

Conn Cétchathach and the Image of Ideal Kingship in Early Medieval Ireland

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I. The name of Conn and his epithets

The personal name *Condus*, *Connos* ‘head’ is attested in Gaulish. It is characteristic of this anthroponym that the form *Connos* occurs on the coins of the Lemovices as the sovereign’s name, drawing the kingly tradition of the name back to the continental Celts. This form was usually connected with OI *conn*, *cond* ‘protuberance, boss, chief, head’ and ‘sense, reason’, once believed to be two separate words by T. O’Rahilly. The external connections are very uncertain: Skr. *kandah* ‘tuber, bulb’, Greek *kóndulos* ‘bulge, fist’, Lith. *kanduolys* ‘stone (of fruit)’ (O’Rahilly 1946, 514–515). It is plausible that the primary meaning was ‘head’ and that the meaning of ‘sense, reason’ was secondary (Delamarre 2001, 103). When the first meaning of the word is mentioned we have to take into consideration the widespread importance of ‘head’ and the symbolism of ‘head’ in Celtic regions. E. Bachellery and P.-Y. Lambert were less enthusiastic about the etymology of *conn*, which seems to be quite uncertain to them, while they believed that there was without any doubt the only one word *conn/cond* derived from **kondno-* (1987, 196).

Conn’s epithet – Cétchathach – presumably recalls the hundred battles fought by Conn in every fifth of Ireland, some of which are mentioned in *Baile in Scáil*. This epithet seems to reflect the same image as the name of an ideal Gaulish king Ambigatus (‘fighter around himself’), known from Livy’s account, that also represents a type of ‘the first king’ (*Ab Urbe Condita*, V.34.2). It is significant that according to different sources not all Conn’s conflicts are victorious for him. It seems plausible to assess different images of Conn Cétchathach from such texts as ‘The saga of Fergus Mac Léti’ (*Echtra Fergus maic Léti*), ‘Fingen’s Vigil’ (*Airne Fingein*), ‘The battle of Mag Léna’ (*Cath Maige Léna*) and *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, as images of different mythological and quasihistorical characters later labelled with a popular name.¹ Even his best-known epithet probably had an earlier original form – *cétchorach* ‘of the hundred treaties?’ (Binchy 1952, 46), ‘der Erstvertragliche?’ (Thurneysen 1930, 102f.) – supplied by the eighth-century tale of Fergus mac Léti,

1 The conflicts he is involved in these different texts are respectively in ‘The saga of Fergus Mac Léti’ with his brother Éochu Bélbuide (they are only two rival kings of the Féni in this 8th century text); in *CML* with the Southern king Mug Nuadat; and in *LG* with the Leinster king Éochu mac Erc.

and even earlier by a seventh-century poem (Binchy 1952, 46) and a fragment from the laws (AL IV 20.3). The adjective *corach* has a variety of meanings deriving from *cor* ‘putting, throwing, letting go’, and it is used in a vague sense in alliteration sometimes with prefixes (DIL, 1 *corach*). The better-known epithet of Conn deserves better attention too: the first part *cét-*, rather than meaning ‘hundred’, could well have been an ordinary numeral prefixed to the adjective with a meaning ‘first, original, primal’², while *cathach* is an adjective with a meaning ‘vehement, warlike’ (DIL, 1 *cathach*). Thus it is quite possible that one of the original forms of the epithet was ‘first-warlike’, ‘first-fighter’ and only later has it acquired a meaning ‘of a hundred battles’. A character with a similar epithet and functions is found among the heroes of *Cóir Anmann*, namely *Cass Cétchuimnech .i. Cass Cétcoimgneech .i. is é cétna rothinnscain coimgnedha 7 filidhecht a Temhraigh artús* (‘Cass Cétchuimnech, that is, Cass Cétcoimgneech : it is he that first began histories and poetry in Tara’) (Stokes and Windisch 1897, 292). The semantics of ‘primacy’ typical of Conn support this hypothesis, and an image of Conn as a ‘first king’, which we shall discuss further on, is similarly likely to be an image of ‘the first warrior’.

