Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies
Approaches to Religion
and Mythology in Celtic Studies

Edited by

Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm

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This volume contains a selection of the contributions to the VIIIth symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica held in Helsinki in September 2006. The three-day event focused on the themes “religion and mythology” and gathered together 70 Celticists from 11 different countries, making it the biggest Celtic event ever held in Finland. This collection of articles presents various current viewpoints within the field of Celtic studies, from scholars of history, art history, literary studies and comparative religion. In addition to more traditional approaches, the importance of introducing new theories and methods from the discipline of comparative religion is highlighted in the last two parts of the book which present the previously unpublished results of two ongoing research projects.

The contents of this book have been organised thematically around three keynote lectures delivered at the symposium. Part I “Mythology and Religion” opens with an article by John Carey on two of the so-called “Leinster poems”. Carey examines, in two poems relating to the legendary ruler Labraid, possible traces of a rhetorical strategy employed by Christian missionaries. He argues that these texts combine dynastic propaganda with promotion of the Christian message by invoking the Christian idea of the supreme kingship of God in their portrayal of Labraid.

In her article Clodagh Downey reconsiders the tradition concerning the origins of Conall Corc’s name. Downey’s study of the varied textual material arrives at the conclusion that the interpretation of the epithet corc as “red” is secondary and results from the continuous redrafting of tradition. Her approach exemplifies the application of thorough etymological and textual analysis to the reinterpretation of early Irish genealogical history.

Ralph O’Connor’s metatextual reading of Togail Bruidne Da Derga focuses on the connection between storytelling and prophecy. His treatment of the text is based on the extant Middle Irish recension and its creator’s literary technique. O’Connor suggests that the saga-author’s fascination with the supernatural origins of the knowledge of the filid can be detected in his use of prophecy as narrative device.

Turning to Christian materials, Jennifer Ni Ghradaigh’s contribution offers a new interpretation of the four figures depicted on the Devenish
round tower. Ní Ghrádaigh argues that the iconography of the tower may be read as a representation of the four evangelists, and that the sculpture must be considered within the wider context of the twelfth century Irish church. She proposes that the images may be seen as proclaiming sacred space and adding a visual dimension to the audible function of the round tower.

Roy Flechner’s article discusses the reception of the Collectio canonum Hibernensis in Brittany. By examining of the manuscript evidence, Flechner traces the historical setting for the use of the Hibernensis by the Breton church. He locates the transmission of the Hibernensis within the wider context of ninth-century church politics, thus shedding new light on how the canonical texts were studied and applied on the Continent.

The contributions in part II present the ongoing work of the international research network “The power of words in traditional European cultures”. Since 2005, the nine teams participating in this project have been working on a survey and analysis of European forms of “words of power”, such as curses, spells and prayers which are believed to influence and transform reality. Through philological, diachronic and multidisciplinary study, the research project aims to chart the history and historiography of the power of words in Europe, and to study types of cultural continuity and religious interchange in periods of cultural transition, when political and religious interests are most likely to be in conflict. The teams, located in Utrecht, Coleraine, Cork, Lampeter, Helsinki, Moscow (three teams) and St. Petersburg, consist of experts in European cultures, with an emphasis on the Celtic and Slavic areas, and with specific focus on philology, folklore, history, theology and comparative religion.

Jacqueline Borsje is the co-initiator (with Tatyana Mikhailova) of “the power of words” research network and the head of the Utrecht team. She discusses the portrayal of evil and different strategies for dealing with it in three related examples from medieval Irish literature. Borsje argues that in the hagiography of Patrick, the lorica “Deer’s Cry” and a mythological tale related to the Túatha Dé Danann, which all represent different genres, uttering words of power functions as a mechanism for coping with feelings evoked by confrontation with evil.

While Borsje’s article could be seen as an attempt to elucidate how words of power functioned in early Irish literature, Tom Sjöblom pursues the question of why they achieve their goal in the first place. Thus Sjöblom’s main concern is with the emotional relevance of early Irish taboo-thinking. His cognitive approach builds on the view that the effect
of using formulaic speech to connect honour-taboos with traditional lore is
grounded in the emotional response evoked in the audience. This
emotional communication is, according to Sjöblom, a universal element of
taboos which in the Irish narrative context appeal above all to the principal
emotion of shame.

