

File ID	uvapub:55064
Filename	283785.pdf
Version	final

SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type	book chapter
Title	Human sacrifice in medieval Irish literature
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Faculty	FGw: Instituut voor Cultuur en Geschiedenis (ICG)
Year	2007

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.283785>

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II. HUMAN SACRIFICE IN MEDIEVAL IRISH LITERATURE

Jacqueline Borsje

The earliest reference to Celtic religion mentions human sacrifice.¹ Sopater, a playwright from the late fourth century BC, writes about the Celts:

Among them it is the custom, whenever they win any success in battle, to sacrifice their captives to the gods ...²

Sopater supplies us with the main elements for a definition of human sacrifice: people kill certain other human beings for a specific reason as an offering to supernatural beings.

There are three types of written sources available that give information about so-called Celtic human sacrifice. First, Greek and Latin writings mention several types of human sacrifice purported to have been performed by various Celtic populations.³ Secondly, we have medieval texts from the inhabitants of countries, where a Celtic language is spoken: Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.⁴ Thirdly,

¹ See P. Freeman, *War, women, and druids* (Austin, 2002) 33f.

² Sopater, fragment 6 Kassel-Austin, quoted by Athenaeus (fl. c. AD 200) iv.160, tr. C.B. Gulick, *Athenaeus* II (London and Cambridge MA, 1928) 230f.

³ See, for instance, E. Anwyl, 'Communion with Deity (Celtic)', in J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* III (Edinburgh, 1910) 747-51 at 749-50; E. Anwyl and J.A. MacCulloch, 'Sacrifice (Celtic)', *ibidem* XI (Edinburgh, 1920) 8-12; G. Dottin, *Manuel pour servir à l'étude de l'Antiquité Celtique* (Paris, 1906) 114-15, 255-58; idem, 'Divination (Celtic)', in Hastings, *Encyclopaedia* IV (Edinburgh, 1911) 787-8 at 787; L. Gougaud, *Les chrétientés celtiques* (Paris, 1911) 17-18; J. de Vries, *Keltische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1961) s.v. Opfer; F. Graf, 'Menschenopfer in der Bürgerbibliothek. Anmerkungen zum Götterkatalog der "Commenta Bernensia" zu Lucan 1,445', *Archäologie der Schweiz* 14 (1991) 136-43. On the relationship between classical sources and recent archaeological finds, see F. Marco-Simón, 'Sacrificios humanos en la Céltica antigua: entre el estereotipo literario y la evidencia interna', *Arch. f. Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1999) 1-15.

⁴ For medieval Irish examples, see F.N. Robinson, 'Human sacrifice among the Irish Celts', *Anniversary papers by colleagues and pupils of George Lyman Kittredge*

folklore customs from these same countries from the last centuries have been said to be survivals of the practice of human sacrifice.⁵

What strikes us immediately is that we have no direct witnesses from the Celts themselves: the information comes from Classical authors, Christian descendants of the Celts and modern scholarship.⁶ A survey and analysis of all these texts could easily fill a book, which is why the present paper is limited to the literary motif of human sacrifice in medieval Irish literature.⁷ The other sources will be referred to only when relevant.

In this survey, early Irish examples of human sacrifice are classified in four types.⁸ The first type is human sacrifice in the strict sense: an offering to Gods for a certain purpose. The other types lack the mention of supernatural beings to whom the offering is made. They can be defined as foundation sacrifice (2), vicarious sacrifice

presented on the completion of his twenty-fifth year of teaching in Harvard University, June, MCMXIII (Boston and London, 1913) 185-97, and below. For Welsh examples, see H. Gaidoz, 'Review of "Zur Volkskunde", alte und neue Aufsätze von Felix Liebrecht (...)', *Revue Celtique* 4 (1879-80) 118-22 at 120-21; J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh, 1911) 190, and below; for Scottish examples, see G. Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow, 1911) 276-89; A. Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica. Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh & London, 1928) 338-41, and below. I did not come across any Breton examples.

⁵ See, for instance, J. Brand, *Observations on popular antiquities chiefly illustrating the origin of our vulgar customs, ceremonies and superstitions*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London, 1900; 1777¹) 125-26, 210-11, and the theories mentioned in MacCulloch, *Religion*, s.v. Sacrifice, human; R. MacilleDhuibh, 'Sating the river goddess', *West Highland Free Press*, 1-4-1994; 'The reason of the cow's hide', *West Highland Free Press*, 27-12-2002.

⁶ It is beyond any doubt that there is a hidden agenda in most of our sources. To interpret and assess the information offered in the texts is not an easy task. See, for instance, N.K. Chadwick, *The druids*, ed. Anne Ross (Cardiff, 1997²) 6-30, on several classical texts ultimately deriving from the tradition of Posidonius (c. 135-c. 50 BC).

⁷ At the turn of the 20th century, scholars debated the historical reality of human sacrifice among the Irish Celts: see, e.g., E. O'Curry in O'Curry and W.K. Sullivan, *On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish II* (Dublin, 1873) 222; P.W. Joyce, *A social history of ancient Ireland I* (London, New York & Bombay, 1903) 239, 281-86; K. Meyer, 'Human sacrifice among the ancient Irish', *Ériu* 2 (1905) 86; Gougoud, *Chrétientés*, 17; MacCulloch, *Religion*, 236. This question is beyond the scope of this study. For references to archaeological finds in the Irish context, see Marco-Simón, 'Sacrificios', notes 43, 59; and R. Ó Floinn, 'Recent Research into Irish Bog Bodies', in R.C. Turner and R.G. Scaife (eds.), *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives* (London, 1995) 137-145, quoted in Ailbhe MacShamráin, 'Iarsmaí 'Ceilteacha' na Danmhairge ón Iarannaois: Comharthaí ar Chaidreamh?', in R. Ó hUiginn & L. MacCóil (eds.), *Bliainiris 2001* (Ráth Cairn, 2001) 181-202. With thanks to Ailbhe MacShamráin for sending me an English version of his article.

⁸ Initially, I distinguished even a fifth type – metaphorical sacrifice – but I dropped this category on second thought, because it stretches the definition too much.

(3), and burial sacrifice (4). The length of this paper dictates that I can analyse only the most important text in depth; the other examples will be dealt with more briefly.

In this paper, I use words, such as 'idol' and 'paganism'. These terms do not reflect my judgement of these religious concepts, but are translations of words from my sources. Finally, archaeology is not included in my discussion: this is a discipline in its own right and is beyond the scope of this paper.

1. Offerings to the Gods

The best-known Irish example of human sacrifice is from the tradition on place-names, the *Dindshenchas*, in which the place-name Mag Slécht is explained. The prose version goes as follows:

Ann roboi rilglidal Ereenn.i. Crom Croich,⁹ 7 da idhal decc do clochaib ime, 7 eisium dí or, 7 is é ba déa do cach lucht rogab Erinn co toracht Patric. IS dó no ídpradis cétgeine cacha sotha 7 primgene cacha cloinde. IS cuca rosiacht Tigern[m]las mac Follaich ri Ereenn dia samna co firu 7 co mna Ereenn imalle dia adhradh, coro slecht uile fiadhu co ræm[d]jetar tul a n-etan 7 maetha hi srona 7 faircledha a nglun 7 corra a n-uillend, co n-eplatar teora cethrama[i]n fer n-Ereenn oc na slechtonaib sin. Unde Mag Slecht.¹⁰

Tis there was the king-idol of Erin, namely the Crom Cróich, and around him twelve idols made of stones; but he was of gold. Until Patrick's advent, he was the god of every folk that colonized Ireland. To him they used to offer the firstlings of every issue (*suth*) and the chief scions of every clan (*clann*). 'Tis to him that Erin's king, Tigernmas son of Follach, repaired on the day of Samain¹¹ together with the men and women of Ireland, in order to adore him. And they all prostrated before him, so that the tops of their foreheads and the gristle of their noses and the caps of their knees and the ends of their elbows broke, and three fourths of the men of Erin perished at those prostrations. Whence *Mag Slecht* "Plain of Prostrations".¹²

⁹ Variant readings are: Crom Cruach (Book of Lecan 250va18), – Croich (Book of Ballymote 393a5); Crom Cruaich (Trinity College Dublin, MS 1322 (H.3.3) 51b24). I am grateful to Pádraig Ó Macháin for sending me a print-out from the manuscript's microfilm of this last page.

¹⁰ W. Stokes, 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*', *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895) 31-83, 135-67, 269-312 at 35 (henceforth: *Prose Tales* 2).

