

# “Tara and Cashel, Cities of Violence and Mercy”

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Undergraduate

Irish folklore is an oral tradition, that was frequently intended as a method of glorification of the ruler kings. Such traditional oral culture resulted in the intermingling of tribal history and kingship with origin legends,<sup>1</sup> and Ireland created a synthesized version of its history, praising its kings and incorporating them into folklore. Prophecy was invariably present in Irish folklore and history, and of these histories, much prophecy surrounds two competing cities that acted as the seats of power in Ireland, the city of Tara, in the North, and the city of Cashel, in the South. Tara was believed to be founded by the gods in prehistory,<sup>2</sup> and was the original locale of the Irish throne and told a pagan legend until the time of its demise in the 6th century. Conversely, the city of Cashel was late in foundation, and was thought to be from Christian inception. The prophecies surrounding the cities of Tara and Cashel, although pagan in tradition, diverge radically in that the Cashel prophecies offer an ethically Christian view of kingship through use of Christian symbolism and the virtues of truth and mercy with an emphasis on Christian peace. In contrast, the prophecy of Tara centers upon a destructive and vindictive pagan narrative. This discrepancy and change of thought reflects the eventual move away from paganism and towards Christianity that began in Ireland in the late 6th century.

First, I shall look closely at the prophecies in *The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón*, as translated from Irish by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. In this piece, we shall see the pagan aspects of prophecy, noting the constant repetition of the themes of battle, vengeance and cruelty, that represent the merciless nature of this pagan society. The myth also repeats its core prophecy four times, that the hero, Niall, the abandoned bastard son of noble king Eochaid, is destined to become king.<sup>3</sup> This prophecy is first revealed by the poet Torna; and also by the prophet Sithchenn; it is then alluded to when Mongfinn, the vindictive queen, attempts to have Niall killed; and, finally, the prophecy is affirmed by the hag-goddess, and Niall's untrustworthy brothers formally proclaim his precedence. The tale is dynastic propaganda of the eleventh century, with some parts as old as perhaps the eighth century.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Francis John Byrne, "Senchas: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition," in J. G. Berry (ed.), *Historical Studies IX*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1974): 138.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest local remains at Tara consist of a small passage grave dated c. 2100 B.C. and known as Dumha na nGiall ("Mound of the Hostages").

<sup>3</sup> Donnchadh Ó Corráin, "Legend as Critic," in Tom Dunne (ed.), *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, (Cork University Press, 1987): 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Secondly, I shall look closely at the prophecies in the story of *The Finding of Cashel*, as translated by Myles Dillon. Here we see a contrast in that these prophecies have Christian motifs and focus on the virtues of truth and mercy as the overruling virtues for a proper ruler. The influence of St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, as well as the integral presence of an angel will be discussed to advance the notion of a Christian based folklore in Cashel.

*The Adventure of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón* is a pagan myth that traces the kingship of the city of Tara. Pagan themes are deeply embedded in Mongfinn, Queen to noble king Eochaid. Mongfinn loathes the hero protagonist, Niall son of Eochaid, who was not begot by her, but by Cairenn, daughter of the king of England. Contrary to Christian tradition that values legitimate birth, an illegitimate king is considered admissible as heir to the Irish throne in this pagan myth. Mongfinn introduces a tone of spitefulness and malice to this myth by inflicting suffering on Cairenn. She forces her to undergo great servile hardship during her pregnancy, so that the child Niall should die in the womb. Niall does not die in the womb and in a most unchristian act of abandonment, Cairenn, in fear of the wraith of Mongfinn, leaves her newborn exposed to the birds, not daring to take him up from the ground.