The literary images of the King and the Hero are scrutinised in
Professor Miller’s contribution. Focusing on early Welsh narrative
material, he analyses an example of King Arthur’s royal “words of power”
through three particular themes, of which the ingratitude of princes is
identified as a theme pertaining to the contract between the sovereign and
his champion. Miller’s reading reflects a textualist approach which points
to the different functions of communication in a narrative universe.

Professor Mikhailova offers in her article a reappraisal of the old
problem of the five fifths of Ireland. She advances an hypothesis that the
concept of cóic olchóiced is based on an ethnic pattern rather than a
cosmological or geographical principle. According to Mikhailova, the idea
of a cóiced corresponds to the pre-Goidelic tribes in Ireland whereas the
five fifths as a literary theme is late and influenced by both Old Testament
and Classical models.

Part III “Sacredness” presents the results of the two-year research
project “Religion, Society, and Culture: Defining the Sacred in Early Irish
Literature” funded by the Academy of Finland and headed by Dr Tom
Sjöblom. The aim of this project, conducted at the Department of
Comparative Religion at the University of Helsinki, was to provide a
comprehensive view of the function of sacredness in early Irish society
and culture, including both the horizontal and vertical aspects of the
concept. In their individual contributions the scholars have focused on
sacredness at both the level of inter-personal relationships in society, and
the level of relations between the earthly and divine spheres. A third way
of defining the sacred investigated in this project was a spatial one,
concentrating on the borders between the inside and the outside, and the
liminal character of the one who functions between the two. The overall
objective of the project was to introduce the insights of comparative
religion into the field of Celtic studies and to approach early Irish literary
material from a new methodological perspective.

Professor Anttonen is the foremost expert in the study of the cultural
history of the sacred. His article serves as a general introduction to the
concept of sacredness both as a term in the vernacular and as a religious
concept with ontological and metaphysical reference. By exploring how
the category is used, Anttonen considers the role that the notion of the
sacred plays in cultural analysis. In this article he poses the question of
why the notion exists in the first place and whether there is a specific logic which can be detected behind the use of the notion in different cultural contexts. Moreover, Anttonen is interested in how the concept of sacred can be operationalised as an analytical tool in the comparative study of religion.

In her article, Riitta Latvio appropriates the conceptual semantic framework of Anttonen's theory of the sacred in her analysis of neimed, one of the core concepts in early Irish society. She focuses on the social distinctions marked by neimed with regard to the concept’s perceived sacral associations, and argues that the prevalent understanding of neimed as a permanent status or privilege conferred on a person should be broadened to include its reference to a temporary quality, by which people and animals are marked as being outside everyday routines. In her conclusions Latvio proposes that the early Irish law texts provide some evidence to suggest that classification as neimed may have cut across early Irish society and been applicable to all persons without overt regard to social status. In addition, her approach problematises the applicability of the sacred as a category created by scholars in earlier analyses of neimed.

How the concept of the sacred has been used as an analytical tool in previous research is also one of the central questions in Alexandra Bergholm’s article. By reflecting upon Arnold van Gennep's theory of ritual transition and Veikko Anttonen's notion of the sacred as a border category, Bergholm explores the symbolic potential of the liminal character of Suibhne Geilt. In her opinion, the ambiguity surrounding the figure of the geilt in Buile Suibhne may be conceptualised in terms of sacredness by focusing on those aspects of Suibhne's marginal existence that that mark him off as something “other”. By considering earlier scholarly interpretations of Buile Suibhne made from a shamanic, Christian or ritual point of view, Bergholm suggests that the depiction of Suibhne Geilt communicates a quality of sacrality that is identifiable regardless of the particular framework within which the tale is interpreted.

In its theological focus Katja Ritari's article departs from modern theoretical models of the sacred. Her primary interest lies in the ways that medieval authors conceptualised sacredness in their religious writings. By analysing hagiographical texts and the martyrology Félire Óengusso, Ritari seeks to discern the theology of holiness common to early Irish ecclesiastical authors. She draws attention to the interface between the perception of sacredness in early medieval Ireland and the sacred as a phenomenological concept. Ritari argues that if we privilege the experience of transcendence as communicated by the medieval authors, the conception of holiness must be anchored in their theological
understanding of the sacred as a \textit{sui generis} ontological category, in Rudolf Otto's terms as something "wholly Other".

We wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Cultural Foundation. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to Harriet Thomsett for her relentless effort in proofreading the articles.
ABBREVIATIONS

BND  *Bretha Nemed Déidenach*. CIH 1111–1138.
Abbreviations

**BnE**  

**BNT**  

**BR**  

**CA**  

**CA2/CA3**  

**CaO**  

**CGH**  

**CD**  

**CG**  

**ChA**  
*Chethairshlict Athgálae*. CIH 352.25–422.36; 1438.36–1465.27; 1723.11–1755.16 etc.

**CIH**  

**CMCS**  
Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies (formerly Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies)

**CO**  

**DAC**  

**DDC**  

**DIAS**  
Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

**DIL**  

**EC**  
*Études Celtiques*


GBRE  Geis ocus búa da riogh Éirenn, edited by Myles Dillon. PRIA 54 C1 (1951).

GU  Geisi Ulchail, edited by Brian O’Looney. PRIA/Irish manuscript series 1:1 (1870).


ITS  Irish Texts Society

JRSAI  Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland


PHCC  Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium

PMLA  Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America

PRIA  Proceedings of Royal Irish Academy

RIA  Royal Irish Academy


SC  Studia Celtica


TCD  Trinity College Dublin.
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Editor(s)</th>
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>TDG</td>
<td>Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne</td>
<td>Nessa Ni Shéaghdha.</td>
<td>ITS, Dublin</td>
<td>1967</td>
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<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>Tochmarc Émire. In Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories</td>
<td>A.G. van Hamel</td>
<td>DIAS, Dublin</td>
<td>1933</td>
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<tr>
<td>UB</td>
<td>Uraicecht Becc. CIH 1590–1618; 634–655; 2318–2335.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UR</td>
<td>Uraicecht na Riar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law</td>
<td>Liam Bretnach</td>
<td>Early Irish Law Series II, DIAS, Dublin</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<tr>
<td>YBL</td>
<td>Yellow Book of Lecan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ZCP</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie</td>
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PART I:

MYTHOLOGY AND RELIGION
FROM DAVID TO LABRAID: 
SACRAL KINGSHIP AND THE EMERGENCE 
OF MONOTHEISM IN ISRAEL AND IRELAND 

JOHN CAREY

This talk will be based on two brief texts, belonging to the corpus of what have come to be called “Leinster poems”: pieces—some of them lengthy litanies of dynastic ancestors, some brief eulogies of individual rulers— which are preserved in the genealogical compilations devoted to the kings of the Laigin.\(^1\) The “Leinster poems” are perhaps best known on account of the dramatic claims which have been made for their antiquity: thus Kuno Meyer, their first editor, took the oldest among them to date from the sixth or from the beginning of the seventh century.\(^2\) Myles Dillon stated more simply that they “probably belong to the sixth century”, comparing them to eulogies of the Gupta dynasty in India and asserting that “it is my belief that here, as elsewhere, an ancient common inheritance has been preserved in India and in Ireland”.\(^3\) James Carney likewise held the oldest Leinster poems to be essentially pagan compositions, going back to the sixth century or indeed, in the final development of his views, to the middle of the fifth if not even earlier.\(^4\) This more extreme position

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\(^4\) James Carney, “The Dating of Archaic Irish Verse,” in *Early Irish Literature: Media*
has elicited considerable scepticism, and telling counter-arguments. But even if they are not as old as Carney eventually thought, the poems have every appearance of being very old indeed: Donnchadh Ó Corráin has shown that there are in fact historical grounds for dating some of them, at any rate, to the early seventh century. This alone gives the “Leinster poems” an exceptional interest—not only as specimens of archaic language and prosody, but also in terms of their imagery and ideology. It is this last that will be my main concern in what follows.

**Moen oen**

The two specimens which we shall be considering are both panegyrics of Labraid Loingsech: the legendary ancestor of all of the royal lineages of the Laigin, to whom the Middle Irish pseudohistorical tradition assigned a *floruit* around the year 300 B.C. We can refer to the first of them, from its opening words, as *Moen oen*. The bulk of the poem may be translated as follows:

Moen, alone since he was an infant:
it was not the custom of a high king.
He smote kings, a splendid [spear-]cast,
Labraid the grandson of Lorc.

The heroes of the Gáileóin 
took spears (*laignea*) in their hands:
thenhence [they are called] Laigin,
From David to Labraid

the host of the Gáileóin.
They established provinces as far as the sea,
the expanses of the lands of Éremón:
after exile, Löchét of the war-bands
conquered the princes of the Gaels.

