated to the ninth century (ibid. 54).

[41] Edition: Vendryes (1953); translation: Cross & Brown (1918, 29-47). Vendryes (1953, xxii) dates the text to the ninth or tenth century.

[42] Edition and translation: Murray (2004, 33, 50). In Harl. 5280 (ibid. 113), the Fomoire are not mentioned. The text has an older stratum, possibly from the ninth century, and was revised in the early eleventh century (ibid. 4).

Chormaic, he foretells that *síabrai* will die after forty years of Cormac's kingship (for a quote, see below). There is no further explanation why or how this would happen. Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 52) points out that Lugna's second prophecy contradicts other statements in the tale concerning Cormac's expulsions from Tara and his death; he assumes that the prophecy was later added to the main text. When the actual description of Cormac's death in the *ráith*, 'fort', of Spelán the hospitaller in Cleitech is given, the circumstances look suspicious, but there is no mention of *síabrai*. A salmon bone, which was kneaded into wheat (dough), gets stuck in his throat (Hull 1952, 85).

We have seen how the demise of Fergus mac Leite and Conaire Mór was accompanied by a state of fear. Fear also plays a significant role in a related tradition on Cormac's death. In the late Middle Irish (Ó Cathasaigh 1977, 68) poem *Cnucha cnoc os cionn Life*, 'Cnucha, a hill above the Liffey', Cormac hears the noise of an angry crowd, because of which he swallows the fatal morsel in terror (*úathbás*).[43] The detail of dying phantoms is only mentioned in the prophecy and not in these two death accounts. The relevant part of the prophecy by Lugna Fer Trí in *Geneamuin Chormaic* goes as follows:

> *Bid ri Temrach co bo tri.*
> *Con·bebabat*[44] *siabra iar caithim .xl. i righi for cathair Coraind conan-eber fris Temair* (Hull 1952, 83).
>
> He will be king of Tara three times.
> *Síabrai* will die after [his] spending 40 [years] in kingship over the fortress of Corann, which is called Tara.

This bears similarity to a prophecy about Cormac in *Baile in Scáil* §13:

> *Bid rii Temrach co fo thrii*
> *ara-mbebat ilshíabrai .i. síthaigi* (Murray 2004, 37).
>
> Three times he will be king of Tara
> in [i.e. during] which will die many *síabrai*, i.e. *síd*-dwellers (Murray 2004, 53).

The actual reference to Cormac's death in the prophecy in *Baile in Scáil*, however, does not mention supernatural beings, but we recognize the place of his death: *Bebaid Cormac caín, marb día máirt hi tóeb Chletig*, 'Fair Cormac will die, dead on a Tuesday beside Cleitech' (Murray 2004, 38, 55).

What are we exactly dealing with in these two texts? The first line apparently reflects traditions about Cormac being expelled from kingship

[43] Edition and translation: Power (1917, 39-55: 43, 49).

[44] Read: *con·bebat*; this is one of the common errors of the two manuscripts, presumably going back to the common exemplar. Hull refers to the form *ara·mbebat* in *Baile in Scáil*, but describes this tradition as 'Cormac's ultimate destruction by the fairy elves (*siabra*)' (Hull 1952, 80).

and Tara; the second line in both texts gives rise to many questions and may even portray two different views. In *Geneamuin Chormaic*, a link seems to be implied between Cormac ending his kingship and the *síabrai* ending their life. *Baile in Scáil* appears to refer to their death during his reign. Are they killed by him? Do they die of grief because of his banishment (*Baile in Scáil*) or because of his death (*Geneamuin Chormaic*)?

The prophecy in *Baile in Scáil* in Rawlinson B 512 mentions the death of the *síabrai* and then continues with a reference to an overseas journey by Cormac: *A breith dar muir la Mǽlchend i n-aidchi gaim tess Beind Bairchi*, 'He will be taken overseas by Máelchenn one winter's night south of Benn Bairchi' (Murray 2004, 37, 54). Melchend is the name of a druid in Cormac's retinue (Carney 1940, 187-97: 192), Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 70, n. 262) points out, and this druid plays a role in a different, probably later, tradition about Cormac's death. Here we find elements from the older sources combined, but the *síabrai* are said to be killers instead of dying.

Thus, in *Do Fhlathiusaib hÉrend*, 'On the reigns of Ireland', the statement about Cormac's death by swallowing a salmon bone in Clettech after forty years of kingship is followed by an alternative tradition in which Maelchenn betrays Cormac and *síabrai* kill him:

> *Cormac hua Cuind .xl. bliadan co n-erbailt i tig Clettig iar lenamain cnáma bratain ina bragit. ł it siabra ro n-ortsat iarna brath do Maelcend* (Best, Bergin & O'Brien 1954, 93, ll. 2971-3).
>
> Cormac descendant of Conn: 40 years, until he died in the house of Clettech when the bone of a salmon got stuck in his throat. Or they were *síabrai* who killed him after his betrayal by Máelchend.