The poet, Torna on finding the child, reveals Niall's compelling life prophecy. This myth is true to the Irish Heroic Biography, as Niall's begetting is illegitimate, he is born to the earth and abandoned, he is threatened in youth and forced to flee Tara, and he is raised as an adopted son. Niall is to be a great king of Tara. Torna sings of blood and war and battle and conquest, themes commonplace in the pagan Irish myths. The prophecy Torna speaks of mentions, "Niall of the Nine Hostages," and that "in his time he [Niall] will redden a multitude," and that in war the plains will be extended, and great battles fought and "for twenty-seven years he will rule Ireland—and Ireland will be ruled by his descendants for ever."<sup>5</sup> There is pagan revelry in death, retribution, glory and plunder, and there is no mention of "weak" virtue such as mercy or truth. Also, we are told that Niall will die an honorable death, in battle on a Saturday afternoon, by the sea of Wight at the hand of Eochaid. The death is described as "good," like his beginning, indicating that violent death in battle is deemed an honorable end for a pagan king.

Niall returns to Tara as a grown man and angers Mongfinn by freeing his mother from servitude and dressing her in royal purple. The theme of battle and avenging is revived by a second prophecy delivered through the druid/smith prophet Sithchenn, who is called upon by Mongfinn in

<sup>5</sup> Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Birth of Cormac Ua Cuinn." Copyright Tomás Ó Cathasaigh: 67.

her rage. Sithchenn passes judgment on the sons of Eochaid, divining each by which weapons they take to his forge. Brain is for the battlefield, Ailill is for avenging, and Niall conquers. Niall, who took the great anvil, is prophesied the great prize of kingship. Such divination through weaponry reveals pagan appetite for war and conflict.

Mongfinn, discontented by the verdict, entices her sons to quarrel so they might be separated by Niall and have an opportunity to kill him. This too fails, as Niall is told to “let the sons of Mongfinn be peaceful.” Here, the theme of peace is used to distract from a vengeful trap designed to kill Niall. This trap failing, Mongfinn sends the sons of Eochaid again to prophet Sithchenn to ask for hunting arms, and Sithchenn once again prophesies Niall as the fortunate son by awarding him the finest weaponry.

The most significant prophecy in this myth is that revealed by the pagan hag-goddess, a recurring soothsaying personality of Irish tradition.<sup>6</sup> She is a wretched figure who transforms herself into a queen after being reduced to poverty or being deranged. She is the sovereignty of Ireland, and her very appearance in the story designates the hero as destined for the kingship. The brothers Fergus, Ailill and Brian all refuse to kiss the hag, “I would sooner die of thirst than give you a kiss,” but Fiachra offers her a peck, and Niall not only gives her a kiss, but sleeps with her, and she is renewed to the figure of a beautiful queen. While in hag form she represents the many battles and conflicts of Ireland and these conflicts are judged as inherent to the country. She explains this saying, “... as you have seen me, ugly, wolfish, horrifying at first, and beautiful at last, so also is the sovereignty; for it is seldom gained without battles and conflicts.”<sup>7</sup> The nature of Ireland is such explained, ugly, in that battle and conflict are considered an integral and a necessary aspect of the country—and yet worth fighting for.

Additionally, the hag advises Niall not to give water to his brothers until they have acknowledged his seniority and raised his weapon “a hand’s breadth above theirs.”<sup>8</sup> This is significant as we see that the brothers are considered quarrelsome, untrustworthy, and untruthful, and as such it is necessary for Niall to subdue them, which he accordingly does. Once subdued they then admit to Mongfinn that seniority has been given to Niall and they confirm that, “he

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<sup>6</sup> Other examples of the transformation of the goddess in Irish myth are Ethne, spouse of Cormac mac Airt, in *The Melodies of Buchet’s House* and in *Cormac’s Dream*.

<sup>7</sup> Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

[Niall] will be first... to have kingship.”<sup>9</sup>

The prophecies in the story of *The Finding of Cashel*, as translated by Myles Dillon, are very distinct from those of Tara, stressing Christian motifs and parallels and focusing on truth and mercy, as opposed to destruction and revenge, as virtues for a proper ruler. Traditional symbols are used, such as the color yellow being an indication of Irish fertility and prosperity. Furthermore, St. Patrick is introduced as a focal character who instigates the conversion of Cashel to Christianity. Swineherds see angelic visions sent by God, and there is a long and powerful blessing—concluding with a condition of mercy. Slaves are freed, showing the mercy of the king and the prophetic visions are specifically acknowledged as a device of the Christian God.