The grandson of Loegaire Lorc
was a gryphon attacking unknown lands,
higher than men
save for the holy King of heaven.

There is one more verse, which I shall come to shortly. Even before we
have considered the conclusion, it will be obvious that this is splendid
poetry. That it cannot however go back to the fifth century, and almost
certainly not even to the sixth, is immediately evident on the basis of a
single criterion: the alliteration in the line *flaithi Goedel gabsus* “[he]
conquered the princes of the Gaels”. *Gabsus* is a form of the verb *gaibid*
“takes, seizes”, the first consonant of whose stem derives from an Indo-
European aspirated voiced velar; but *Goedel* “Gael” was borrowed into
Irish from British, and exhibits the characteristically Brittonic shift of
initial *w*- to *gw*-.* Just when this shift took place is not easy to ascertain,8
but John Koch has assembled evidence indicating that names borrowed
into Irish from British began to reflect it in the early decades of the
seventh century.9

The difficulty posed by *Goedel* was not addressed by Carney. For him,
the poem’s only late features all occur in the single line *acht noebrí nime*
“save for the holy King of heaven”: he described this reference to the
Christian God as “an instance of monastic censorship”, whose secondary
character he also detected on the level of diction. In this connection he
pointed out that the line breaks the alliterative sequence which runs
through the composition; that it ends with a simple disyllable, *nime*, rather
than with a trisyllable or a disyllable with a medial consonant cluster;10
and that it uses the word *acht* to mean “except”, whereas archaic poetry

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employs *inge*.\textsuperscript{11} Enrico Campanile went further, taking the entire stanza to be a later addition; he held that it had been composed as a pious replacement for the final stanza (which we have yet to consider), but that the latter had then through some oversight been retained anyway.\textsuperscript{12}

Of these arguments, that based on the break in alliteration is the strongest. The lack of a trisyllabic or quasi-trisyllabic cadence could, as Carney himself observed, be rectified by the simple expedient of emending *noebrí nime* to *nime noebrí* with preposed genitive. Nor can I take the use of *acht* rather than *inge* very seriously as a dating criterion. The former is a word with an Indo-European etymology, whose use here to mean “except” is comparable to that of its Greek cognate *ektos*. If *inge* appears instead of *acht* in some “archaic” compositions, therefore, this is to be regarded simply as a matter of style; it is certainly not evidence that *acht* was not already being employed even before the time of the oldest written evidence.

Although both Carney and Campanile objected to the line on metrical grounds, this was not their primary motive for taking exception to it. Even more unacceptable was its reference, already mentioned, to a heavenly Deity. As Carney said, “the statement of Christian belief is as dubious as the metre”; while for Campanile the sentiment expressed “betrays a pious Christian hand”. Our view of the poem’s date will inevitably colour our assessment of these criticisms. If *Moen oen* was in fact composed at a time when Ireland was still largely or perhaps wholly pagan, then such a Christian reference would of course be incongruous and implausible, and it would be credible enough that its inclusion should have been the work of some later copyist. But would the composition of a pagan poem, so unambiguously heathen as eventually to be subjected to “monastic censorship”, be as likely in the seventh century, when Irish society as a whole was—at all events officially—Christian? I would rather not make up my mind too soon. I propose that we set the disputed line to one side for the present, and turn to the final stanza.

Carney proposed various renderings for this quatrain in different publications, but consistently cited its “clear and unequivocal paganism” as a criterion for his dating of *Moen oen* as a whole. Here is how he translated it in 1971:

\textsuperscript{11} Carney, “Three Old Irish Accentual Poems,” 70; Carney, “The Dating of Archaic Irish Verse,” 46 n. 10.

\textsuperscript{12} Campanile, *Die älteste Hofdichtung*, 43.
Gold over the bright sun, he took sovereignty over the lands of human beings; and amongst the gods, he is one god, who is Moén son of Áine, the sole king.  

And here is his version of 1989:

Gold more shining than the great bright sun, there seized the lands of humans and of gods the singular god who is Moín, son of Áine, the singular king.

The principal difference between the two is the treatment of the word deib: should it be emended to genitive plural dé, so that Labraid is said to have taken control “over the worlds of men and gods”; or is it rather related to the dia oen which follows, as in Carney’s translation “amongst the gods, he is one god?”

