

and its ideas about the just king, similar to those expressed in the *tecosca*, speak for an Irish provenance.

Though having a different bias, religious texts such as *Apgitir Chrábaid* (The Alphabet of Piety) or *The Rule of Ailbe of Imlech*, and legal texts such as *The Advice to Doidin* show affinities in style, structure, and expression with wisdom texts. Irish law tracts contain many didactic passages, and stylistically many legal axioms are expressed in a manner similar to that of wisdom literature. Medieval Irish tales are also interspersed with nuggets of wisdom, such as *Gel nech nua* (Any new thing is bright) (TCor § 14.23), which is used in *Serglige Con Culainn* of 720.

The earlier texts (AM, TCus, BrCC, parts of TCor and SF) are composed in a rhythmical prose whose prime stylistic features are repetition, alliteration, and sometimes unusual syntax. BFF, ALE, parts of SF and TCor display a monotonous, formulaic style with terseness of expression bordering on obscurity. A strong legal interest is apparent in all wisdom texts. Women are usually depicted in an unfavourable way. Although pre-Christian origins are frequently assumed for Irish wisdom literature, stylistic parallels with biblical models such as the *Book of Proverbs* are observable and may have influenced, if not engendered, the Irish texts. Due to the nature of the genre, its formulaic style, and the compilatory character of many of the texts, a great amount of mutual borrowing has taken place and the collections could easily have been added to in the process of transmission, so that it is now largely impossible to get a clear picture of the original shapes of the texts.

DAVID STIFTER

#### References and Further Reading

- Best, Richard I. "The Battle of Airtech." *Ériu* 8/2 (1916): 170–190. [= TCus]
- Breen, Aidan. "De XII Abusivis: Text and Transmission." In *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmission*, edited by P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002.
- Ireland, Colin. *Old Irish Wisdom Attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: An Edition of Bríathra Flainn Fhína maic Ossu (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Vol. 205)*. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999.
- Kelly, Fergus. *Audacht Morainn*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976.
- Meyer, Kuno. *The Triads of Ireland, (Todd Lecture Series, Vol. 13)*. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1906. [= TrBF]
- . *The Instructions of King Cormac mac Airt (Todd Lecture Series, Vol. 15)*. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1909. [= TCor]
- O'Donoghue, Tadhg. "Cert Cech Ríg co Réil." In *Miscellany Presented to Kuno Meyer*, edited by Osborn Bergin and Carl Marstrander, 258–277. Halle an der Saale: Niemeyer, 1912.

- . "Advice to a Prince." *Ériu* 9 (1921–1923): 43–54.
- O'Rahilly, Thomas F., ed. *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs*. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1922.
- Simpson, Dean. "The 'Prouerbia Grecorum'." *Traditio* 43 (1987): 1–22.
- Smith, Roland. "On the Briathartheosc Conculaind." *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 15 (1925): 187–192.
- . "The *Speculum Principum* in Early Irish Literature." *Speculum* 2 (1927): 411–445.
- . "The Alphabet of Cuigne mac Emain." *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 17 (1928): 45–72. [= ALE]
- . "The Senbriathra Fithail and Related Texts." *Revue Celtique* 45 (1928): 1–92. [= SF & BFF]

See also **Kings and Kingship; Law Tracts; Moral and Religious Instruction; Sedulius Scottus; Triads**

## WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC

### Terminology

By "magic" we understand words and acts performed by human beings, which are believed to bring about changes in the empirical world or to produce knowledge of hidden things in a supernatural way. The term "supernatural" refers to the nonempirical dimension of life, which is central to religious belief systems. The difference between the categories "natural" or "empirical" and the "supernatural" becomes clear when applied, for instance, to the human sense of "seeing." If someone looks at a cow in a field in a natural way, the empirical information about the cow's location and form is passed on to the brain of this person. If a person is believed to look at this beast in a supernatural way, the cow may be said to have been affected by the look, because of which it stops yielding milk. This way of "supernatural" looking is known as "casting the evil eye" or "bewitching." The relation between cause and effect in magic is not dictated by laws of science but is part of belief systems; hence, magic is a religious concept. "Witchcraft" is magic performed by witches—people believed to be professionals in magic.

A study of the semantic history of the term "magic" would reveal that the word has often been used in a polemic context. It has been seen as a "wrong" kind of religion. Originally, Magoi were the priests of the ancient Zoroastrian religion of Iran, but in the course of the fifth century B.C.E the Greeks started to use the term for those engaged in occult arts and private rituals (see Bremmer 2002a). Modern scholars such as James Frazer (1854–1941) defined magic in opposition with religion: By magic, people believed to bring about changes in an automatic, supernatural way or by commanding supernatural beings (often demons), whereas in religion, these

changes are believed to be brought about by the supplication and veneration of supernatural beings (usually God or gods). This opposition is, however, not medieval but stems from Victorian middle-class elitist thinking (see Bremmer 2002b).