2. The birth of Conn Cétchathach in *Airne Fingein*: his genealogy and progeny

Dealing with the concept of an ideal king as it is shown in the tales from Conn’s cycle I would first like to focus on the Old Irish tale *Airne Fingein*, which tells of the wonders manifested in Ireland on the night of Conn’s birth (the bursting out of the Boyne, the appearance of the great oak Eó Mugna, the manifestation of the five roads of Ireland). In all mythologies great attention is given to the circumstances of gods’ and heroes’ births. As the Rees brothers have stressed, the birth of a famous historical character is not different from the births of other people. Gods and heroes on the other hand (being part of the cosmological image of the world) are remembered for the supernatural situations and phenomena specific to their births, marriages and deaths (Rees & Rees 1973, 213). Conn’s example is a characteristic one. The first wonder of this night mentioned by Rothnám, the woman from the *síd*, to her interlocutor, the prince Fingein, is the birth of Conn:

‘Is búaid mór ém,’ or in ben : ‘.i. mac genes innocht a Temraig do Feidlimid mac Tuathail Techtmuir, do rí[g] Érenn ; gébaid Érin in mac sin amal óenrainn 7 bentus Érin asa cóicedaib 7

2 DIL, 1 *cét-*. It corresponds to a Gaulish theme *cintu-* (from *cintus* ‘first’) frequently attested in personal names such as *Cintu-gnatos*, *Cintu-genus* (Delamarre 2001, 98).

geinfit téora flaithi cóicat úad dia c[h]laind for Éirinn 7 bit rí g uili cosin n-Órainech n-Uisnig, cen co pat comshaeglaig uili.’ (Vendryes 1953, 1–2).³

‘There is a great gift indeed,’ said the woman: ‘i.e. a son who is born to-night in Tara to Feidlimid, son of Tuathal Techtmar, king of Ireland. That son will obtain Ireland in one lot, and takes it from its fifths, and will give birth to fifty three lords of Ireland among his descendants, and all of them will be kings until Órainech of Uisnech, though they will not have the same duration of life.’

The word which designates the manifestation of the wonders (and Conn’s birth as the initial wonder necessary for the other to be manifest) is *búaid*, which has a range of meanings: ‘victory, excellence, wonder, gift’. O.I. *búaid*, earlier *boid* Wb. 24 a 16 (pr. m.) from **boudi-*, is cognate with Welsh *budd* ‘profit, advantage’ and Old Breton *bud* ‘id.’. The earliest Celtic form is attested in Gaulish: *boudi* ‘victory, advantage, profit’, as in the inscription from Lezoux, line 5: *pape boudi macarni* ‘for each nourishing advantage’ (Fleuriot 1980, 143; Delamarre 2001, 71).⁴ This gift (*búaid*) seems to act as a positive correspondence of *geis* (Vendryes & Bachellery, Lambert 1981, 107). Any hero or king in early Irish tradition was given a number of taboos (*gessi*) at his birth. Usually these were given by druids with a power over the supernatural sphere or supernatural beings. The same applies to *búada*, which in our case are virtually given by Rothniam, a woman from the *síd*, on the night of Conn’s birth. All these wonders are strongly connected with Conn and form a collection of his supernatural virtues; nevertheless the *búada* have a cosmic character and are not intrinsic to the hero himself.

What is of great importance here is Conn’s descent. His right to obtain the kingship of Tara is proven by his direct descent from the famous kings, Feidlimid Rechtmar (Rechtaid) and Tuathal Techtmar. Right from the beginning of *AF*, where Conn’s ancestors are mentioned by Rothniam, it appears quite obvious both to failed would-be king Fingen and to the reader that Conn has more rights to become a king of Tara (and of all Ireland as it is shown in the text: *gébaid Éirinn... amal*

3 The variant readings are given from the four mss. containing the tale: Book of Fermoy (A), Liber Flavus Fergusiorum (B), D IV 2 (D), and Book of Lismore (L). The established text is given by the author on the basis of these variants.

1. *Is*, as L. *búaid*, buaidh D; buáid B. *mór*, mor DA; mhor L. *ém*, om. D; eimh L. *or*, ar L. *ben*, bean B. *.i.*, om. LAB. 3. *genes*, gheinis D, gheines L. *innocht*, inocht D; indocht A. *a Temraig*, om. LAB. *Feidlimid*, feidlimidh D; Feilim^d L; Feidlimmid A; Fedhl- B. *mac Tuathail Techtmuir, do rí[g] Érenn*, om. LAB. 2. *gébaid*, 7 ateatha D; gebuidh L. *Érinn*, Eirinn D; Éirinn L; hErind AB. *in mac sin*, om. LAB. *amal óenrainn*, i n-oenr[a]ind D; amal aonroinn L; amal oenraind A; amal oenraínd B. 7 *bentus* ... *coicedaib*, om. D. *bentus*, bentais A; beantais B. *Érinn*, Eirinn L; hErind AB. *asa*, assa A. 3. *coicedaib*, coicedaid AB; coiceduibh L. *geinfit*, genfit AB; geinfidh L. *téora*, tri D. *flaithi*, flaithe L. *cóicat úad*, .1. uad L; huad A; buad B; *coecat do righoib uadha* D. *dia chlaind* . . . *Uisnig*, do neoch ghebus Erinn gusan Óraineach Uisnigh 7 bat righ uili iat D. *dia chlaind*, om. L; dia claind AB. *for Éirinn*, for Eirinn L; for hErind A; for Erind B. *bit*, bidhat L. *ríg*, righ L. *uili*, uile A; om. B. *cosin*, cusin L. 4. *Órainech*, Oirinach L; Orainech AB. *Uisnig*, Uisnigh L. *cen co pat*, gin co budh D. *comshaeglaig*, comshaeghlach D; comhshaeglaig L. *uili*, uile B; om. DL.