¹¹ The translation of Stokes reads here 'on Hallontide', presumably meaning 'on All-Hallow's Tide'.

¹² Stokes, *Prose Tales* 2', 35-36.

The metrical version has extra information.¹³ This chief idol (*ídal ard*)¹⁴ or God of the Irish¹⁵ is here called Crom Crúaich.¹⁶ The poem confirms the detail that the idol is of gold and that there are twelve stone idols in the vicinity (lines 45-48). Whitley Stokes's translation of the prose version has led to theories concerning a sacrifice of first-fruit, firstborn animals and children to an earth or fertility god.¹⁷ A literal translation of the relevant sentence is, however: 'It is to him that they used to sacrifice the firstborn of every offspring and the firstborn of every family.'¹⁸ This could include animals, but it could also be limited to just human children. According to the metrical version, they kill their firstborn children (*clann*; line 14), amounting to one-third of their descendants (*suth*; line 19).¹⁹ As *suth* and *clann* are here both referring to human offspring, it seems likely that the same is meant in the prose.²⁰ The method of the sacrifice is hinted at in the

¹³ Three collections of the *dindshenchas* have been preserved: one collection of poems (Version A) and two collections in which prose and poems are found together (Versions B and C). The Mag Slécht *dindshenchas* is part of Collection C, in which 'the legend attached to each place-name is related first in prose and then in a poem', cf. T. Ó Concheanainn, 'The three forms of *dinnshenchas Éirenn*', *Journal of Celtic Studies* 3 (1981-82) 88-131 at 88-89. This Collection C was, in Edward Gwynn's view, the work of a late twelfth-century reviser, but according to Tomás Ó Concheanainn, this 'reviser' was in fact the original redactor of the *dindshenchas*, Versions A and B being anthologies or extracts from C (*ibid.* 90-91, 131). For the edition and translation of the poem on Mag Slécht, see E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas IV* (Dublin, 1924) 18-23 (for an earlier edition and translation, see K. Meyer and A. Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living II* (London, 1897) 301-05).

¹⁴ Gwynn (*Metrical Dindshenchas IV*, 19) translates 'a lofty idol', but it is likely that *ídal ard* is synonymous with *rígídal* (literally 'king-' or 'royal idol') in the prose, meaning 'chief idol'.

¹⁵ *Ba hé a ndía*, 'He was their god' (Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas IV*, 18-19). In line 31 he is called a demon (*demon*) and in line 56 an idol (*arracht*).

¹⁶ Spelled 'Cruach' in the *Book of Lecan*.

¹⁷ See, for instance, MacCulloch, who, obviously influenced by W. Mannhardt and J.G. Frazer (*Religion*, 269), speculates about the sacrifice, suggesting that the flesh of the victims (identified with the God) was either buried in the fields or mixed with the corn-seed (*ibid.* 237). There is no basis for this ritual in the Irish texts.

¹⁸ *Cétgein* and *príngein* are synonymous, both meaning 'firstborn'.

¹⁹ *Suth* means 'fruit, produce; offspring, issue, progeny; milk'; *clann* is 'plant; springing locks, tress; children, family, offspring; a single child; descendants, race, clan'.

²⁰ The ambiguity of the Irish text is to be seen in the summary of this tradition by J. O'Donovan, *Annala Rioghachta Éireann. Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616 I* (Dublin, 1856) 43, n. a: he refers to the sacrifice of 'the firstlings of animals, and other offerings'. According to H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Les druides et les dieux celtiques à forme d'animaux* (Paris, 1906) 101, the firstborn of animals and women were sacrificed. It could be argued that the idea of the offering of the firstlings (fruit of the field, animals, children) was known from the Bible, but in this case the children were not seen as sacrifice to be slaughtered but

metrical version: they pour the blood of the children around the idol (lines 13-16). The reason for the sacrifice is furthermore given: they ask for milk and corn in return for their offer (lines 17-19). The adoration by Tigernmas king of Tara and the Irish is elaborated upon – besides kneeling, the beating of hand palms, bruising of their bodies, loud wailing and shedding of many tears are mentioned (lines 29-32). Only one fourth of the Irish population escaped death, and in this version the people die during Samain night (lines 33-40).²¹ Samain is the night preceding and the day of 1 November, the beginning of winter in Ireland. Saint Patrick is then said to have ended the worship of this idol by using a sledgehammer (lines 49-56).

The Middle Irish *dindshenchas* collection was compiled in the eleventh or the first half of the twelfth century.²² Thus it is a rather late witness of what is supposed to have happened in the fifth century. Moreover, the medieval etymology of the placename is based upon association with the verbal noun of the verb *sléchtaid*, an ecclesiastical term and a loan word from Latin (*flectāre*).²³ Yet it is the most

to be consecrated as servants of God. Sacrificing children was ascribed to 'pagans' or to sinning Israelites, and the receiving deity would be identified as Molech, Baal or another 'idol' (see further below); for human sacrifice in the Old Testament see Noort, this volume, Ch. V.

²¹ The death of three-fourth of the population together with King Tigernmas is furthermore mentioned in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (ed. and tr. R.A. Stewart Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn. The Book of the Taking of Ireland V* (Dublin, 1956) 202-09, 432-37), in *Do fhilathusaib hÉirend* (ed. R.I. Best, O. Bergin and M. A. O'Brien, *The Book of Leinster formerly Leabar na Núachongbála I* (Dublin, 1954) 56-93 at 63), in the *Annals of the Four Masters* (ed. and tr. O'Donovan, *Annala*, 42-43), and by Geoffrey Keating in the seventeenth century (ed. and tr. P. S. Dinneen, *The History of Ireland by Geoffrey Keating, D.D. II* (London, 1908) 122-23). Elsewhere in the *dindshenchas* 4000 people are said to have died on this occasion (Stokes, 'Prose Tales 2', 163). It should be noted, though, that some poems deviate from this tradition. Poem LXV from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*-tradition, ascribed to Eochaid Ua Floind who died in 1003 according to the *Annals of Ulster*, calls Tigernmas *támda*, translated by Macalister as 'who suffered plague'; his death was in Slechta in Breifne (Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn IV* (Dublin, 1940) 270-73). The eleventh-century poet Gilla Coemáin also mentions the death of Tigernmas with many Irish as caused by a plague (*tám*; ed. and tr. B. MacCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus, no. 830* (Dublin, 1892) at 158-59). Gilla Coemáin does not mention a place name here, but in poem CXIV from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*-tradition he identifies the place as Mag Slécht and he qualifies the death of Tigernmas as 'noble' (Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn V*, 432-37, at 436-37, stanza 12).

²² W. Stokes, 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*', *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894) 272-336, 418-84 at 272 (Prose Tales 1). The Old Irish period is from about 600 to circa 900, the Middle Irish period from c. 900 to c. 1200, and the Early Modern Irish period from c. 1200 to c. 1650.

²³ J. Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'Irlandais ancien* (Dublin and Paris, 1974) 129.

important early Irish text about human sacrifice, which is why it deserves further investigation concerning its literary development and its use of sources.

The beginning of the prose account is similar to a statement in the *Confessio*, written by Saint Patrick in the fifth century. He describes his advent to Ireland likewise as a crucial turning point in Irish history. The Irish used to worship *idola et immunda*, 'idols and unclean things', he says, but since his arrival they have become the people of God.²⁴

Idolum is the Latin equivalent of Irish *ídal*, used in our text. Saint Patrick uses biblical phrases in his writings. This is also the case when he describes the Irish pre-Christian religion.²⁵ We find, for instance, the same phrase – *idola colere* – in the Vulgate text of *Deuteronomy*, where the cults of Egypt and other nations are condemned:

Vidistis abominationes et sordes id est idola eorum lignum et lapidem argentum et aurum quae colebant (29.17)

You have seen abominations and filth, that is: their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold, which they worshipped.

The same phrase (*idola colere*) is also used in *Daniel* 14.4, in which chapter the Babylonians worship an image of clay covered with brass (*aereus*). A golden (*aureus*) statue is also venerated in this book: King Nebuchadnezzar demands that the people prostrate before this idol (*Daniel* 3.1-7). The worship of filth (*immunditias colere*) is found in *IV Kings* 17.12, in which chapter not only the veneration of statues, molten calves and other idols is mentioned but also the sacrifice of children (twice: *IV Kings* 17.17, 31). Another parallel with Patrick's words is found in the same book: *figurae idolorum et*

²⁴ *Confessio* §41 (ed: L. Bieler, *Libri epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi. Introduction, text and commentary* (Dublin, 1993) 81). The parallel that Patrick here creates between Israel and the Irish is also found in e.g. §38, where he paraphrases the *Book of Jeremiah* (16.18-20) about the false idols that the (Israelite/Irish) fathers made for themselves as gods. Biblical references in this article are to the Vulgate, which was the version of the Bible used most in medieval Ireland.