The polemic view of magic is also found in Christianity. Medieval Irish literature, composed in monasteries, is no exception to this rule. It is, therefore, not surprising that Irish equivalents for the term "magic" are *díabuldánacht* (diabolic art) and *gentliucht* (pagan art). Other general terms are *druídecht* (druids' art) and *ammaitecht* (witchcraft). Words such as *corrguinecht* and *fithnasacht* may have referred to a specific type of sorcery.

### Magic in Early Irish Literature

In conformity with general Christian doctrine, magic is associated with pre-Christian or non-Christian religion in early Irish literature. In hagiography, druids and magic are described in antithesis with saints and miracles; the former representing evil and the latter good. Supernatural acts performed by druids and saints may be similar, but their evaluation differs. A good example is the contest between Saint Patrick and the druids as described in Muirchú's *Life of Patrick* (see O'Loughlin 2003). The aim of magic in hagiography is always destructive, hence the art of *magi* (magicians, i.e., druids) is designated in Hiberno-Latin, for example, *ars diabolica* (devilish art) or *maleficia* (evil deeds).

In non-hagiographic narrative literature (see Ulster Cycle, Mythological Cycle), the negative image of magic is less pervasive. Divination—the supernatural art to acquire knowledge about hidden or future things plays an important role in portrayals of pre-Christian society. As in hagiography, the source of knowledge or power with regard to such magical practices is sometimes explicitly identified as "demons," but at other times such indications are absent, and in this way, a more neutral description is given. We do not know whether divination and other rituals as described in this literature have ever taken place. Some descriptions may just as well reflect Christian assumptions about the pre-Christian past, influenced by Biblical and/or Classical literature. Certain portrayals of magic may be influenced by a Middle-Irish (c. 900–1200) trend to romanticize the pre-Christian past (Carey 1997).

Another difference between this kind of literature and hagiography is that magic is also associated with non-human inhabitants of Ireland: the supernatural beings of early Irish literature. Thus, the *áes síde* (people of the hollow hills or "fairies;" see Mythological Cycle) are believed to possess knowledge of magic. The so-called Túatha Dé Danann (see Invasion Myth,

Mythological Cycle) have been said to have acquired supernatural knowledge in northern islands before their settlement in Ireland. Several magical practices are described in *Cath Maige Tuired* (The Battle of Mag Tuired; Gray 1983) as supernatural weapons in a war between the Túatha Dé Danann and their enemies, the Fomoiré. The association of magic with the left, the north and evil is a recurring theme in early Irish literature (see Borsje 2002).

### Magic in Daily Practice

As magic was considered to be useful in criminal acts, it is also mentioned in early Irish law (Kelly 1997: 174–175). Not only professional witches but also ordinary people were believed to harm others with magic, for example, by casting the evil eye (Borsje and Kelly 2003).

Magic was, however, also seen as useful for good and neutral purposes: for example, healing, protective, and divination charms that were written in Christian manuscripts. The supernatural entities referred to are both non-Christian and Christian. These, often complicated, texts are still largely ignored in Celtic and Medieval Studies (Carey 2000).

### Witch Persecution in Medieval Ireland

In general, Christian doctrine condemned magic and witchcraft. In this spirit, belief in a *lamia* or *striga* "a dangerous supernatural female associated with witchcraft" was forbidden at the *First Synod of Saint Patrick* (Bieler 1963: 56–57). In later medieval Ireland, the general condemnation did not lead to witch hunts on the large scale as have taken place on the European Continent during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. A famous, and probably the first, witch trial was that of Alice Kyteler and her associates in Kilkenny (1324). Bishop Richard de Ledrede, a British cleric schooled in France, played a crucial role in the trial and wrote a contemporary narrative of the events. He seems to have tried to introduce continental ideas about witchcraft to Ireland. The few trials that did take place in Ireland have, however, never led to a "witch craze."

JACQUELINE BORSJE

### References and Further Reading

- Bieler, Ludwig. *The Irish Penitentials. Scriptorum Latini Hiberniae V*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1963.
- Borsje, Jacqueline. "The Meaning of *túathcháech* in Early Irish Texts." *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 43 (2002): 1–24.
- and Fergus Kelly. "Examples of 'the Evil Eye' in Early Irish Literature and Law." *Celtica* 24 (2003): 1–39.