4 Cf. the famous queen of the Britons *Boudicca* ‘Victorious’.

óenrainn ‘he will obtain Ireland... in one lot’). The place of Conn’s birth gives him a certain right of succession as well: only one manuscript, D IV 2, states that he was born *a Temraig*, implying that his father was in possession of Tara at that time.

The tradition of the Uí Néill made Conn’s father, Feidlimid Reichtmar (Reichtaid, ‘Lawgiver’), the king of Tara and of Ireland. According to *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* he extorted the *bóruma* (‘cattle-tribute’ taken from the Leinstermen) against Cú Corb, the king of Leinster. Later Conn himself is depicted as deeply involved in the *bóruma* conflict with the Leinstermen. At first he is successful, but later appears driven from Tara by Eochaid mac Erc, king of Leinster, who resided in Tara for seven years (Macalister 1956, 330). On the other hand, as O’Rahilly has correctly noted, Feidlimid (Fedelmid) could have been taken from the earlier Leinster genealogical tradition (1946, 281n), which is even more relevant if we reconsider Conn’s relations with the Leinstermen in *LG*. In the early Irish genealogical poetry dating back to the seventh century, which deals mostly with the legendary kings of Leinster, Fedelmid is variously called either Reichtaid or Fortrēn and is depicted as a king of Leinster (Meyer 1913, 17 § 6; 28 § 16; 40 § 18). Moreover, Conn himself and another quasihistorical king of Tara, Cathaír Mór, are mentioned in these ‘Leinster poems’ as kings of Leinster descent, ‘worthy subject-matter of poets’ (*fri filedu fáth*) (Corthals 1990, 119). Thus perhaps the direct ancestry ascribed to Conn is taken from the enemy’s side and in this case we see two genealogical traditions merged.

Conn’s alleged grandfather Tuathal Techtmar seems to represent a different side in Irish synthetic history. In *LG* he is an invader from abroad, who had crossed the sea and conquered a kingdom in Ireland (Macalister 1956, 308). It is Tuathal who first extorted *bóruma* from the Leinstermen according to Irish synthetic tradition and thus began a long lasting conflict between the future Uí Néill and Leinster (Stokes 1892, 40–42). Conn Cétchathach, his descent and his reign are associated in the pseudohistorical tradition with Uí Néill/Leinster relations and might reflect an early stage of these relations.

As Vendryes has remarked, the phrase *bentus Éirinn asa cóicedaib* ‘he takes Ireland from its fifths’ is obviously an addition to the original text because *bentus* is a 3 sg. present of *benaid* followed by a suffixed pronoun whereas the other predicates *gébaid* and *geinfit* are in the future (1953, 29). This fragment is absent in manuscript D IV 2, which often gives the earlier reading. It is significant that political, if not cosmological, qualities of the unifier of Ireland are attributed to Conn. The image of Conn corresponds to that elastic but not illusory notion of ‘the first king’. It does not mean that the kings of this type are really ‘historically’ or ‘pseudohistorically’ first, but in different arrangements of the same ‘pseudohistorical’ material they could have been considered the first, and according to their status they initiate certain important features of social life (Dumézil 1971, 258–259).

AF supplies a passage on the fifty-three kings of Ireland, the descendants of Conn Cétchathach. The future king is only just born in Tara but the woman from the *síd* already knows the destiny of his progeny. Here we encounter the same tradition as in the earlier texts of genealogical character such as *Baile Chuinn* and *Baile in Scáil*. For example the curious note that the kings who descended from Conn would not have the same duration of life (*cen co pat comshaeglaig uili*) echoes the manner of the kings' enumeration in the late seventh-century *Baile Chuinn*, where Muiredach Tírech is given thirty years, Éilimm is given two hundred years, and an anonymous king is given sixty years (Murphy 1952, 146–147). The fifty-three kings in *AF* correspond to fifty-three days' respite requested by the druid from Conn in *Baile in Scáil* (Meyer 1901, 458). This probably shows that the author of *AF* had knowledge of contemporary variants of *Baile Chuinn* and *Baile in Scáil*.