Either of these approaches would appear to be grammatically possible. The conjunction sceo most usually connects nouns, but examples of its use to link verb clauses can be found in such texts as Amra Coluimb Chille and the first recension of Táin Bó Cúailnge. Since the poem affords no other instances of a sentence running on from the first couplet of a stanza into the second, however, it would seem that the balance of likelihood favours leaving deib unemended, and construing it with dia oen rather than with for doíne ndomnaib. But how are we to understand dia oen?

So far as I can see, the meaning can only be “one god”, taking “one” in the sense “lone, single, unique”. Such renderings as Carney’s “the singular god who is Moín” or “amongst the gods he is one god” could almost be suspected of using the ambiguities of English to cloud the issue: the words “singular god” can simply designate a god who is remarkable or noteworthy; and when we speak of “one” individual among others we are

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14 Carney, “The Dating of Archaic Irish Verse,” 47. For the emendation of the final word from genitive oenríg to nominative oenrí see his n. 11 (cf. Campanile, Die älteste Hofdichtung, 44). Campanile’s translation, although it assumes several emendations, is broadly similar: “[Gold] Höher als die glänzende Sonne herrschte der einzigartige Möen, Sohn von Áine, über Menschenwelten, und ein Gott unter den Göttern ist er, der einzigartige König” (ibid., 26).
15 Meyer did not so emend deib, but all the same took it to belong to the preceding clause: “ergriff er die Herrschaft über Menschenwelten und über Götter” (“Über die älteste irische Dichtung: II,” 12).
16 DIL s.v. sceo, col. 88.42-6.
employing the word as if it were an indefinite article. But neither of these usages can be attributed to *oen* in Irish.

That *oen* in our phrase indicates uniqueness, or at least isolation, is borne out when we consider the word’s rôle elsewhere in the poem. Its importance is reflected in the fact that it occurs both at the beginning and at the end. At the start, we find another instance of its rare use as an attributive adjective, here qualifying Labraid’s nickname “Moen”; while in the final line it qualifies “Moen” again, now as first element in the compound *oenrí*. The sense in both cases is “lone”, “single”, “unique”; but the word’s connotations are transformed in the course of the poem itself. The exiled Labraid was “alone” in childhood in the sense of being bereft of supporters: that he was stripped of his rightful following is reflected in the phrase “it was not the custom of a high king”. But now, having returned in triumph and overcome all opposition, he is the “sole king”—unapproachable in his supremacy, rather than vulnerable in his isolation. This adroit unfolding of the implications of *oen*, and of the nature of “onlyness”, is evidently one of the poem’s primary themes: it would be wrongheaded not to be guided by this in approaching the third instance of the word, as an adjective qualifying *dia*. The Leinster poems themselves afford us an instance of comparable usage in the line *Fiachu ferr oen ilur bráithre mBaiccedo* “Fiachu alone [is] better than the many brothers of Baiccid”.

Accordingly, I would translate the stanza in its entirety as follows:

Gold above the great bright sun,
he gained sovereignty over the world of men;
[as] the one God to the gods
is Moen son of Áine, the sole king.

Labraid, in other words, after conquering all of Ireland as far as the sea, and after having overthrown the rulers, the *flaithi*, of the Gaels, has made himself the master of “the worlds of men”. His ascendancy over his fellow mortals is as absolute, as immeasurable, as is the true God’s superiority to the conquered gods of heathendom. As Charles Doherty has commented,

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17 This criticism also applies to the translation of this poem which I contributed to *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, ed. John T. Koch and John Carey, 4th ed. (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), 58.
“Even in this most archaic of material the Church has a firm base”.\textsuperscript{19} We are a long way from Carney’s “clear and unequivocal paganism”.\textsuperscript{20}

**Lug scéith**

The second poem (to which I shall be referring as *Lug scéith*) comprises only two verses. In two manuscripts it appears immediately before *Moen oen*, and in these copies both compositions are said to be the work of a single poet.

Lug of a shield,
a shining phantom:
beneath the heavens there was not [anyone]
who would be as great as the son of Áine.

A mortal loftier than gods,
a sturdy acorn,
pure, with many branches,
the grandson of Loegaire Lorc.