²⁵ For instance, he tells how he declined a piece of wild honey, offered to him during his journey with 'pagan' sailors (*Confessio* §§18-19) and qualified as a sacrifice: *Immolaticium est* (Bieler, *Libri epistolarum*, 68). This is a quote from *I Cor* 10.28 (*hoc immolaticium est idolis*). It should be noted that Paul refers in this chapter to *Exodus* 32, in which the Israelites sacrificed to the idol of the golden calf and adored it as a god.

immunditias (*IV Kings* 23.24) are mentioned in a chapter in which, again, child sacrifice is described (*IV Kings* 23.10).

Hagiographers of Saint Patrick appear to have filled in details concerning the *idola et immunda* in Patrick's *Confessio*, using such biblical descriptions of idolatry as mentioned above. I suggest that these Patrician documents, biblical and other sources, have been used in the Mag Slécht tradition. I will delineate this literary development, starting with the *Lives* of Patrick that chronologically precede the Mag Slécht *dindshenchas*, and complementing them with the biblical sources that they refer to.²⁶

At the end of the seventh century (circa 670 – 700), Bishop Tírechán wrote the *Collectanea* – a collection of local traditions about Saint Patrick. We read of Patrick sending a prophetic Irishman to the Moat of Slécht (*ad fossam Slecht*).²⁷ The idol there is not mentioned.²⁸

Neither Mag Slécht nor its idol are mentioned in the *Life of Patrick* written by Muirchú in the seventh century. His narrative about the main conflict between Christianity and pre-Christian religion contains, however, a few relevant clues.²⁹ Muirchú explicitly draws a parallel between pre-Christian Ireland and Egypt when he writes that Patrick will celebrate the first Easter in 'the Egypt of this our island',³⁰ just as it once was celebrated for the first time in Goshen (I §13). He uses the word *caput*, 'head', four times in one sentence. Patrick celebrates the 'head' of all feasts – Easter – in Mag Breg, where the greatest Irish kingdom is and the head of all paganism and idolatry – the capitol Tara. It is there that the saint would smash the head of the dragon, just as the Psalmist wrote,³¹ and he

²⁶ Previously, the importance of biblical and Patrician texts in this context has also been pointed out by M. Ó Duígeannáin, 'On the medieval sources for the legend of Cenn (Crom) Cróich of Mag Slécht', in J. Ryan (ed.), *Essays and studies presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill* (Dublin, 1940) 296-306. Because he was concerned with the historical evidence presented by the texts, he did not offer a detailed analysis of the sources.

²⁷ Ed. and tr. L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* 10 (Dublin, 1979) 136, line 34.

²⁸ J.B. Bury ('The itinerary of Patrick in Connaught, according to Tírechán', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* C 24 (1902-04) 153-68 at 154-56) suggests that originally the story about the idol in Mag Slécht was here, but Bieler (*Patrician Texts*, 220) refutes this.

²⁹ Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 62-123.

³⁰ Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 83.

³¹ PsG 73.14; the Psalmist refers to the heads (*capita*) of the dragon; the quotation has presumably been adapted to the symbolical and stylistic repetitive mention of *caput*. It should be noted, though, that the eighth-century *Psalm* text in Codex Palatinus

would drive a wedge into the head of all idolatry with the hammer of brave action and faith.³² Muirchú tells furthermore (I §15) how King Loegaire summons nobility and druids to Tara, 'their Babylon', for a feast of idolatry, as once the biblical tyrant Nebuchadnezzar had done. Muirchú obviously refers here to *Daniel* 3, in which the obligatory veneration of the golden idol is described.³³

There are five clues in this text that may have influenced the Mag Slécht tradition. Firstly, the confrontation takes place on a plain, in Muirchú's words: *in campo Breg maximo* – *campus* is the Latin equivalent of Irish *mag*. Significantly, according to Muirchú's source, King Nebuchadnezzar has set up the golden statue in the plain (*in campo Duram*) of Dura in the province of Babylon and demands that the people kneel down for it.³⁴ Just as the Babylonians, the pre-Christian Irish are described as kneeling down for a golden statue in a plain in the Mag Slécht *dindshenchas*.³⁵ Secondly, at first sight, the time of

action looks different: Easter is closer to the feast of Beltaine (1 May). The start of summer in Ireland, however, could never have coincided with Easter,³⁶ whereas, significantly, the Feast of Tara is usually connected with Samain, just as the adoration in Mag Slécht.³⁷ Thirdly, Muirchú lets Patrick metaphorically smash the head of the dragon with a hammer – an instrument, which Patrick uses literally against the idol in the metrical *dindshenchas*. Fourthly, I already mentioned the repetitive use of *caput*: the head of the dragon equals the head of idolatry, which is represented by the feast and by Tara. The word *caput* or 'head' is also relevant in the context of the idol in Mag Slécht, because this is another 'head of idolatry' as chief idol – *rígídal* or *ardídal* – of Ireland.³⁸ Moreover, the earliest extant name of this idol begins with *Cenn*, 'head', instead of *Crom*. We read *Cend Crúaich* in the Irish *Life of Patrick* (*Vita Tripartita*), *Cenn Cró[i]ch* or *Cenn Croth* in the Latin *Vita Tertia* and no name at all in *Vita Quarta*.³⁹ Fifthly, in these Patrician *Lives* it is Muirchú's King Loegaire who is said to have worshipped the idol in Mag Slécht; no mention is made of the legendary King Tigernmas.

There is thus a description of the adoration of *Cenn Crúaich* in these Patrician *Lives*, but some details differ from what we find in the Mag Slécht *dindshenchas*. *Cenn Crúaich* is here described as covered with gold and silver (VT,⁴⁰ V3, V4). One version (V3) is very short: Saint Patrick's prayer pulverises the idol. The other two versions (VT, V4) tell how Patrick makes the earth swallow the twelve

Latinus, a manuscript from a Northumbrian or Irish monastery, reads here *caput* (ed. M. McNamara, *Glossa in Psalmos. The Hiberno-Latin Gloss on the Psalms of Codex Palatinus Latinus* 68 (Psalms 39:11-151:7). *Critical Edition of the text together with Introduction and Source Analysis* (Vatican City, 1986) 155.)

³² ... postremo inspirato divinitus sancto Patricio vissum est hanc magnam Domini sollempnitatem quasi caput omnium sollempnitatum in campo Breg maximo, ubi erat regnum maximum nationum harum, quod erat <caput> omnis gentilitatis et idolatriae, [ne possit ulterius] lib[er]lari, <ut iuxta vocem psalmistae> caput draconis confringeret <et> uti hic invictus cuneus in caput totius idolatriae (...) sub malleo fortis operis cum fide iuncti sancti Patricii et suorum manibus spiritalibus primus inluderetur, '.... at last holy Patrick, divinely inspired, decided that this great feast of the Lord, being the principal feast of all, should be celebrated in the great plain of Brega, because it was there that there was the greatest kingdom among these tribes, the head of all paganism and idolatry; there, in the words of the Psalmist he would smash the head of the dragon, and for the first time an irresistible wedge would be driven into the head of all idolatry with the hammer of brave action joined to faith by the spiritual hands of holy Patrick and his companions' (Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 82-85).

³³ His source is also obvious from the list of Loegaire's nobility (*congregatis etiam regibus, satrapis, ducibus, principibus et optimatibus populi, insuper et magis, incantatoribus, aurspicibus et omnis artis omnisque doni inventoribus doctoribusve vocatis ad Loigaireum velut quondam ad Nabuchodonosor*: Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 84), which is given in imitation of the nobility of Nebuchadnezzar (*itaque Nabuchodonosor rex misit ad congregandos satrapas magistratus et iudices duces et tyrannos et praefectos omnesque principes regionum; Daniel* 3.2; cp also *Daniel* 3.3: *tunc congregati sunt satrapae magistratus et iudices duces et tyranni et optimates* ...). See also T. O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara-event within its background as a biblical "trial of divinities"', in J. Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff, 2003) 123-35.

³⁴ Another 'plain of the idol' (*campus Idoli*) is mentioned in *Amos* 1.5.