There is no such character as Óraínech ('Face of gold') of Uisnech among the descendants of Conn in *Baile Chuinn* or in the later, probably ninth century, *Baile in Scáil*. Óraínech is found as the epithet of a king in the genealogy from Rawlinson B 502, referring to Ailill Aullom's son Eochaid Oraínech (147b 41). In one of the closing paragraphs of *Baile in Scáil* we encounter a king called *ossnadach [n]Uisnig .i. Cerball* 'the sighing one of Uisnech, i.e. Cerball' among the prophesied kings, possibly corresponding to our Óraínech of Uisnech (Murray 2004, 48; Meyer 1918, 238). Murray has proposed that this ruler be identified with Cerball, son of Flann Sinna (*fl.* late ninth / early tenth century) (2004, 8). This chronology corresponds to the accepted dating of *AF* as well as of *Baile in Scáil*. On the other hand the association of Conn's descendants with Uisnech seems to reflect a certain affiliation of Conn with this significant locus. It is also significant that Conn's reign and the reign of his descendants, according to *Baile in Scáil*, is approved by the sanction of the god Lug. The drink of sovereignty is given to the kings only after Lug's command (Meyer 1901, 460).

The birth of Conn, this legendary king, granted the right time and circumstances for the manifestation of wonders. O'Rahilly has argued that Conn, being an eponymous ancestor of the Connachta, might have been a deity-ancestor for this dynasty and people. Relying upon the meaning, discussed above, of the word *conn* (*cond*) in OI, the same scholar also argued that *Conn* might have been a god of wisdom (1946, 282).⁵ It is significant that Conn Cétchathach is once called *Cond Crínna* 'Conn the Wise' (LL 364.5; Best and Lawlor 1931, 122), where *crínna* is

5 In another variant of Irish synthetic history Conn, Eógán, and Araide are called *trí sóir Érenn* 'the three free-born [ancestors] of Ireland' (Thurneysen 1917, 64). An earlier variant is found in the poem *Sóerchlanda Érenn uile*, where the same three protagonists are mentioned as the ancestors of the free (noble) Irish families: *Cond Éogan Araide án. It é ciniud na trí mál. Araide i n-Emain cen ail. Cond Cétchathach i Temair* (Thurneysen 1917, 57). The same expression is found in *Lebor Gabála : is iat trí sáeir hÉrenn, Cond, Araide, Eogan*, LL 22 b 50 (Macalister 1956, 290). Thus Conn is an eponym of Connacht, Araide of Ulster, and Eógán Mór of Munster.

a derivative of *crín* ‘old, withered’. O’Rahilly perceives this form as an equivalent to Gaulish *Senocondus* ‘Vieille-Tête’ (Delamarre 2001, 103), and he compared the name Conn – from O.I. *conn* with a range of meanings ‘head, chief; sense, reason’ – with Welsh *Pwyll penn Annwryn* (O’Rahilly 1946, 281–282). Thus the manifestation of hidden wonders, their coming into the cosmos from pre-existence, follows the coming into being of a godly king or a principle of wisdom and order (is it not the very Conn’s head/Conn-head which knows all the wonders of *AF* and manifests this knowledge in the world?). The king’s birth was often surrounded with cosmogonic associations in rituals or mythologies of many cultures (Eliade 1963, 54). The king’s birth in *AF* can also be interpreted as his symbolic ‘inauguration’ followed by the manifestation of the *búada*.

As late as in the seventeenth century Irish poets connected the wonders of Conn’s night of birth with this progenitor of the royal dynasty of Uí Néill, and with the northern half of Ireland as his domain. In the famous ‘contention of poets’ (*Iomarbhagh na bhFileadh*), which took place at the beginning of the seventeenth century and was prompted by the problem of northern (Uí Néill) vs southern (Eóganachta) priority in Ireland, the same wonders of Conn were put forward by one side to prove the benefits of the northern half. Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, one of the northern poets, clearly called all the *búada* mentioned in *Airne Fingein* ‘the gifts given to him by the King of Heaven’ (*a thiodhaicthe ón Rígh do nímh*) (McKenna 1918, 64).

3. Two poems on Conn Cétchathach in *AF* and other relevant sources

The image of Conn Cétchathach as an ideal king, whose reign is described almost as a Golden Age, is found only in *AF*. There are two fragments in the tale which are devoted entirely to this image. First is the poem *Gáir gene Cuinn*, the prophecy sung by the druid (or *fili*) Cesarn at the birth of Conn, the prophecy which elaborates on the future reign of Conn. The opening lines, with a clear sexual implication, describe some sort of sacred marriage between Conn and the land of Ireland: ‘*Conn for Éirinn! Ériu fo Chunn...*’ (‘Conn over Ireland! Ireland under Conn...’) (Vendryes 1953, 19).⁶ It is important that the birth of Conn and the prophecy fall on the night of *Feis Temro* with all its inaugural significance. According to T. F. O’Rahilly’s idealised picture of the kingship of Tara ‘each king of Tara (or Ireland) on attaining the kingship was espoused to the goddess Ériu’ (1946a, 14). Later D. A. Binchy stressed that *Feis Temro* originally meant a symbolic mating of the king with the goddess (where *feis*, v.n. of *foaid*) (1958, 134). At the same time we

6 This formula is found also in the metrical version of *Echtra mac Echdach Mugmedóin: Níall macc Echdach, fo mbái Banba barrbrethach* (Joynt 1910, 92 § 4).

have to bear in mind that in the later ninth or the early tenth century when *AF* was composed *Ériu* obviously was not considered a goddess and that the formula found in our poem reflects an earlier image of the world.