Whether or not the poems really have the same author, there are certainly respects in which they can be compared: thus (although the sequence is different) both refer to Labraid in adjacent stanzas as *mac Áine* and as *ua Luirc Loegairi*. We can also note the way in which *Lug scéith* qualifies Labraid’s greatness: it is only “beneath the heavens” that he has no equal. The obvious corollary is that in heaven Labraid would in fact encounter one greater than himself, and this is essentially what is stated in the disputed passage in *Moen oen*: there too, Labraid is “higher than men/save for the holy King of heaven”. This correspondence seems to me to speak in favour of accepting *acht noebrí nime* as original, despite the defective alliteration. There are, to be sure alternative scenarios: that both poems have been tampered with in the same way, or that *Moen oen* was modified so as to assimilate it to *Lug scéith*. But while neither of these hypotheses is impossible, both seem unnecessarily laborious—especially since, as we have seen, the view that *Moen oen* is a pagan composition must be discarded in any case.


\textsuperscript{20} It seems to have been Campanile who most clearly recognised the problems posed for a pagan interpretation by the phrase *dia oen*. He therefore emended it out of existence, restoring the final couplet as *scéo deeib dia is öenMóen mac Áíni öenrí*. 
If we do entertain the possibility that the reference to “the holy King of heaven” is integral to *Moen oen*, this can in fact be seen as an important part of that poem’s argument. Labraid is the greatest of men, with a single exception: the Christian God who, because he has become incarnate as Jesus, is also a man and is therefore of course supreme among men. For the sentiment being expressed, we can compare a considerably later poem preserved in *Lebor Gabála*, where it is said of an even more primordial legendary king that “such was his virtue/ that he was better than any king save holy Christ”. But Jesus the man is also, by the same token, greater than all other gods: this superiority is unqualified, and can serve as an analogy for the absoluteness of Labraid’s sole kingship. To put it another way: Jesus, as both God and man, is supreme in both the divine and human spheres. Comparing him with Labraid can be a way of evoking the latter’s human pre-eminence, while making a religious point as well. *Lug scéith* reflects the same ideas, but has another dimension also. As you will have noted, I take the first word in the poem to be a proper name, that of the god Lug. In understanding it in this way I am rejecting the alternative view, going back to Meyer’s edition, according to which *lug* here is not a proper name at all but rather a word for “lynx”. Although *lug* in the sense “lynx” still has its advocates, it seems to me to be a ghost word. I am not aware of a single unambiguous attestation; nor is it easy to see how such a form could be related to the other Indo-European words for “lynx”, all of which appear to go back to a stem *leuk-* with unvoiced velar.

Apparently, then, the poem begins with an allusion—however we choose to interpret this—to the pre-Christian supernatural. The collocation of the name *Lug* and the word *scál* is immediately reminiscent of the Old Irish prophetic text *Baile in Scáil*, which is introduced by a tale in which Conn Céitchathach, king of Tara, visits the Otherworld hall of Lug. The

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22 He rendered *lug scéith* as “ein Luchs des Schildes,” adding in a footnote “D. h. schreckenerregend wie das Bild eines Luchses auf einem Schild” (Meyer, “Über die älteste irische Dichtung II,” 23). This interpretation was also adopted by Campanile, *Die älteste Hofdichtung*, 28, 46-47.
23 Thus Bernhard Maier, “Is Lug to be Identified with Mercury (*Bell. Gall.* VI 17,1)? New Suggestions on an Old Problem,” *Ériu* 47 (1996), 128.
24 I hope to return to this question on another occasion.
narrator refers to Lug as a scál, although the god himself is portrayed as denying such an identification; Lug also claims to be a figure from the very distant past, belonging to the lineage of Conn’s own remote forebears. Conn is made welcome, and offered meat and drink: the draught of ale which is served to him corresponds to his reign as king, and a prophecy of the whole sequence of his successors is governed by the metaphorical portrayal of the kingship of Tara as an ale-feast in which they are all participants.²⁶ Conn was claimed as an ancestor by the Uí Néill, the royal kindred which wrested Tara, and the kingship which it represented, from the Laigin: may this evocation of a relationship between Conn and the scál Lug have supplanted an earlier tradition, in which Labraid was the beneficiary of Lug’s good will?²⁷ For our poet, at any rate, Labraid seems to appear as Lug’s alter ego.

This is not yet all, however. Labraid may, in some sense, “be” Lug, but his supremacy obtains only in the terrestrial realm. Even if he can by analogy be called a “god”, he is still subject to the God in heaven. But then the second stanza makes a further move: Labraid/Lug is in fact a mortal, and a mortal who is—perhaps as such—more exalted than the gods themselves. How can this be so? That a Christian should be superior to the gods of paganism would have been a medieval commonplace; but Labraid was held to have lived and died many centuries before the Gospel came to Ireland, or indeed Christ into the world. The answer is provided, I think, by the poem’s concluding lines. Labraid is an “oak-seed” or acorn, from which many branches sprout: as a royal ancestor, he lives still in his innumerable descendants, whereas the old gods are gone forever.