According to Ó Cathasaigh (1977, 70, n. 262), the reading *brath*, 'betrayal', may have been caused by a miscopying of *breith* from the tradition about the overseas journey in *Baile in Scáil*. The *Annals of Tigernach* supply a reason for the betrayal that has become part of the tradition: *Nó as iad na siabra ron-ortadar iarna brath do Maelcenn drái o nár' cred Cormac dó*, 'Or it was the *síabrai*[45] that destroyed him after he was betrayed by Maelchenn the druid,[46] since Cormac did not believe in him'.[47]

We have seen that Cormac was given an exceptional status in religious matters in the texts that we have discussed so far.[48] His kingship

[45] Stokes translates 'elves'.
[46] Stokes translates 'wizard'.
[47] Edition and translation: Stokes (1896, 6-33, 119-263, 337-420: 20).
[48] The twelfth-century tales about Cormac's adventurous journey (*echtrae*) into the Otherworld, from where he retrieves his wife and son from Manannán Mac Lir and returns with his gifts to the human world, might form a late 'correction' of Cormac's exceptional religious status. The

is not inaugurated through a sacred sexual union nor based upon a contract with the *áes síde*. The alternative tradition in the annals hints at (religious?) difficulties with a druid. The Dublin fragment of the *Annals of Tigernach* is explicit about this: Cormac believed in God and hence ended up in a conflict with the druidic order. All loose ends are here brought together and tied up within the Christian view of the world by naming not only the *síabrai* but also the devil[49] as the supernatural entities causing Cormac's death:

> *(Cormac hua Cuind Chétchataig) do ecaib hi Cleitiuch Bregh dia mairt iar leanamain chnamha bratain ina braghait. Siabraidh ron-ortadur iarna brath do Mhailcend drui 'ar n-imphod do Cormac ar druidibh 7 ar adradh De dó tairsibh. IS ime sein ro aimsigh Diabul Cormac co tuc bas dochraidh do .i. cnaim inn iaich snamha dia marbad.*
>
> Cormac, grandson of Conn the Hundred-battled, died in Cletech of Bregia on a Tuesday, a salmon's bone having stuck in his throat. *Síabrai* killed him after he was betrayed by Maelcenn the druid because Cormac had revolted against druids and worshipped God in lieu of them. Wherefore the Devil attacked Cormac and brought him an ugly death, to wit, the bone of the swimming (?) salmon killed him.[50]

What seems to be implied is that Cormac rejects the prevalent religion, which makes him an enemy of the current religious professional elite, the druids. One of them, Máelchenn from his own retinue, betrays him by feeding him dangerous food. The finishing touch is delivered by supernatural entities: a devil from the new religious system together with the *síabrai* from the old system give him a fright, which makes the food lethal. The religious professionals and the supernatural entities are further linked in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, in which the former incite the latter:

> *Cetracha bliadhain do Corbmac, mac Airt, mic Cuind, hi righe nEreann go bfuair bás i cCletech iar lenmhain cnáimh bradáin ina bhraghait, tres an siabhradh ro imir Mailgenn drai fair, iar niompodh do Corbmac ar na draoithibh fo bithin adharta Dé dó tairsibh. Conadh aire sin ro aimsigh diabhal eisiumh tre furaileamh na ndruadh go ttuc bás dochraidh dó.*
>
> Forty years was Cormac, son of Art, son of Conn, in the sovereignty of Ireland, when he died at Cleiteach, the bone of a salmon sticking in his throat, on account of the siabhradh [genii] which Maelgenn, the Druid, incited at him, after Cormac had turned against the Druids, on account of his adoration of God in preference to them. Wherefore a devil attacked him, at the instigation of the Druids, and gave him a painful death.[51]

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sexual reunion with his queen happens during his reign and not as initiation to his kingship (see Hull 1949b, 871-83, and the literature there cited).

[49] The Irish text does not use an article in this case, therefore 'a devil' may be a better translation.

[50] Edition and translation: Stokes (1897b, 374-90: 382). I have slightly adapted Stokes's translation: Stokes translates 'fairies' instead of *síabrai* and 'wizard(s)' instead of 'druid(s)'.

[51] Edition and translation: O'Donovan (1856, 114-17).

Spelán the hospitaller from *Geneamuin Chormaic* seems to have disappeared and given way to Máelchenn the druid, but the place Clettech or Cleitech has remained consistent. We have previously encountered Cleitech, mentioned as the *síd* appointed to Elcmar when he was robbed expelled from Brug na Bóinne in *Tochmarc Étaíne*.