The poem depicts Conn as the ‘true lord’, *fírflaith*, an image that we find elsewhere in the early Irish literature and law-tracts, most prominently in the seventh-century wisdom-text *Audacht Moraind* ‘The Testament of Morann’. The image of Conn here seems to reflect the shift in the early Irish culture from a cosmological period to a historical period, pertaining mainly to the features of the former. The king as described in *AF* and in the other relevant sources takes part in the cosmological action rather than in the historical process. His role in society is determined by his cosmological functions (Toporov 1973, 115). The features and attributes of the king and his reign contribute to a particular image of the world, a particular cosmological scheme determined by the existence of a true king. The following scheme shows qualities and actions of a *fírflaith* (‘true ruler’) attributed to Conn in the poem with their counterparts in *Audacht Moraind*. Nevertheless the slight difference in stresses might lead into a conceptual clash of the two sources.

Airne Fingein	Audacht Moraind
<p><i>A shlóigh for Midi for Mumain bid bludaid co mara múr...</i> ‘His hosts upon Mide, upon Munster, he will be a destroyer/breaker to the sea’s sand-bank...’ (Vendryes 1953, 20.250–252) <i>... fo-géra cach túaidh a bara conicce tonn Mara n-Icht.</i> ‘His wrath will inflame each <i>túath</i> as far as the wave of the sea of Wight (= English Channel).’ (Vendryes 1953, 20.260–261) <i>forba flatha co trí muire</i> ‘completion of sovereignty as far as the three seas’ (Vendryes 1953, 21.280)</p>	<p><i>Luifith il-túatha, Táthat co mor.</i> ‘He will move many <i>túatha</i>, uniting to the sea.’ (Kelly 1976, 4.25–26)</p>
<p><i>Téora flaithi coícat úadh.</i> ‘fifty three lords from him.’ (Vendryes 1953, 21.269)</p>	<p><i>Moigfith a chomarbe...</i> ‘He will increase his heir.’ (Kelly 1976, 4.27)</p>
<p><i>ind fírflaith bláith builid búan...</i> ‘the true lord fair, gentle, lasting’ (Vendryes 1953, 21.267) <i>bid ail fhírinne cech trátha...</i> ‘He will be a rock of truth each time...’ (Vendryes 1953, 21.272)</p>	<p><i>Fírflaith...</i> <i>fris-tibi fírinne inde-cluinethar.</i> ‘True lord... He smiles on the truth when he hears it.’ (Kelly 1976, 18.145–146)</p>

What is striking at first is that Conn is called in *AF* the ‘true lord’ (*fírflaith*), while according to *Audacht Morainn* this term designates an ideal ruler with the highest physical and moral qualities in an idealised hierarchy of the possible types

of kings. According to *Audacht Morainn* there were four types of king: the true lord (*fírfhlaith*), the prudent lord (*ciallfhlaith*: he ‘defends borders and tribes’), the lord who takes power with the help of troops from outside (*flaith congábale co slógaib díanechtair*), the bull-lord (*tarbfhlaith*: ‘he strikes and is struck, he injures and is injured’) (Kelly 1976, 18. 143–155). From what we saw in *AF* and in other sources it seems that Conn in some respects deserves the title of *tarbfhlaith* rather than *fírfhlaith*, and that the picture in *AF* reflects a different view of a *fírfhlaith*, more aggressive, war-like and less dependant on his moral values. In *Audacht Morainn* the true lord (*fírfhlaith*) is deeply connected with the concept of *fír flathemon* (‘the truth of lord’) and its later counterpart *fírinne*, and the success of a king’s reign depends entirely on the king’s righteous behaviour.

Besides calling Conn ‘the rock of truth’, *AF* in its opening paragraphs says that ‘the truth of Ireland was concealed... before this night (the night of Conn’s birth)’ (*forralgadh fírinne Éirenn...cusanocht*). This phrase is found only in one manuscript containing *AF*, namely the Book of Lismore (f^o. 138a, ll. 29–31). As J. Vendryes has pointed out, this should have been a secondary addition to the original text (1953, 38), while the earlier version of D IV 2 just underlines the fact that a *senchus* of Ireland was revealed; this addition aims to confirm Conn’s position as a *fírfhlaith* and develops the cosmogonical qualities of his birth up to the highest level – the truth is manifested only with the birth of an ideal ‘true king’.