³⁵ Daniel's friends disobey this royal demand, just as Patrick and his followers break the royal rule when they light their paschal fire before King Loegaire lights the Tara fire, in Muirchú's narrative.

³⁶ See J. O'Donovan, *Leabhar na g-Ceart, or The Book of Rights* (Dublin, 1847) xlviii-l; J.B. Bury, *The Life of St. Patrick and his place in history* (London, 1905) 107, 303.

³⁷ See, for instance, Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* IV, 296-99; cf. D.A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *Ériu* 18 (1958) 113-38 at 127-38.

³⁸ The length of this article does not allow the description and analysis of other Irish idols, such as *Cermand Cestach*, mentioned in the Middle Irish commentary of the *Martyrology of Oengus* (ed. & tr. W. Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé. The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905) 186-87) and *Crom Dubh*, known from later folklore, see P.K. Ford, 'Aspects of the Patrician Legend', in Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore and Christianity. Studies in Memory of William W. Heist* (Los Angeles, 1983) 29-49.

³⁹ *Vita Tripartita* (VT), ed. and tr. W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick with Other Documents Relating to that Saint* (London, 1887) at 90-93 is dated to c. 900; it was revised in the eleventh century, cf. G. Mac Eoin, 'The Dating of Middle Irish Texts', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982) 109-37 at 115; *Vita Tertia* (V3), ed. L. Bieler, *Four Latin Lives of St. Patrick. Colgan's Vita Secunda, Quarta, Tertia, and Quinta* (Dublin, 1971) at 150-51 is dated between c. 800 and c. 1130 (*ibid.* 26); *Vita Quarta* (V4), ed. *id.* at 99, is dated between the first half of the eighth and the eleventh century (*ibid.* 12).

⁴⁰ In *Vita Tripartita*, he is also called the chief idol (*ard ídal*) of Ireland.

idols covered with brass up to their heads.⁴¹ The saint performs a miraculous action with the staff of Jesus without touching the idol, because of which the statue moves and is marked on its left side. These two versions describe how Saint Patrick expels the demon that lived in the statue (and who in *Vita Quarta* used to give answers to the people) to hell. This happens before the frightened eyes of King Loegaire and many Irish. *Vita Quarta* ends with their expression of gratitude towards God; *Vita Tripartita* tells how Patrick baptises many in 'Patrick's well', builds a church and leaves the prophetic Irishman there, who was probably also mentioned in Tírechán's *Collectanea* (see above). Place of action is in all these versions Mag or Campus Slécht (VT, V3, V4); in *Vita Tripartita* the statue's face is said to have been directed towards Tara.

Finally, this narrative is found in the *Life of Patrick* written by Jocelin of Furness in 1185/1186.⁴² This late *Life* obviously depends upon the earlier ones, but a new element is the explanation of the name of the idol: *Ceancroithi id est caput omnium deorum*. *Cenn* is here explicitly connected with *caput* and used in the metaphorical sense as 'the head (or chief) of all gods'.

Comparing these other Mag Slécht traditions with the *dindshenchas*, it stands out that human sacrifice is mentioned only in the latter. The goal of the sacrifice – to get corn and milk – is said to have been achieved through other ways as well in early Irish literature: for instance, thanks to sacral kingship,⁴³ a contract with a supernatural person⁴⁴ or the holding of a fair at the first of August.⁴⁵ Samain

⁴¹ Idols made of these materials are also found in the Bible: for instance, gold and silver (*Psalms* 113.12, 134.15; *Sap* 15.9; *Isaiah* 2.20, 30.22, 31.7; *Ezekiel* 7.19–20, 16.17; *Hosea* 8.4); clay and brass (*Daniel* 14.6); gold, silver, brass, stone and wood (*Revelation* 9.20).

⁴² Ed. J. Colgan, *Trias Thaumaturga* (Dublin, 1997; facsimile reproduction of Louvain, 1647) 77, caput lvi.

⁴³ See, for instance, the Old Irish 'Testament of Morann', ed. and tr. F. Kelly, *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976) 6–7, in which milk and corn are successively mentioned (§§18–19) among other life-enhancing phenomena that are said to be produced by *fír flathemon*, 'the justice of the ruler'.

⁴⁴ The supernatural beings known as the Túatha Dé Danann destroyed corn and milk, until the Irish made a contract with the Dagda as related in an Old Irish tale, ed. and tr. V. Hull, 'De gabáil in t-shída (Concerning the seizure of the fairy mound)', *Zs. f. celtische Philol.* 19 (1931) 53–58. MacCulloch, *Religion*, 79, tentatively identifies him with Cenn/Crom Crúaich, pointing out that Crom-eocha was a name of the Dagda and that 'a motto at the sacrificial place at Tara read, "Let the altar ever blaze to Dagda"'. This remains, however, unverifiable: he says he bases these two things upon a lost text, referred to in *Collectanea de rebus Hibernicis* by Charles

is connected with many traditions,⁴⁶ but none mentions human sacrifice.⁴⁷ Where does this come from?

As we are dealing here with a Christian reconstruction of the pre-Christian past, a suitable source of inspiration was the Bible in which so-called 'pagan' practices were described.⁴⁸ As we have seen, Egypt,⁴⁹ Babylonia and Israel were used as symbols for Ireland. Loud cries, people cutting themselves and kneeling for a statue are also mentioned in the context of the cult of Baal.⁵⁰ Several biblical texts refer to the sacrifice of children to idols, such as Molech.⁵¹ Statues⁵² of idols are sometimes mentioned in the same context.⁵³ The

Vallancey (Dublin, 1786, IV.2, 495). It should be further noticed, that MacCulloch seems to have misread Vallancey's work: it is not on p. 495 but on p. 502 that the so-called motto at Tara is given, but no mention of a source is made, let alone a lost text. Moreover, concerning the name Crom-eocha (which I did not find in Vallancey's book), it should be noted that Vallancey excelled in highly speculative etymologies, translations and theories.

⁴⁵ See the *dindshenchas* on Carman (Stokes, 'Prose Tales I', 311–15): the promise of corn and milk is followed by an enumeration of other good things. The *dindshenchas* on the Fair of Teltown has been mistakenly connected with human sacrifice, see Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* IV, 417.

⁴⁶ See M.-L. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (London, 1949) 52–56. It should be noted that Sjoestedt connects some deaths by burning and/or drowning in Samain tales with instances of human sacrifice mentioned in the *Scholía* on Lucan (see below). The crucial characteristic of a human being killed in offering to a supernatural being is, however, not present in these tales. More study is needed.

⁴⁷ Interesting in this context is the *Lebor Gabála* tradition, in which the supernatural people known as the Fomoiré demanded from the Irish a yearly tribute, to be paid at Samain, of two thirds of the children, the corn and the milk in Mag Cetne (see Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* IV, 138–41, 172–75). I take this to refer to slavery, not to human sacrifice.

⁴⁸ Without further elaboration, already in 1899 Douglas Hyde, *A literary history of Ireland from earliest times to the present day* (London, 1980, reprint of 1899) 92–93 suggested that a 'Christian chronicler familiar with the accounts of Moloch and Ashtarôth' added this motif.

⁴⁹ Perhaps some association with the killing of children in Egypt may also have played a role. It is in Goshen in Egypt that at first the Jewish children are killed, and later the first-born of the Egyptians are killed as a result of the Tenth Plague. See also below, the text on Samson and the Gesteda. For human sacrifice in Egypt see the contributions of Van Dijk and Te Velde, this volume, Ch. VI and VII.

⁵⁰ III Kings 18.28, 19.18.

⁵¹ See J. Day, *Molech: A god of human sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1989). Molech is called 'idol' in e.g. Lv 18.21, 20.2; III Kings 11.5, 11.7; see also Noort, this volume, Ch. V.

⁵² As indicated above, statues made from various materials also have a parallel in biblical descriptions.

⁵³ See IV Kings 16.3, 17.17, 17.31, 21.6, 23.10; 2 Chronicles 33.6; Sap 14.23; Ezekiel 20.31, 23.37–39.