- Bremmer, Jan N. "The Birth of the Term 'Magic.'" In *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, edited by Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, 1–11. Leuven: Peeters, 2002a.
- . "Appendix: Magic and Religion." In *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, edited by Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, 267–271. Leuven: Peeters, 2002b.
- Carey, John. "The Three Things Required of a Poet." *Ériu* 48 (1997): 41–58.
- . "Téacsanna Draíochta in Éirinn sa Mheánaois" (Magical Texts in Early Medieval Ireland). *Breis faoinár nDúchas Spioradálta: Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 30 (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 2000): 98–117.
- Gray, Elizabeth A. *Cath Maige Tuired. The Second Battle of Mag Tuired (Irish Texts Society LII)*. London: The Irish Texts Society, 1983.
- Kelly, Fergus. *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-Texts of the 7th and 8th centuries A.D.* Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997.
- Mackey, James P. "Magic and Celtic Primal Religion." *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 45 (1992): 66–84.
- Neary, Anne. "The Origins and Character of the Kilkenny Witchcraft Case of 1324." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 83 C (1983): 333–350.
- O'Loughlin, Thomas. "Reading Muirchú's Tara-Event Within its Background as a Biblical 'Trial of Divinities'." In *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults*, edited by Jane Cartwright, 123–135. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003.
- Seymour, St. John D. *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology*. Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co. and London: Humphrey Milford, 1913.

See also **Hagiography and Martyrologies; Invasion Myth; Mythological Cycle; Patrick; Pre-Christian Ireland; Satire; Ulster Cycle**

## WOMEN

### Women in Sagas

Irish sagas set in the pre-Christian period feature some very masterful heroines, notably Medb, queen of Connacht, who has equal property and power with her husband, King Ailell, and leads a great army to invade the province of Ulster in the famous saga *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (the Cattle-raid of Cooley), from the Ulster cycle. This can give people the impression that women had greater freedom and control in pagan Ireland before the norms of Christianity redefined their role in society. However, there are two problems with this interpretation. First, most sagas were actually written between the ninth and the twelfth centuries or later, by Christian scribes adapting their rich inheritance of old traditions to suit the taste of their own times. Second, a number of their female protagonists, Queen Medb in particular, were based on goddesses or female symbols of sovereignty, whose extensive powers reflect their own supernatural attributes rather than the role of ordinary women at any date.

### Women in Saints' Lives

Female saints also had supernatural attributes, in the sense that the Latin or Irish accounts of their lives credit them with many miracles. Otherwise they are shown as respected abbesses running communities of nuns, and the Lives may give us clues about the life of female religious communities in the early period. They show the nuns employing men to plow the lands attached to their communities, entertaining visiting bishops and abbots to hospitable meals that might include home-brewed beer, fostering young boys ultimately destined for the priesthood, and giving them their early education. Certain saints, like Lasair of Kilronan, are reputed to have pursued academic studies under the instruction of male saints and to have become qualified to instruct male clerics themselves, but the Life of St. Lasair is a late text written in a secular school of hereditary male historians, and it is uncertain if this feature of the Life is based on very early tradition. The fact is, we have no Latin works from early Ireland attributed to female authors, though we may have some Irish poems, such as "St. Íte's Lullaby to the Baby Jesus" or "The Lament of the Hag (or Nun) of Beare." Another feature of the Lives of Irish saints, male and female, is the saint's tendency to wander through the countryside from church to church, founding new communities, prescribing the tribute to be paid to the mother church, and blessing future generations of local families as long as they continue to be obedient to the saint's "heir," or successor, the head of the principal church dedicated to that saint. This is clearly a literary device by the writer of a saint's Life to cast an aura of sanctity over territorial and financial rights claimed by the principal church in later generations, so again it is uncertain whether this reflects a real tendency of early nuns to leave their convents to wander on extensive tours of affiliated churches. However, as "heir" to the lands and authority endowing her nunnery, any abbess qualified as a female landowner, and this was the one class of female who did enjoy a degree of independence and power in early Irish law.

### Landownership in the Laws

Old Irish law tracts discuss property rights, forms of marriage, and legal capacity. Full status as a free citizen in early Ireland depended on landownership, and family lands could only be transmitted through male heirs. If a man had no sons, his daughter might inherit his share of the family estate for her lifetime. Such an heiress would have the legal rights of a property owner, and the same public liability for tax and services as a male landowner. According to commentaries added to the law tracts around the eleventh or twelfth centuries,

Published in 2005 by  
Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
www.routledge-ny.com

Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
2 Park Square  
Milton Park, Abingdon  
Oxon OX14 4RN U.K.  
www.routledge.co.uk

Copyright © 2005 by Routledge

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Medieval Ireland: an encyclopedia / Seán Duffy, editor ; associate  
editors, Ailbhe MacShamhráin, James Moynes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-94052-4 (hb: alk. paper)

1. Ireland—History—1172–1603—Encyclopedia.
  2. Ireland—History—To 1172—Encyclopedia.
  3. Ireland—Civilization—Encyclopedia.
  4. Civilization, Medieval—Encyclopedia.
- I. Duffy, Seán. II. MacShamhráin, Ailbhe. III. Moynes, James.

DA933.M43 2005  
941.503' 03—dc32

2004011295