Looking at the parallels shown, one can either admit the *Audacht Morainn* as the source for the poem from *AF* or accept the existence of a common tradition of the clichés applied to a *fírfhlaith*. At the same time it is possible to reconsider these formulae in a biblical context. The repeated image of Conn driving his enemies as far as the seashore echoes a phrase from *AM*: *Luifith il-túatha, táthat co mor* ‘he will move many *túatha*, uniting to the sea’. Note the future tense in *AF*: *bid bludaid, fo-géra*. I take *táthat* here to be a v.n. of *táthaid*, meaning ‘joining, uniting (peoples)’ as in *ó táthat na d-tuath* (DIL, T-tnúthaigid, 90.52; Curry 1855, 92.13), especially since Kelly has found no mention of the hypothetical *túatha táthat* ‘tribes of thieves’ in his translation (1976, 25).

Having examined these two correspondences, we have to look for a broader context for this image. McCone has noted that the description of the righteous rule in *AM* (even in its earliest version B) to some extent echoes the Psalms (1991, 141). In Ps. 72:8 there is an image of the righteous king who ‘shall have dominion also from sea to sea’ (*dominabitur a mari usque ad mare [Vulgate]*).⁷ Although it might be expected that the authors and redactors of the pseudohistorical and legal texts in question had knowledge of the Psalms and the Old Testament, the geographical position of Ireland itself provided *literati* with an image of the world where sea and sea-shore were daily reality and the most logical limit to any king’s ambitions

7 Cf. Zechariah 9:10 on the future Messiah: *Et imperium eius a marri usque ad mare* ‘and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea’ (*Vulgate*).

and powers. Therefore the phrases from *AF* and *AM* cannot be taken as a mere translation of the fragment from the psalm. The native character of these ambitions and the idea of the supreme power in Ireland are supported by the evidence of the earliest Irish laws. The Old Irish status text *Míadshlechta* distinguishes a term for the high-king *tríath*: *Tríath .i. rí, amail is-beir: Tríath trom trem[i]—ætha Éirind túath[a] ó thuind co tuind...Cóic cóicid Érenn term[i]—ætha a mámu uile* ‘A *tríath*, i.e. a king, as [the following] states: The mighty *tríath*, he goes through the *túatha* of Ireland from wave to wave [i.e. from sea to sea]... The five fifths of Ireland, he goes through all their submissions’ (Breatnach 1986, 193).

At the same time the image of Conn in *AF* differs from the image in *AM*: he is not only moving his enemies, he is destroying *túatha* (‘tribes’). The line *..fo-géra cach túaidh a bara* ‘his wrath will inflame each *túath*’ raises the narrative to an eschatological dimension. There is a parallel to this image on the level of both syntax and semantics, found in an Old Irish poem on the end of the world, when God ‘inflames our tribes’ (*fogeir ar túatha*) (Meyer 1912, 196). The king obtains qualities of the last judge.

An even more evident eschatological image may be found later in the same poem from *AF*. When the text narrates the battles and fierce exploits of Conn it reports the heavenly phenomena in the following terms: ‘*ó thalmain conicce glasnem/ línfaid aer lasrach lonn*’ (‘from earth to the blue sky/ fierce flames will fill the air’) (20.265). The closest resemblance to this image in early Irish literature is found in ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’ (*TBDD*) when the ideal peaceful reign of Conaire (also a king of Tara) suddenly comes to its end: ‘*rop ném thened tír h-Úa Néill immi*’ (‘there was the blaze of fire around the land of Uí Néill’) (Knott 1936, 8.241). This fire from the sky signifies the collapse of Conaire’s sovereignty in Ireland and the start of his downfall determined by his breaking of *gessi*. The poem on Conn’s exploits on the other hand gives a picture of the *fírfhlaith* (‘true lord’) and his power.⁸ How would these contrasting contexts correspond to each other? Does the cosmic figure of Conn itself embody the celestial punishment of which poor Conaire is only a victim? The image of Conn’s power, together with the external evidence from different Indo-European traditions, supports a hypothesis concerning direct relations between the thunder god and the military functions of a king (cf. the beginning of the Hittite inscription of Anntas, the connection of Perun and the prince’s war-band in the earliest treaties between Russians and Byzantines) (Ivanov 1968, 4).