Both poems, accordingly, comprise a mixture of dynastic propaganda and Christian polemic. Both combine the exaltation of Labraid with the depreciation of the pagan gods, but do so in differing ways. Moen oen is a poem about singularity: Labraid, in a manner characteristic of the “heroic biography” in general but also, by the same token, true of the story of Jesus in particular, begins his existence as a friendless and endangered waif, but is eventually the unchallenged master of all he surveys. This makes him the most exalted of all humans still dwelling on the earth; his elevation above all other kings is like the true God’s elevation above all other gods. In Lug scéith’s two short stanzas, the poet plays with a whole series of equations and comparisons. The mortal Labraid is at first (in a manner which may well reflect genuine pre-Christian tradition) identified

with a pagan god; then all men (including Labraid) are subordinated to the man Jesus, who is identical with the Christian God; and finally we perceive that Labraid, as founder of dynasties which have lasted down into the present, is greater than the gods who belong only to the past.

That Labraid and Christ are here so juxtaposed may at first seem surprising, but is in fact no more so than the implicit comparison of Christ with Mongán mac Fiachnai in the second of the poems in *Immram Brain*: here a prophecy of Christ’s birth and divine nature (“he will be both God and man”) is juxtaposed with a prophecy of the birth of Mongán.\(^{28}\) Even as Labraid is identified with the god Lug, Mongán is said to be the son of the god Manannán: each is, in the space of a few lines, associated both with the Christian Saviour and with one of the native divinities.

If a Christian agenda is part of these poems, though, it is a Christian agenda of a particular kind. The God of heaven is placed above all other gods, just as Labraid is placed above all other kings—but one implication of such an analogy is that the other gods, like the other kings, actually exist. What sort of theology would lie behind such statements? One answer immediately suggests itself: a theology born of a Christian milieu, to be sure, but one in which it was still felt to be necessary to assert the claims of the Christian God against those of the divinities whose worship his cult was superseding.

I do not think that there is really anything very audacious in this suggestion. There was already a substantial Christian population in Ireland in the early fifth century, and by the sixth the island was full of powerful religious houses; but the collection of canons entitled *Synodus episcoporum*—whenever this was compiled—reflects a period in which Christian communities in Ireland still felt obliged to legislate against the risks posed to their faith by association with pagan neighbours.\(^{29}\) In the seventh century, druids were apparently still active as transmitters of tradition;\(^{30}\) in the eighth, their place within the framework of society was still being negotiated by legal writers;\(^{31}\) and ninth-century manuscripts


\(^{30}\) The crucial evidence here is a passage in the treatise *De mirabilibus sacrae Scripturae*, written in 655. For the text, and some discussion, see John Carey, trans., *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 12, 58.

contain incantations which are in effect supplications to pagan deities. The A-version of the gnomic text *Audacht Morainn*, dating perhaps from the eighth century and evidently addressed, like the Labraid poems, to a court audience, concludes with the following exhortation to a young king:

Tell him that he should not entrust himself to paganism; he should entrust himself to righteousness, which will preserve him. Tell him that he should not entrust himself to idols; he should entrust himself to the God who is the best of gods (*i nDía as dech deib*), the God of heaven.

As late as the eleventh century, we find an account of oracles being sought from the immortal Oengus Óc at the mound of Newgrange, and a text from the same period refers to prayers—the Middle Irish word used is *itcheda*—being addressed to one of the women of the *síd* on the night of Samain. Down into modern times, as is well known, it has still been possible for many Irish people to believe both in the One God and in a host of other supernatural beings, and to attribute daunting powers to the latter. To be sure, “the good people” are not called “gods”. But the folk of the *síd* were referred to as “the men of the gods” or “the tribe of the gods” throughout the Middle Ages; and Tírechán, in a famous passage in his *Collectanea*, spoke of the *síd*-dwellers in the later seventh century as *dei terreni* or “earthly gods”.