⁵⁴ Ezekiel 16.36 (see furthermore verses 17, 20–21). Mention is also made of the devouring of children by idols (cf. Ezekiel 23.37).

most common form of this child sacrifice is 'passing them through fire', but we also encounter the offering of the blood of children to idols, just as in the Mag Slécht *dindshenchas*.⁵⁴ A description in *Psalm* 105.36-39 is quite similar to what is portrayed in the Irish text: Israel is accused of sacrificing their sons and daughters to demons; their innocent blood is shed and offered to the statues of the idols of Canaan. Sometimes blood-shedding is mentioned in the same context as child sacrifice,⁵⁵ which could also have influenced the description. Another possible source of inspiration for a bloody ritual may have been the name Cenn Crúaich itself, which might be translated as 'the Head of Slaughter'.⁵⁶

Noteworthy are furthermore Classical sources, in which bloody human sacrifices by the Celts are mentioned. This should be seen as yet another example of 'pagan practices', and not as an example of the early medieval Irish identifying themselves with the Celts, because this identification was post-medieval.⁵⁷

For example, Lucan (AD 39-65) writes in his *Civil War* concerning the Celts:

*Et quibus inmitis placatur sanguine diro
Teutates horrensque feris altaribus Esus
Et Taranis Scythicae non mitior ara Dianae.*

and the people who with grim blood-offerings placate
Teutates the merciless and Esus dread with savage altars
and the slab of Taranis, no kinder than Diana of the Scythians.⁵⁸

Diana or Artemis is the goddess who demanded from Agamemnon his daughter Iphigeneia as human sacrifice; Scythian Diana is Artemis of Tauris to whom strangers were sacrificed.⁵⁹

This text leads us to our second example of 'human sacrifice to the Gods' in early Irish literature, for Lucan's *Civil War* was translated into Irish under the title *In Cath Catharda*, 'The Civil Battle'. This Irish version is dated circa 1100 or the early twelfth century.⁶⁰ The relevant section reads:

*Tancadar ann popul na Teotonedha. [is acu sen nó idpraitis fola daini i
tempol Ioib 7 Mercur 7 Mairt].*⁶¹

There came the people of the Teutones. [It is by them that the blood of people used to be offered in the temple of Jupiter, Mercury and Mars.]

The Irish text summarizes here the Latin by offering the list of nations without the accompanying descriptions. The result is that the Celtic (i.e. Gaulish) names mentioned by Lucan have disappeared. Teutates seems to be mistaken for the people of the Teutones.⁶² The second sentence, found in one manuscript only,⁶³ summarizes Lucan's description of the sacrifice of human blood, but the three Gaulish divine names have been replaced by their *interpretatio romana*. Could it be that its scribe knew the *Commenta Bernensia* or the *Adnotationes super Lucanum*?⁶⁴ These ancient commentaries on Lucan's work identify Mars, Mercury and Jupiter with the Gaulish deities.⁶⁵ The difference is that they do not start with Jupiter whereas

⁵⁹ On Iphigeneia, see J.N. Bremmer, 'Sacrificing a child in ancient Greece: the case of Iphigeneia', in E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar (eds), *The Sacrifice of Isaac. The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden, 2002) 21-43.

⁶⁰ See A. Sommerfelt, 'Le Système Verbal dans *In Cath Catharda* (suite)', *Revue Celtique* 38 (1920-21) 25-47 at 39.

⁶¹ W. Stokes, 'In Cath Catharda. The Civil War of the Romans. An Irish Version of Lucan's *Pharsalia*', in W. Stokes and E. Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte* IV.2 (Leipzig, 1909) 56.

⁶² Stokes, 'In Cath Catharda', 57, n. 1.

⁶³ Royal Irish Academy, D.IV.2.

⁶⁴ The *Commenta Bernensia* are preserved in ninth-century Berne 370, ed. H. Usener, *M. Annaei Lucani Commenta Bernensia* (Leipzig, 1869, repr. Hildesheim, 1967). The *Adnotationes super Lucanum*, ed. I. Endt, *Adnotationes super Lucanum* (Leipzig, 1909) are extant in abbreviated form in Berne 370 and fuller in Bodmer lat. 182 from the eleventh century, see R.J. Tarrant, 'Lucan', in L.D. Reynolds (ed.), *Texts and Transmission. A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford, 1983) 215-18 at 215 n. 4.

⁶⁵ The *Commenta Bernensia* offer two possibilities: (a) Teutates=Mercury, Esus=Mars, Taranis=Dis Pater, or (b) Teutates=Mars, Esus=Mercury, Taranis=Jupiter, see Usener,

⁵⁵ For instance, *Ezekiel* 22.3-4.

⁵⁶ *Crúaich* as a feminine ā-stem means 'stack of corn, rick, mountain, hill'; as an adjective it means 'gory, bloody', and as a neuter o-stem 'slaughter, wounding'. In the Book of Lecan version of the Mag Slécht *dinshenchas* (see above, footnote 10), it seems to have taken the form of the adjective in Crom Cruach, 'the Bloody Bent One' (*cromm* means 'bent, stooped, crooked'). Alternatively, 'the Head/Bent One of the Hill' has been suggested, see J.P. Dalton, 'Cromm Cruaich of Magh Sleacht', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* C 36 (1922) 23-67 at 47, 62; he points out at 36 that his reconstructed location of the site has the form of a *crúach* or mound, but the form *Cenn/Crom Crúaiche* is not attested. For more about *crúach* and related forms, see R. Ó hUiginn, 'Crúachu, Connachta, and the Ulster Cycle', *Emania* 5 (1988) 19-23 at 21-23.

⁵⁷ See J. Leerssen, 'Celticism', in T. Brown (ed.), *Celticism* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1996) 1-20 at 5, who roughly dates the construction of 'the Celt' to the period from 1650 to 1850.

⁵⁸ Lucan I.444-46, tr. S.H. Braund, *Lucan, Civil War* (Oxford, 1992) 14.

the Irish text does. We cannot, therefore, be certain whether these commentaries were among the sources of the scribe.⁶⁶ What we do have is a Middle Irish tradition about 'Teutonic' sacrifice, in which human blood is offered to Jupiter, Mercury and Mars.

Our third example is a twelfth-century tale entitled 'How Samson slew the Gesteda'.⁶⁷ The editor Carl Marstrander suggested that the Gesteda should be located in the Land of Goshen in Egypt.⁶⁸ We are told how the angry Gods of the Gesteda have concealed all the waters from the people. The high king and chief priest of India arrives. He appears to be banished from his country and now advises the king of the Gesteda to sacrifice all their priests, druids, seers, physicians and learned people to the Gods. Twelve of them should be decapitated, offered and burned upon the altars daily for three months. Despite the protests of the victims, this happens. Then Hebrew people, descendants of Dan, suffer shipwreck in the vicinity and are taken captive. They were on their way to Troy in order to find out whether the Trojans were venerating the same God as they did. If so, Samson would go to Troy to help them fight against the Greek army. Now, however, they are under the threat of being sacrificed as well. They manage to arrange that one of them may go back to Samson for help. In the meantime each day twelve of them with a chief are sacrificed. In due time, Samson arrives together with his wife Lil(i)a and the priest Nehemias. Samson slays almost all of the Gesteda with the jawbone of a camel and sets fire to their dwellings. Then the waters rise up out of the earth and Samson kills

Commenta, 32. According to the *Adnotationes*, Teutates=Mercury, Esus=Mars, and Taranis=Jupiter (see Endt, *Adnotationes*, 28). See further Graf, 'Menschenopfer'.

⁶⁶ Three rituals are described in the *Commenta Bernensia* (32 Usener): a human being is suffocated head down into a kettle for Teutates, or hung in a tree for Esus or people are burned in a wooden vessel for Taranis. These descriptions of Gaulish rituals have been linked with the literary motif of the threefold death in a search for Celtic, cf. F. le Roux, 'Des chaudrons Celtiques à l'arbre d'Esus. Lucain et les Scholies Bernoises', *Ogam* 7 (1955) 33-58 or Indo-European, cf. D.J. Ward, 'The Threefold Death: An Indo-European Trifunctional Sacrifice?', in J. Puhvel (ed.), *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1970) 123-42, forms of sacrificial death. More critical research is needed, which, for instance, takes into account, firstly, that the Latin text presents three separate rituals and not a threefold ritual, and, secondly, that the Irish literary motif is always set in an explicitly Christian setting, see J.N. Radner, 'The Significance of the Threefold Death in Celtic Tradition', in Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore*, 180-99 at 183.

⁶⁷ Ed. and tr. C. Marstrander, 'How Samson slew the Gesteda', *Ériu* 5 (1911) 145-59 from one manuscript: Royal Irish Academy, D.IV.2. Marstrander presumably gave the tale its title; for the date, see p. 145.