In the story of *The Finding of Cashel*, the instigators are two swineherds, Dúirdriu and Cuirirán who act as prophets for the prophecy of the founding of Cashel. David Sproule, in his *Politics and pure narrative in the stories about Corc of Cashel*, mentions that the authors of *The Finding of Cashel* may have been inspired by the story of the birth of Jesus in the New Testament, where Herdsmen, keeping night-watches with their flocks in the fields, see the angel who announces the birth of the Savior.<sup>10</sup> The swineherds of Cashel are parallels, their revelation being the coming of an earthly king. Both Herdsmen and Swineherds are the humble carriers of the holy message. It is the swineherds who find Cashel and it is to them it is revealed the angelic blessing and they are shown the cycle of the kingship of Munster while out putting their swine to mast.<sup>11</sup> It is stressed twice that the blessing is bestowed by angels and not revealed by a pagan god, as in the stories of Tara. These are angels, messengers from heaven, a designation sent by God, and the blessing is of the Lord, and a very powerful blessing it is:

A powerful blessing of prosperity south upon you all, kings of Cashel: blessing of rule, blessing of cattle, blessing of victory, blessing in battle, perfect blessing, blessing of wine, a sound blessing, a noble blessing, a lasting blessing. Blessing of heaven cloud-blessing, blessing of earth fruit-blessing, blessing of sea fish-blessing, blessing of sun rankblessing, blessing of moon honour-blessing, blessing of ale food-blessing, blessing of dew, blessing of light, blessing of valour, blessing of wisdom, blessing of ploughing... A life-blessing is the firm blessing of the mighty Lord so long as you keep Truth with the divisions of mercy.<sup>12 13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> David Sproule, “Politics and Pure Narrative in the Stories about Corc of Cashel,” in *Ériu* 36 (1985): 26.

<sup>11</sup> Myles Dillon, “The story of the Finding of Cashel,” in *Ériu* 16 (1952): 68. *Ériu* is published by the Royal Irish Academy, 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2.

<sup>12</sup> Myles Dillon, 69.

<sup>13</sup> This long blessing, with variation, has been appended to the Book of Rights, and is there attributed to St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.

The expression of the blessing is actually pagan, rather than Christian, bearing the mark of antiquity. But, the conclusion added at the end dictates that the blessing is maintained only if the Cashel kings reign with truth and mercy upon their people. These virtues of truth and mercy being esteemed virtues integral to Christianity for use by the Cashel kings, and here we see an emphasis wholly divergent from the traditional pagan beliefs of Ireland's past. Mercy itself is considered a Christian beatitude: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Furthermore, these revelations come to the swineherd Cuirirán in trance, and when recited to the king he responds, "May it be a truth that is confirmed! May it be a power that is enforced!... The king assents and the people say 'Amen'"<sup>14</sup> Of particular note is that the people respond with "Amen," traditionally a Christian response to prayer, reinforcing the foundation of Cashel as a spiritually Christian event.

In the blessing, the statement that the woods were yellow is evidence that the land of Cashel was naturally fertile, and appears to be a contrast to the pagan belief that the fertility of the land was tied to the justice of the high king, as referred to as *fir flathemon/flatha*. Furthermore, it is mentioned of the long blessing that it was, "The blessing of the mighty Lord who made the whole world by his sole word from its yellow foundation."<sup>15</sup> Here Christian motif is intermixed with pagan tradition, for the Lord makes the world from the yellow foundation of his word. Yellow, being used to imply His goodness and productiveness and benevolence, is a symbol immediately identifiable to the Irish.

The presence of the angel is crucial to the plot of the founding of Cashel, because through this divine figure the word of God is transmitted to the Irish people. In Christian literature and stories, the angel represents the conveyance of the message of God. In this case, the angel speaks of the blessing which God has given to Cashel as well as to the dynasty of kings whose lives and health will be safeguarded as long as they observe the holy imperative to rule with truth and mercy. Corc becomes king and his first act is one of mercy, that of setting free the hostages of Munster. Some of these hostages are even proclaimed sacred, such as the swineherds, who are freed "without tribute and without exaction of king or steward."<sup>16</sup> They are freed unconditionally, and one is even promoted to a high post at his coronation, whereat the king bestows him with his garment that is usually reserved for the kings *Ollav*, his highest poet. Thus, not only does the king

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<sup>14</sup> Myles Dillon, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Myles Dillon, 69.