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1997, 71) is right when he states that 'Cormac's death is shrouded in mystery'. Yet, we may gain something from reading the texts from the perspective of the foreign invader motif. Cormac is a king different from others. He does not want to be buried in Brug na Bóinne, we read in *Geneamuin Chormaic*, because he venerates a different god than the people buried there (Hull 1952, 85). According to the Middle Irish text *Senchas na Relec*, 'The history of burial places', this used to be the place of burial for the Túatha Dé Danann, and kings were buried there since Crimthann Nia Náir started this tradition at the instigation of Nár, his wife from the *síd*.[52] Once more, in a marginal gloss *síabrai* are said to have killed Cormac and they are identified with the Túatha Dé Danann:

> *Tánic tra bás dia innaigidseom hi Tig Cletig isin bliadain tanaise ar coll a roirc* [read: *roisc*] *íar ngleanamain cnáma bratan ina bragit.*
>
> [Marginal gloss:] *ł it siabra ron ortsat .i. T*[*uatha*] *D*[*é Danann ar it friu as*]*berthea sia*[*bra*] (Best & Bergin 1929, 127).
>
> In the second year after the injuring of his eye he came by his death at the house of Cletech, the bone of a salmon having stuck in his throat (Petrie 1845, 100).
> Or they were *síabrai* who killed him, that is: Túatha Dé Danann for they used to be called *síabrai*.[53]

From the perspective of the dwellers of the *síde* and the Túatha Dé Danann, Cormac was a forerunner of Patrick with his new laws and religion. Cormac was a proto-foreign invader. Some foreign invaders or enemies of Ireland are portrayed in a certain manner, and Cormac seems to a certain extent to be drawn into this type of portrayal.

Let us, for instance, consider the enemy of King Conaire. Ingcél Cáech, the leader of the foreign invaders, is one-eyed and has, depending on the manuscript reading, three or seven pupils in his eye (Knott 1936, §§44, 58). The single eye is notable in various foreign invaders, such as Balor, Cichol, anonymous warriors of the Fomoire and Partholón.[54] Ingcél Cáech has robbers and evil or demon folk in his retinue (see Stokes 1901,

[52] Edition and translation: Petrie (1845, 97-101). For a reconstruction of the lost *echtrae*, 'adventurous journey' of Crimthann Nia Náir, see Borsje (2004, 169-93).
[53] This gloss is also found in H.3.17; see Petrie (1845, 98).
[54] See Borsje (2002b, 75-99), for an analyis of the portrayal of Ingcél Cáech, and further references to these one-eyed invaders (ibid. 84-5, n. 67), for Balor, see Borsje & Kelly (2003, 1-39: 4-8).

167) and he collaborates with Irish exiles. Demonising robbers is a well-known motif in early Irish literature,[55] but it seems that we can extend this feature to foreign invaders as well. The motif of a single eye is sometimes found as a characteristic of these kinds of people, emphasising their warrior status, as Kim McCone points out.[56] We should furthermore bear in mind that the Antichrist, an important supernatural entity belonging to the demonic realm, according to Christian tradition, is also depicted as a one-eyed being.[57]

This complex of motifs of being one-eyed, exile, foreign invaders, demonisation and destruction is also associated with an Irish king. Congal Cáech (Congal the One-eyed), king of Ireland, is in the oldest tradition[58] expelled from Tara because a bee blinded his eye. In the later tradition, he is said to be a king of Ulster. This tragic one-eyed king becomes enraged with his foster-father Domnall, who is king of Tara according to the later tradition. Congal leaves Ireland and leads foreign invaders back, thereby destroying the land. He is demonised as well, because he is said to be inspired by either Satan or the Furies.[59]

When we now look at Cormac, we see significant similarities and differences. Just as Ingcél Cáech, Cormac has seven pupils in his eyes, although in Cormac's case this mark is a sign of beauty.[60] Cormac, moreover, becomes one-eyed. The blinding of one eye leads to his expulsion from Tara.[61] Cormac is, however, not demonised as the others but is assailed by two foreign women who turn out to be demonic beings, called *geilti glinne* (the wild women of a valley).[62] They threaten to destroy Ireland, but Cormac puts himself under the safeguard of 'the true God', and thereby saves the land.