⁶⁸ Marstrander, 'Samson', 145.

the last survivors: the Indian priest, the king and the queen. Samson thanks the heavenly Gods and God; Nehemias writes this all down in the annals of the Hebrews. Just as the previous example, this text ascribes human sacrifice to 'pagan' foreigners. The killing of these people by Samson is seen as a divine punishment.

In the fourth example of this group, human sacrifice is part of a divine punishment. In the Old Irish *Letter of Jesus*,⁶⁹ people are told to keep Sunday holy. Many sanctions are enumerated; one of them is that people, who do not observe the rules pertaining to Sunday, will be taken in bondage abroad by 'pagans', who will sacrifice these transgressors to their Gods.⁷⁰ This text is the oldest in this group and it is our final example of human sacrifice in the strict sense. Only the first example ascribes human sacrifice to the pre-Christian Irish; in the other three texts, 'pagan' foreigners perform this act. The Gods to whom this sacrifice is offered are named in the first two instances only: Cenn Crúaich and the Roman interpretations of Gaulish Gods. Cenn Crúaich is believed to give corn and milk in return; in the tale about Samson the Gods do not return the waters in exchange for human sacrifice, but the waters flow forth when Samson takes his divine revenge on the sacrificing people.

The other examples that will be described below do not refer to Gods as recipients of human sacrifice, although, as we will see, the God of the Christians sometimes plays a role.

2. Foundation sacrifice

The earliest possible reference to foundation sacrifice is one of the etymological explanations of the name Emain Macha, the royal fortress of Ulster. We read in the early Irish *Glossary of Cormac*, ascribed to King Bishop Cormac mac Cuilennáin (831-908):

Nó Em- ab ema [aíma] i.e. sanguine, quia ema sanguis est; -uin i.e. unus, quia sanguis unius hominis [effusus est] in tempore conditionis eius.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ed. and tr. J.G. O'Keeffe, 'Cáin Domnaig. I. The Epistle concerning Sunday', *Ériu* 2 (1905) 189-214; the text dates possibly from the ninth century: see J. Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An investigation related to the process of Christianization and the concept of evil* (Turnhout, 1996) 335-41.

⁷⁰ O'Keeffe, 'Cáin', 196-97, §10. The motif of being taken into exile by foreign peoples as a divine punishment can of course be traced back to the Old Testament.

⁷¹ Ed. K. Meyer, 'Sanas Cormaic. An Old-Irish Glossary', *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 4 (1912) 42. The glossary is translated by J. O'Donovan and W. Stokes, *Sanas Chormaic. Cormac's Glossary* (Calcutta, 1868).

Or *Em-* is from *ema* ['blood' in Greek] that is: from blood, because *ema* is blood. *Uin* that is: one, because the blood of one man [was shed] at the time of its founding.

It is a well-known tradition that one needs human blood or human sacrifice for the construction of a stable building.⁷² This etymology, however, only supplies us with the barest details – there is neither reference to stability nor any further detail that could confirm that a sacrifice was performed at Emain Macha's construction.

A variation on this theme without human sacrifice is found in the late Old Irish tale 'Fíngen's night watch'.⁷³ What the builders of a palisade lift one day falls down the next morning.⁷⁴ Miraculously, one Samain night the palisade suddenly is stable. I mention this example, because it appears that human sacrifice is often absent in the oldest sources, but comes up in later variant versions. We saw this in the Mag Slécht tale and we shall see this presently again.

When Vortigern, king of the Britons, wants to build a fortress on a hill overlooking the sea, three nights in a row the building material (stone and wood) disappears. His druids, who had pointed out this place, now tell him to kill a son whose father is not known and to sprinkle his blood on the hill. The boy's blood should consecrate the fortress. This boy is found, but he appears to outwit the druids. He shows that a red and a white worm are living under the ground. When dug up, they fight and the red one wins. The boy explains that they symbolise the Saxons and Britons. In the end, nobody is sacrificed: the king and the druids go north to build a fortress and the boy, Ambrose son of a Roman consul, builds his fortress on the hill.

⁷² See J.H. Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach. The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin, 1848) xxiv-xxv; W. Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries* (London and Edinburgh, 1862) xli-xlii; idem, 'Mythological Notes. X. Human sacrifice', *Revue Celtique* 2 (1873-75) 200-01; Joyce, *Social history*, 284-86; H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, 'Des vic-times immolées par les constructeurs pour assurer la solidité des édifices', *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905) 289; E.S. Hartland, 'Foundation, foundation-rites', in Hastings, *Encyclopaedia VI* (Edinburgh 1913) 109-15; Anwyl and MacCulloch, 'Sacrifice', 12; A.H. Krappe, 'The Foundation Sacrifice and the Child's Last Words', in his *Balor With the Evil Eye. Studies in Celtic and French Literature* (New York, 1927) 165-80; S. Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation Sacrifices', *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland* 75 (1945) 45-52.

⁷³ Ed. J. Vendryes, *Airne Fíngen* (Dublin, 1953) at 16-17, §10, tr. T.P. Cross and A.C.L. Brown, 'Fíngen's Night-watch', *The Romanic Review* 9 (1918) 29-47 at 43; Vendryes, *Airne*, xxi dates the text to the ninth or tenth century.

⁷⁴ Cross and Brown, 'Fíngen's Night-watch', 29-30 suggest that the failure is due to the fact that one attempts to build on a *síd* or elfmound, and that the success may be the result of a compact with the dwellers in the *síd*.

This tale is from *Lebor Bretnach*,⁷⁵ the early Middle Irish translation of the Latin *Historia Brittonum*.⁷⁶

It is likely that this narrative influenced an Early Modern Irish tale, called 'The adventurous journey of Art son of Conn'.⁷⁷ In this tale, druids advise to slay the son of sinless couple before Tara and to mix his blood with the earth of Tara (§8) or with the blighted earth and the withered trees (§12). This is, however, not a foundation sacrifice. The boy's killing is supposed to bring back Ireland's fertility: ever since the king married the wrong woman,⁷⁸ there is neither corn nor milk in Ireland (§8). Just as in the tale about Mag Slécht, child sacrifice is suggested as a kind of exchange for corn and milk. I note in passing that the king's druid is called Cromdes (§8), which name bears reminiscence to Crom Crúaich. As in our previous example, the human sacrifice does not take place. The boy is found on a wondrous island and brought to Ireland. He is willing to undergo the sacrifice, but his mother appears on the scene, bringing

⁷⁵ Ed. and tr. Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, 90-99; for a more recent edition without translation, see A.G. van Hamel, *Lebor Bretnach. The Irish version of the Historia Britonum ascribed to Nennius* (Dublin, 1932) at 53-61, who has added the Latin text (based on Mommsen's edition) at the bottom of the pages. The Irish translation is ascribed to Gilla Coemáin and dated to the middle of the eleventh century, cf. D.N. Dumville, '"Nennius" and the Historia Brittonum', *Studia Celtica* 10-11 (1975-76) 78-95 at 87-88.

⁷⁶ The Latin original was written in Wales in 829-30, cf. D.N. Dumville, 'Some aspects of the chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25 (1972-74) 439-45; on the Latin original of the Irish text, see idem, '"Nennius"'. For a wide-ranging theory based on this episode, see Krappe, 'Note sur un épisode de l'*Historia Brittonum* de Nennius', *Revue Celtique* 41 (1924) 181-88.

⁷⁷ Ed. and tr. R.I. Best, 'The Adventures of Art son of Conn, and the Courtship of Delbchaem', *Ériu* 3 (1907) 149-73.