<sup>16</sup> David Sproule, 23.

act mercifully after receiving the word of God from the angel, but he goes beyond that to promote hostages to a place of honor at his court. The Christian value of mercy is indeed mutual, for just as Corc acts with mercy so does God grant him mercy in his protection.

The coming of St. Patrick, who later became patron Saint of Ireland, is central to the Christian morals of the story of Cashel. St. Patrick is credited with bringing Christianity to the Irish people, and his presence is a recognizable reminder of the Christian themes of the founding of Cashel. When the two swineherds stay near Cashel, they hear “the sweetest music in the world on the ridge beside them... And they saw a cleric in his white chasuble, with two chanting choirs about him, symbolizing the coming of Patrick.”<sup>17</sup> The founding of Cashel is a holy event because of the angel’s long blessing, and the swineherds bear witness to further miracle, seeing a white Christian cleric in white chasuble and choir an event anticipating the coming of St. Patrick, and the deliverance of Christianity to the people of Ireland. Saint Patrick, on arrival in Cashel, “baptized, and blessed the men of all Munster.”<sup>18</sup> The act of baptism, which St. Patrick carried out for all of Munster, is considered by Christianity as a purification of the spirit, and a purging experience which allows the subject to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> Thus, with St. Patrick, Christianity arrives to Ireland and the first king of Cashel and his people are purified of the pagan ties of their past through baptism, and Cashel is designated as a Christian city. With this designation, the people of Cashel adopt Christian principles that defy the pagan ritual of murder and violence. The men of Munster are now Christians and subject to the commandment of God, “thou shalt not kill.” Murder is strictly prohibited, and a decree is passed by Saint Patrick that, “If the men of Munster outrage me concerning Cashel, head of their baptism, by man-slaying within their country, their kingdom shall be in disgrace.”

Other translations have given less attention to the Christian element of the prophecy of Cashel, yet still forward the notion that it is a Christian based prophecy of kingship. For example, Sproule presents us with a second shorter and older translation of how Corc founded Cashel, found in the Book of Leinster, a twelfth century text residing at Trinity college in Dublin. This translation includes only one swineherd and in many ways is more convincing in that Corc lights the fire and claims the lands of Cashel by chance, accidentally fulfilling the prophecy foretold by the swineherd

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<sup>17</sup> Myles Dillon, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Myles Dillon, 73.

<sup>19</sup> “Baptize,” from the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

the previous night. The Christian symbolism in this translation is far less overwhelming, being contained mostly in the vision of what the swineherd of Áed saw, "... a yew bush on a rock... a little oratory in front of it and a flagstone in front of that. Angels were in attendance, going up and down from the flagstone."<sup>20</sup> Sproule feels that in this version the symbolism establishing the close connection of Cashel with the Church is "perfect."<sup>21</sup> The attendance of angels shows that the message is of divine origin and the place holy. The yew was of the tree of Éoganachta. The oratory establishes future connection of Cashel with the Church and the *lecc* or flagstone was a vital part of an inauguration site.<sup>22</sup>

There is a fundamental shift from pagan folklore to describe kingship in Tara to a folklore based on Christian virtues in the founding of Cashel. What accounted for this shift was the evolution in religious ideals more contemporary to the time. In the story of the finding of Cashel, we are witnessing the transition of the Irish people from their pagan beliefs to the more modern and popular Christian beliefs. We can see very clearly the transformation of prophecy, and a change in focus from violence and vindictiveness to a new emphasis on on Christian peace through truth and mercy. Tara diminished into obscurity and Cashel superseded Tara as the new seat of power in Ireland. However, its pagan myth remained strong in oral tradition as a counterpoint to the Christian tale of Cashel's kingship and as a significant account of the religious and political oral history of the island of Ireland.

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<sup>20</sup> David Sproule, 23.

<sup>21</sup> David Sproule, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



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