We have noted Cormac's different relationship with the supernatural order, which became apparent in the virtual absence in the texts under discussion of a sexual union with a woman representing the sovereignty, and a 'pact' with wolves seemed to replace the contract with the *áes síde*. Perhaps the latter was seen to be incompatible with or embarrassing to his

[55] See, e.g. Sharpe (1979, 75-92); McCone (1986, 1-22; 1996b, 89-111); Nagy (1997, 109-11, 295-9).
[56] See the publications of Kim McCone, mentioned in the previous footnote. For more about the symbolism of the motif of being one-eyed, see Borsje (2002b).
[57] Edition and translation: Ó Cuív (1973, 87-113: 96).
[58] See 'Bee judgments'; edition and translation: Charles-Edwards & Kelly (1983, §§30-33); for the date of the text, see pp 13 (about the middle of the seventh century), 27 (the period c.637–c. 700).
[59] See Borsje (2007b).
[60] See *Tesmolad Cormaic*, 'The panegyric of Cormac' (O'Grady 1892, I, 89-90, II, 96-7). For the significance of multiple pupils, see Borsje & Kelly (2003, 15-16).
[61] See e.g. Petrie (1845, 97-8, 100); Hull (1958-59, 14-63: 23-8, 45-8).
[62] Edition and translation: Meyer (1891, 69-70).

Christian identity, and the substitution with wolves, therefore, suited better. Wolves are associated with foreigners (as in the term *cú glas*, 'grey dog, hound or wolf; exile from overseas') and with robbers. Perhaps what we can see here symbolised is that these groups are under the control of Cormac, a paragon of the ideal of sacral king

And yet, from a different perspective, he is a one-eyed invader and a threat to the old religion. Perhaps this is why not only *síabrai* and Cleitech but also a druid are mentioned in the mysterious tale of his death.

Conclusions

This contribution has developed the idea advanced by Anton Gerard van Hamel about protection and preservation of the land as a central theme in the literature. His idea was connected with the themes of sacral kingship, foreign invasions and the supernatural order. The survey here presented is far from exhaustive, and can only serve as a preliminary exploration.

Van Hamel's three categories of hunting, fighting and knowledge of the land are all represented in this survey (see table 2).

Table 2. Hunting dangerous creatures/fighting off invaders/ knowledge of the land

Success	**Failure**
	Invasion small water people
contract King Fergus with small people	breaking contract—fear
interdiction on 'ancestral' loch	Fergus = invader—blemish on face
(Loch Rudraige)	death by monster

King Cormac pact with wolves	Becomes one-eyed—exile
contract with 'foreign' supernatural (God)	death by *síabrai*

King Eochaid contract with the super-natural	king loses queen
improvement landscape	violation of mounds

King Conaire contract with supernatural	Unjust judgment, breaking *gessi* & law
	burning land—fear
King Conaire contract with wolves	one-eyed foreign invader contract with exiled robbers: destruction of the land
	Ancestral crime: death by *síabrai*

knowledge of the land	barren, destroyed land
Queen Medb counts pigs	invasion of infernal pigs
(Cath Maige Mucrama)	

New supernatural order	invasion by Christians
Plain near Tara	King Loegaire counts deer—fear

(Clóenfherta Temrach)	unjust judgment King Lugaid
new king	landslide & barren land
new order	transgression King Loegaire
	earthquake—fear

	TDD destroy produce of the land
contract human invaders & king TDD: protection of the land	

King Conn C. guards the land against invasion	Threat of invasion by men of the *síde* & Fomoire
Expulsion of destructive Fomoire by 4 supernatural beings	Destruction of the land by Fomoire
4 supernatural beings guard the land for the sake of Conn's descendants	against invasions of the Fomoire

Congal king of Tara	becomes one-eyed—expulsion from kingship
Domnall king of Tara 'contract' with God	Congal 'contract' with Satan/Fury/Furies
	Congal Cáech king of Ulster & foreign invaders destroy the land

	Foreign *geilti glinne* break *geis* Tara & maim people
Cormac invokes safeguard King of Heaven	They demand veneration of demons
protection of the land against destruction	

	revenge old religious order against 'one-eyed foreign invader' King Cormac

With regard to our theme, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. A king may enter a contract, which can bring good things to the land. But if he violates the contract, fear reigns and king and land face destruction. An anti-social contract may be established that serves this destruction

2. Failure at a hunt and fatal foreign invasions expose the fact that something is wrong with the relationship between the king and the supernatural. This applies both to the reconstruction of pre-Christian and Christian times. In fact, these two religious perspectives may be

found within one text, even when a genre is clearly dedicated to Christian ideology, such as hagiography.

3. Kings should obey the rules imposed upon them by the supernatural order, either native or Christian or both. If the king happens to live in a time of transition, like Loegaire, he should be flexible and know which order to follow. If he is a transition figure himself, like Cormac, he may die in a conflict with the old order and receive a reward from the new order: a future with the King of Heaven and a literary testimony of excellence, despite being blemished in one eye.