⁷⁸ This is a supernatural woman, banished from the lands of the supernaturals (the so-called *Túatha Dé Danann*) because of a transgression with another man (§3). When she arrives in Ireland, she declares she wants to marry the king's son Art, but she marries his father instead and demands that Art be banished from the court for a year (§§5-7). As a result, milk and corn are lacking in Ireland. The druids declare that this is caused by the *corbbad*, 'pollution, corruption, incest', and unbelief of the wife of the king (§8). See further B. O. Hehir, 'The Christian revision of *Eachtra Airt meic Cuind ocus Tochmarc Delbchaime ingine Morgain*', in Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore*, 159-79. Interesting is the presence of the motif of a sexual (more or less incestuous) transgression with a younger female, which is also found in two other human sacrifice tales. Vortigern marries his own daughter and has a son with her. This is told just before the 'human sacrifice' episode. The Indian priest in 'How Samson slew the Gesteda' was banished from his land because he had raped his stepdaughter. Note also that the appointed victim in two tales is supposed to have been conceived either without sex (*Lebor Bretnach*) or by a single sexual act ('The adventurous journey of Art').

a cow that is slaughtered instead. The cow's blood is mingled with the earth of Tara and put on the doors of Tara. This cow was carrying two bags, filled with two birds, one with one leg and the other with twelve legs. The birds fight and the one-legged bird prevails. The woman explains that the birds symbolise the druids and the boy. She advises to hang the druids and to banish the queen, who causes the milk and corn blight (§§12-14).⁷⁹ Obviously, not only the *Historia Brittonum* but also biblical tales have been used as sources, such as the intended sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham with the replacement by a ram and the blood of lambs put on the doorposts of the Israelites in Goshen in Egypt, because of which the firstborn children in those houses are not killed.⁸⁰

Our next example of foundation sacrifice belongs to hagiography. Again, this motif is not found in the oldest source – the Latin *Life of Columba* by Adomnán (†704)⁸¹ – but in the later Irish *Life of Colum Cille*, dated to 1169.⁸² This text relates how Colum Cille meets two bishops on his arrival on the eve of Whitsuntide in Iona, where he will establish his monastery. These bishops want to expel him. Colum Cille knows, however, that they are false and he reveals their true identity. Thereupon they abandon the island to him. The text then reads:

At-bert Colum Cille ind sin rá muntir: 'Is maith dúin ar fréma do dul fó thalmain súnd', 7 at-bert friu: 'Is cet díb nech écin uaib do dul fo úir na hinnsi-se dia coisecrad.' Atracht suas Ódran erlatta 7 is ed at-bert, 'Dianam-gabtha,' olse, 'is erlom lem sin.' 'A Odrain,' ol Colum Cille, 'rot-bia a lóg sin.i. ní tiberthar a itghe do neoch icom ligesi mína forsa shirfes ar thúis.' Luid iarum Odran docum nime. Fothaigissium eclais Híia iarum.⁸³

Then Colum Cille said to his company: 'It would benefit us if our roots were put down into the ground here', and he said to them:

⁷⁹ This does not happen, however, and the woman and boy return home. The narrative continues, but does not concern us here any further.

⁸⁰ See *Genesis* 22.13 and *Exodus* 12.7; cf. also Bremmer, 'Sacrificing a child'.

⁸¹ Ed. and tr. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1991; revised edition of Edinburgh and London, 1961); see also W. Reeves, *The Life of St. Columba, Founder of Hy; written by Adamnan, ninth abbot of that Monastery* (Dublin, 1857) 203-04, note c.

⁸² Ed. and tr. M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry. The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988) 218-69, for the date, see 193. Latin *Columba*, 'dove', is essentially the same as Irish *Colum Cille*, 'dove of the church'.

⁸³ Herbert, *Iona*, 237, lines 414-20.

'Someone among you should go down into the soil of the island to consecrate it.' The obedient Odrán rose up and said: 'If I be taken, I am prepared for it', said he. 'Odrán,' said Colum Cille, 'you will be rewarded for it. No one will be granted his request at my own grave, unless he first seek it of you.' Then Odrán went to heaven. Colum Cille afterwards founded the church of Iona.⁸⁴

This tale about the sacrifice of Odrán appears to have been a popular tradition,⁸⁵ because various later versions are extant. There is a sequence of motifs: first, inimical presences in the land that is new to Colum Cille and his company must be banished or appeased. Second, the death of one companion is needed, either to consecrate the earth in preparation of the building or to stabilise the building of the church.⁸⁶ The false bishops that try to send Colum Cille away are druids in the guise of bishops in the sixteenth-century version.⁸⁷ Later versions refer to evil spirits or demons that make the construction of the sacred building impossible until Odrán is buried alive.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Herbert, *Iona*, 261.

⁸⁵ Odrán is also the name of Patrick's charioteer; he is mentioned in an interesting anecdote in VT (Stokes, *Tripartite Life*, 216-19) and in the *Life of Patrick* in the Book of Lismore, ed. and tr. W. Stokes, *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890) 1-19, 149-67, at 13 and 161. The latter text is one of the later, abridged versions of the *Vita Tripartita*, which also contain new material, cf. J.F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. An Introduction and Guide* (New York, 1929, repr. Dublin, 1979) 345. A man called Foilge (or Failge) Berraide wants to kill Patrick in revenge for the idol Cenn Crúaich, because he was Foilge's God. On the day that they happen to be in the district of Húi Failge, Patrick's charioteer (who knows of Foilge's plan) wants to sit in Patrick's seat with Patrick being the charioteer. Because of this change of positions, Foilge kills Odrán by mistake. Shortly afterwards, Foilge dies and his soul goes to Hell. The later *Life of Patrick* adds that his body lives on being possessed by the Devil until Patrick visits him. This anecdote is also found in V3 and V4 (Bieler, *Four Latin Lives*, 106, 157-58) but without the mention of the name Cenn Crúaich. For more about the sacrificial aspect of the death of Patrick's charioteer, see J.F. Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients. Literary myths of medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1997) 208-10, who also discusses Colum Cille's Odrán at 281-84.

⁸⁶ One could compare this with some of the traditions discussed above: the expulsion of a demon, followed by the building of a church (*Vita Tripartita*) and the suggestion to sacrifice a boy in order to consecrate the king's fortress, which could not be built because of the building material being removed by inimical presences (*Lebor Bretnach*).

⁸⁷ See A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle, *Betha Colaim Chille. Life of Columcille. Compiled by Manus O'Donnell in 1532* (Urbana, 1918) 200-03. Colum Cille calls them 'druids of Hell'.

⁸⁸ See Joyce, *Social history*, 285-86, and W.G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland I* (London, 1902) 304-05, who do not specify their sources; Thomas Pennant (1726-1798), *Second Tour in Scotland*, quoted in Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, xxv; Henderson, *Survivals*, 282-83.

It appears that Odrán does not die immediately, according to these later tales, and gives an unorthodox report about the afterlife. For instance, in a version from 1771 Colum Cille receives a revelation that he should bury someone alive so that the building of his monastery will be successful. The lot falls on Oran.⁸⁹ After three days Colum Cille wants to see his friend again and opens the grave. Oran says then 'There is no wonder in death, and hell is not as it is reported', to which Colum Cille reacts with flinging the earth back on him.⁹⁰

In this section on foundation sacrifice I also discussed, for reasons mentioned above, the tale 'The adventures of Art'. Human sacrifice is suggested in this narrative as a way to restore the fertility of Ireland, in which the boy would function as a 'scapegoat' for the transgressions of the new queen. This type of sacrifice is known as vicarious sacrifice, which will now be dealt with.

3. Vicarious sacrifice

Vicarious human sacrifice plays a role in yet another variant version of the Colum Cille and Odrán tale.⁹¹ According to an oral tradition recorded in 1698,⁹² Colum Cille dreams that he has to bury a man alive in order to stop a famine. Oran volunteers provided that the saint will build a chapel in his name. The 'scapegoat' is thus given a reward for his voluntary death. This motif is also found in the other

⁸⁹ 'Oran' is a later, variant spelling of 'Odrán'.

⁹⁰ See R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona. Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth, 1995) 362. A. Carmichael (*Carmina Gadelica*, 338-41) refers to version in which Odrán is buried alive for three days and nights as part of a bet between him and Colum Cille about the afterlife.

⁹¹ This belief in vicarious sacrifice is also ascribed to the Gauls: according to Caesar (*Bellum Gallicum* VI.16), they sacrificed humans in case of illnesses and war, believing 'that, unless for a man's life a man's life be paid, the majesty of the immortal gods may not be appeased', tr. H.J. Edwards, *Caesar. The Gallic War* (London and Cambridge MA, 1917) 340f. The Gauls of Massilia (Marseilles) are said to have applied the following 'scapegoat' ritual when there was a pestilence. A poor man was fed for a year, then led through the city while symbolically taking on him the transgressions of the population and finally thrown from a height, cf. G. Thilo and H. Hagen, *Servii grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii carmina commentarii* I (Leipzig, 1923) 346 (ad *Aeneid* III.57). For the scapegoat ritual in Massilia see Petronius fr. 1; scholion on Statius, *Thebais* 10.793, cf. J.N. Bremmer, 'Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece', in R. Buxton (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2000) 271-93 at 277, 285-88; E. Courtney, *A Companion to Petronius* (Oxford, 2001) 43-45.

⁹² See Sharpe, *Adomnán*, 361.

examples of vicarious sacrifice: the people who die for the sake of others receive some privileges.