There are at least two more examples in early Irish literature of great fires denoting the absence of *fír flathemon* (‘ruler’s truth’). In the earliest recension B of *Audacht Morainn* the ruler’s truth is said to prevent his subjects from ‘great lightnings’ (*márlochét*) (Kelly 1976, § 12); and the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin

8 See however Baile in Scáil (Murray 2004, 36.76) where Conn is slain ‘after the destruction by fire over every plain’ (*íar n-ár thened tar cech mag*).

ecclesiastical treatise *De duodecim abusiuis saeculi* provides the same context for ‘the blows of lightnings’ (*fulminum ictus*) (Hellmann 1909, 52. l. 18). M. Fomin has noted that the image of lightning in *AM* and in *De duodecim* does not correspond to biblical eschatological imagery and might have been rooted in the native literary standards (Fomin 1999, 176–178) (as ‘the blaze of fire’ of *TBDD*). In the poem from *AF* the image is even brighter, the fires fill the air from ‘earth to the blue sky’ (*ó thalmain conicce glasnem*), leaving no place for natural lightning from a cloud.

Obviously both biblical and classical images might have influenced the authors and redactors of the texts discussed. We can think of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah burnt by the heavenly fire: ‘Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven’ (*Igitur Dominus pluit super Sodomam et Gomorram sulphur et ignem a Domino de caelo*) (*Vulgate*, Genesis 19:24), or of Tacitus (*Historia*, 1.18), *urbes igni caelesti flagrasse*, ‘to burn cities by heavenly fire’.⁹

Finally we can note that the passage in the poem from *AF* with the fire image corresponds to the aggressive image of Conn. He functions in the poem as an omnipotent judge of all the *túatha* of Ireland. He is a king and a warrior, and his image corresponds to the warrior’s ambiguity or instability in early Irish myths and tales. He is also capable of switching from protection to destruction (McCone 1991, 172), and the poem under discussion reflects, rather, his destructive side. It seems that a reign of the *fírfhlaith*, according to *AF*, was not exclusively peaceful and calm as it was perceived in *AM* and other sources. On the other hand the concluding prosaic eulogy and the final poem from *AF* (present only in the Book of Lismore) give the image of Conn as a protector and guarantor of cosmic order.

The final eulogy of Conn in *AF*, as I have mentioned, is found in only one manuscript, namely the Book of Lismore (f° 139 b). It looks like an addition to the tale, supplying Conn with the necessary attributes of a *fírfhlaith* following the standard known from *AM* and other wisdom-texts. The essence of Conn’s praise is summarised in the opening lines of the eulogy: ‘*as é sein rí as dech buí for Éirinn ría creidium*’ (‘...he was the best king in Ireland before the faith’). Here we encounter the popular motif of the ‘benign pagan’ confirmed by certain signs characteristic of Conn’s reign. In the synthetic history of Ireland reflected in *Lebor Gabála* he is made a contemporary of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and his reign seems to have been compared to the peaceful reign of the emperor-philosopher (Macalister 1956, 332). In general it was not uncommon in early Irish literature to equate reigns of native kings and Roman emperors. For instance the reign of Cormac mac Airt, Conn’s grandson (whom we encounter in

9 These Old Testament and classical parallels were kindly submitted to me by M. Fomin, who has worked extensively on the Irish wisdom texts and the image of the king in the early Irish tradition.

AF as well), is compared to that of Octavian Augustus in *Tesmolad Cormaic* ('The Panegyric of Cormac') (Meyer 1885, 73).

For convenience, I will again provide a comparative table of the benefits of the true ruler's reign in *AF*, in *AM* and in *TBDD* (on Conaire's reign).

<i>Airne Fingein</i>	<i>Audacht Morainn</i>	<i>Togail bruidne Da Derga, Tesmolad Cormaic</i>
<i>Ní raba trá Ére in inbaid sin ráithi cin mes</i> 'In that time there was no season in Ireland without fruit (mast)' (25.346)	<i>Is tre fh. fl. ad- manna mármeso márfhedo -mlasetar.</i> 'It is through the justice of the ruler that abundance of great tree-fruit of the great wood are tasted' (6.47)	<i>...mes co glúine cach fogmair</i> 'tree-fruit to the knees every autumn' (Knott 1936, §17, 184–185) <i>barr measa</i> 'an excess of tree-fruit' (Knott 1936, §66)
<i>ba lán gach abhunn d'íasc ó ro soicht glún</i> 'each river was full of fish, and water reached the knee' (25.349)	<i>Is tre fh. fl. to- aidble (uisce) éisc i sruthaib –snáither.</i> 'It is through the justice of the ruler that abundance of fish swim in streams' (6.50)	<i>Cech abund, acht co roised glun, do gebtha bradan in cech mogul isin lin inte.</i> 'Any river, that was but knee-deep, a salmon was got there in every one mesh of the net' (Meyer 1885, 73.9–10)
<i>Lulgacha na láeig i n-a remes</i> 'the calves were milch cows in his time' (26.356)	<i>Is tre fh. fl. ad- mlechtí márbóis –moinigter.</i> 'It is through the justice of the ruler that milk-yields of great cattle are maintained(?)' (7.48)	<i>Lailiucha na colpacha ina ré</i> 'the two-year-old heifers were milch cows in his time' (Meyer 1885, 73.9)
<i>buí flaith Chuinn, cen chreich, cen gait, <...> cen fhoréicin, <...> cen fhaire, cen ingairi.</i> 'Conn's reign was without plunder, without theft, <...> without great violence, <...> without guard, without sorrow'. (25.338–346)		<i>cen gaid <...> cen forecin cen faire cen ingaire</i> (Meyer 1885, 73.21) <i>Nír ragbaiter díberg id flaith</i> (Knott 1936, § 16, 178)