**The “God of gods” in the Bible**

A model for situating the One God in the context of a multitude of other divinities can be found in the most unimpeachable of sources: the Bible itself. Thus Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is made to exclaim “Now I know that the Lord is great, above all gods (*super omnes deos*)” when he

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32 The most recent discussion of this material of which I am aware is my own article “*Téacsanna Draíochta in Éirinn sa Mheánaois Luath*,” *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 30 (2000), 98-117.
33 Fergus Kelly ed. and trans., *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin: DIAS, 1976), 71, following the readings of the first version in the Book of Leinster (my trans.). Use of a dative with the superlative adjective is unusual: perhaps the superlative is being used as a comparative here, and we should translate “better than [all other] gods”.
hears of the crossing of the Red Sea;\textsuperscript{37} and the canticle which the Israelites recite after their escape from the Egyptians includes the rhetorical question “Who is like you among the gods, O Lord?”\textsuperscript{38} David Noel Freedman’s observations concerning the latter verse are pertinent:

In the poem itself the incomparability of Yahweh is affirmed (…) but paradoxically by a comparison of Yahweh with other gods. In order to establish the superiority of Yahweh, comparison is necessary but compromises his uniqueness (…) No other god can bear comparison, none can measure up or even be included in the comparison. But there are other gods, that is clear. Otherwise there can be no comparison to demonstrate the incomparability of Yahweh. This is hardly monotheism in any philosophical or strictly rational sense of the term.\textsuperscript{39}

The richest quarry of such passages is in the Psalter—one of the most familiar books of the Bible, thanks to its central place in the daily office of religious communities. Here the God of Israel is called “the God of gods”,\textsuperscript{40} and is praised in ways which readily recall the eulogies of Labraïd:

There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor [are their deeds] like your deeds. You have brought it about that all the pagans, whoever they are, will come and worship before you, O Lord. For you are great, and one who works wonders: you are the only God (\textit{Deus solus}).\textsuperscript{41}

(…) For the Lord is a great God, and a great king over all gods (\textit{rex magnus super omnes deos}).\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{37} Ex. 18:11. Except where otherwise noted, quotations from the Bible will be translated from the Vulgate text; in citing from the Psalms, I use the Vulgate numbering.
\textsuperscript{38} Ex. 15:11. Here, as sometimes elsewhere, Jerome has used \textit{fortes} “mighty ones” to render Hebrew \textit{elim}; the Septuagint has \textit{Tís hómoiós soí en theoí}, \textit{Kúrie}. See discussion below.
\textsuperscript{40} Ps. 135:2.
\textsuperscript{41} Ps. 85:8-10.
\textsuperscript{42} Ps. 94:3. “God” or \textit{Deus} here renders \textit{El} in the Hebrew text: used in the Bible (like its plural form \textit{Elohim}) to designate the God of Israel, but also the name of the chief deity of the Canaanites.
(...) For the Lord is great, and much to be praised. He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the pagans are demons, but the Lord truly made the heavens.  

Let all be confounded who serve carvings, who glory in idols. Worship him, all you gods! (...) For you are the Lord exalted over all the earth, you are mightily lifted up above all gods (super omnes deos).  

In this last passage, it will be observed that the denunciation of idolatry does not imply that the gods of the pagans are nothing but inert artefacts: they can still be addressed directly, and called upon to adore the Lord. The cult of idols was in fact often understood as the adoration of living demons through the medium of inanimate images, as when the Book of Revelation speaks in a single breath of those who worship “demons and similitudes of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk”. The idea that the gods are real entities, albeit malevolent ones, could even be read into Biblical texts where it was not originally present. In one of the passages just quoted I have translated a line from Psalm 95 as “all the gods of the pagans are demons”, in this following Jerome’s rendering of daimónia in the Septuagint. But the Hebrew word is elîlîm, the basic sense of which appears to have been something like “rags”; when he produced a second version of the Psalms, this time based on the original, Jerome translated this as sculptilia “carvings”.

The most interesting text of all in this connection is perhaps Psalm 81, in which God is described as presiding over an assembly of other deities:

God stood in the assembly of the gods (in synagoga deorum); God gave judgment in their midst.

At the Psalm’s conclusion, God condemns these gods to the fate of mortals, and compares them to a human ruler, in a way which seems to bring us very close to the Labraid poems:

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43 Ps. 95:4-5.
44 Here Jerome has angeli in his rendering from the Septuagint (which gives ángeloi), but dii (for elohim) when translating from the Hebrew.
45 Ps. 96:7-9.
46 Rev. 9:20.