The first early Irish example of vicarious sacrifice is found in 'The regulation of Éimíne Bán' from the late Old Irish or early Middle Irish period.⁹³ When a pestilence threatens Leinster, the king and his nobles consider becoming monks in order to avert this disease. The abbot Éimíne Bán realises the monastery's predicament: they cannot refuse the aristocracy, but if they stay and die it will be a shame for the monastery. The solution he comes up with is that he and an equal number of monks will die on their behalf. Lots are cast which monks will die, and then indeed, each day of a whole week seven monks die.⁹⁴ In the end, the abbot dies for the king, after having secured privileges for the monastery.

Another hagiographical example is found in the Middle Irish⁹⁵ *Life of Finnian of Clonard*.⁹⁶ In a passage that compares Saint Paul with Saint Finnian it is said that Paul died in Rome so that the Christians would not go to Hell and Finnian died in Clonard to save the Irish from the Yellow Plague. This is followed by an angelic promise, which takes the form of a privilege for Finnian's congregation: their prayer will banish every pestilence and illness from Clonard and their fasting will banish disease from Ireland.

The last example is from the narrative 'The expulsion of the Déssi'. Two groups of people are at war. It has been prophesied that the party that delivers the first killing or wound will lose the battle. One party is tricked into killing an animal, which turns out to be a transformed human being. This human being is thus sacrificed in order to win the battle. In the Old Irish version of this tale, druids transform an old slave into a red cow. He rushes in this form at the enemies, who kill him and then see his real form.⁹⁷ In

⁹³ Ed. and tr. E. Poppe, 'A new edition of *Cáin Éimíne Bán*', *Celtica* 18 (1986) 35-52; for the date, see 38. The tale is situated in the seventh century. For more about the historical context, see idem, 'The list of sureties in *Cáin Éimíne*', *Celtica* 21 (1990) 588-92.

⁹⁴ This means 49 monks and the abbot. Strangely enough, the text speaks of fifty noblemen and their king, which would not be compatible with the previous number.

⁹⁵ Robinson, 'Human sacrifice', 193.

⁹⁶ Ed. and tr. Stokes, *Lives*, 75-83, 222-30 at 82 and 229-30. Ingrid Sperber kindly pointed out to me that this anecdote is absent from the Latin *Lives*. For more about the *Lives* of Finnian, see Kenney, *Sources*, 375f.

⁹⁷ Ed. and tr. K. Meyer, 'The Expulsion of the Dessi', *Y Cymmrodor* 14 (1901) 101-35 at 118-21. Meyer dates the text to the second half of the eighth century (at 102). The slave receives a privilege for his descendants, who will be free forever. Incidentally, a woman who was reared on the flesh of little boys suggests this trick.

the later version, it is a druid who transforms and then sacrifices himself in this manner.⁹⁸

4. Burial sacrifice

The fourth type of human sacrifice is burial sacrifice. The following funeral rites are mentioned in the context of the burial of Fiachra, king of Connacht:

*Ro claidead a leacht 7 ro laigeadh a feart 7 ro hadhnadh a cluichi caintechn,
7 ro scribad a ainm oghaim, 7 ro hadnaiced na geill tuctha andeas 7 siad
beoa im fhert Fhiachra, co mba hail for Mumain dogrés 7 co mbeth i com-
ruma forro.*⁹⁹

His grave was dug, and his tomb was laid, and his funeral game was started, and his ogham name was written, and the hostages who had been brought from the south were buried alive around Fiachra's tomb, that it might always be a shame for Munster and be as a triumph over them.¹⁰⁰

There are several texts that refer to funeral rituals but only this Middle Irish tale entitled 'The Death of Crimthann son of Fidach and of the three sons of Eochaid Muigmedón, Brian, Ailill and Fiachra' mentions the ritual killing of people.¹⁰¹

5. Conclusions

Of the twelve medieval Irish examples of human sacrifice described in this survey, only four refer to a proper human sacrifice: a human being killed as an offer to the Gods. Of these, only the *Letter of Jesus* dates from the Old Irish period. The tales about Mag Slécht, Samson

⁹⁸ Ed. and tr. V. Hull, 'The Later Version Of The Expulsion Of The Déssi', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 27 (1958-59) 14-63 at 39-44 and 60-63. This version was compiled before 1106 (*ibid.* 15). The druid receives immunity from the Déssi for his children forever.

⁹⁹ W. Stokes, 'The death of Crimthann son of Fidach, and the adventures of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903) 172-207 at 184, §17.

¹⁰⁰ Stokes, 'The death', 185, §17.

¹⁰¹ Stokes, 'The death'; M. Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (Oxford, 1946; reprint Blackrock, 1994) 30 tentatively dates the text to the eleventh century. Funeral rites mentioned in the Second Tale of *The wooing of Étaín*, ed. and tr. O. Bergin and R.I. Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', *Ériu* 12 (1938) 137-96 at 166-67, dated to the ninth century, at 139, include the digging of one's grave, the making of one's lamentation and the slaying of one's cattle.

and the Irish translation of Lucan's *Civil War* date from the late Middle Irish period. The earliest and only mention of Irish people sacrificing human beings to a God is the Middle Irish Mag Slécht tradition. As pointed out above, sometimes a related motif is found in Old Irish sources, which develops into the motif of human sacrifice in later sources. This is surprising. The ascription of this horrible ritual to the pre-Christian Irish would have fitted Christian anti-propaganda against the competing religion. There are traces of this competition in the earliest texts in the form of condemnation of druids with their arts, divination and 'idol' worship.

I suggest that we should connect the virtual absence of the motif of human sacrifice in the oldest sources with two other literary phenomena: the suppression of reference to pre-Christian Gods and the identification of the Irish with the Israelites. The authors of early Irish literature used the Christian reading of the Old Testament as a model. In their view, the Irish were a chosen people receiving divine revelations about Christianity before Patrick's advent. Thus, although the pre-Patrician Irish were considered to be still in 'the dark' as so-called 'pagans', the authors of the texts did not consider their own ancestors to be so 'pagan' as other nations. Like Israel, they were supposed to be more enlightened.¹⁰² Therefore, reference to the old Gods seems often to have been suppressed or euhemerised.

On the other hand, in the Middle Irish period the reconstruction of the pre-Christian past seems to have entered a new phase: more details were filled in, and sometimes this past is even somewhat romanticised.¹⁰³ Although we would not qualify the description of child sacrifice in the *dindshenchas* romantic, I do think that we should see the literary development of the Cenn/Crom Crúaich tradition in this light. Chronologically, we see in Patrick's *Confessio* of the fifth century an abstract condemnation of idol worship. In the Irish and Latin *Lives of Patrick* details about this worship have been filled in, in which influence from biblical 'idol worship' is undeniable. These texts point out the veneration led by the king. Divination is another characteristic, supplied by the Fourth Live. The God or demon is said to have answered questions of the people from within the statue. It is in the eleventh- or twelfth-century *dindshenchas* that the

¹⁰² See also J. Borsje, 'Fate in early Irish texts', *Peritia* 16 (2002) 214-31.

¹⁰³ See J. Carey, 'The three things required of a poet', *Ériu* 48 (1997) 41-58.

motif of child sacrifice and the enigmatic death of King Tigernmas together with many Irish people are found.¹⁰⁴ My conclusion is, finally, that the further in time we get away from the supposed veneration of Cenn or Crom Crúaich, the more detailed the information becomes. This information seems to be more a key towards understanding in what way the pre-Christian past was viewed in the Middle Irish period than a key to disclose knowledge about the historical veneration of Cenn Crúaich.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ This latter motif also occurs in other sources (see n. 22). It should be noted that Tigernmas not only has an alternative death tradition but he is also described as a 'culture hero', introducing novelties to the Irish, such as the use of drinking horns, the smelting of gold, the use of gold and silver for adornment, and the use of certain colours in clothing. As the statue of Cenn Crúaich was made of gold and silver according to the *Patrician Lives*, I wonder whether this explains why Tigernmas was taken up in the tradition concerning this 'idol'. Or should we see this king as a euhemerised pre-Christian God of the Irish, see K. Murray, 'A Reading from *Scéla Moshauluim*', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philology* 53 (2003) 198-201? More research on Tigernmas is needed.

¹⁰⁵ I am indebted to Ronald Black, Philip Freeman, Michael Herren, Bart Jaski, Kevin Murray and Józsi Nagy for bibliographical information, and I am grateful to John Carey and Ingrid Sperber for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.