The abundance of tree-fruit (mainly acorns), as we see, is a common feature of the true reign, and more examples of this feature, mentioned in several other early Irish sources as a sign of an ideal reign, can be added. In *Tecosca Cormaic* (§1.22) for example we have *mess for crannaib* 'tree-fruit on trees' (Meyer 1909, 2), and in early Irish ecclesiastical law we encounter the same signs of *fírfhlaith* : *arborum fecunditas* (Wasserschleben 1885, 78).¹⁰ As for the ecclesiastical influence on the B version of *AM* and the topic of fruits' abundance during the ideal reign, it is important that *mann* is a borrowing from Lat. *manna* (itself a borrowing from

10 *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, xxv, iv. The word *mess* in OI usually means 'mast, acorns' (Welsh *mes* 'acorns'), and the importance of acorns is connected with the fact that pigs living half-wild in the woods in early Ireland were fed with acorns.

Greek and Hebrew) signifying a divine gift and a divine presence. This is another reason to reconsider Conn's ideal reign, bearing in mind the general context of *AM* and the related texts.

What is striking here in the case of *AF* is a general connection of Conn's reign with flourishing trees and the abundant tree-fruit. One of Conn's *búada* that took place on the night of his birth according to *AF* and the *dindshenchas* was the manifestation of the great tree Eó Mugna (Eó Rossa in the manuscript D IV 2) (Vendryes 1953, ll. 44–66). One of the unique qualities of the tree was an excess of its mast during the year: *docuirethar téora frossa toraid tria chéo de, comba lán a m-mag forsa tá fo thrí día dairmes cacha bliadna* ('it sheds three showers of fruit through the mist, so that the plain on which it stands will be full of mast thrice each year'). This description was repeated in the eulogy in the end of the tale (*Ní raba trá Ére in inbaid sin ráithi cin mes*). The supernatural qualities of the tree (Eó Mugna) are thus transferred to the whole universe in Conn's reign which is said to be 'without a dry tree' *cen chrann crín*, a time when 'each wood was green' (*Ba húr gach coill*). Moreover not only the mast but also the harvest on the fields thrice a year is a feature of this ideal reign in *AF*: *no berta na harbair fo thrí cecha bliadnae* 'the corn used to be brought thrice each year' (Vendryes 1953, ll. 352–353). The later tale *Eachtra Airt meic Cuind* in its opening passages also relates the benefits of Conn's reign before the death of his wife: *Dóigh amh do bendais siat na harbhanna fo trí gacha bliadna* 'Indeed they used to reap the corn thrice each year' (Best 1907, 150).

Another significant feature related to the topic of trees must be mentioned, that is mast and ideal reign in *AF*: this is the idea of a Paradise-like rule. In the same passage on Eó Mugna/Eó Rossa the tree is called *mac in chraind a pardus* ('a son of the tree from Paradise', l. 53). The idea of such a genesis was obviously borrowed from the apocryphal material, and the tree here seems to have signified the Tree of Life as Eó Mugna was perceived as one in the *dindshenchas* (gen. *Craind Beoda*) (Stokes 1895, 279). Later in the eulogy the whole of Ireland under the ideal rule of Conn is compared to Paradise: *Ba parrthus indtsamhlach 7 ba tír tairrngire* 'it was like Paradise and it was a land of promise' (Vendryes 1953, ll. 360). It must be remembered that *Tír Tairrngire* ('The Land of Promise'), a borrowing from the biblical imagery, was perceived in two different ways in early Irish literature generally and *AF* in particular. On the one hand, it seems to reflect a biblical image of the terrestrial Paradise, and in this context it seems to function in the latter phrase, where *parrthus* and *tír tairrngire* are synonymous. On the other hand, after a semantic shift *Tír Tairrngire* had become one of the names for the native Otherworld, and as such is found in *AF* as well. It alludes to the 'hail of the Land of Promise' (*do chassair Thíre Tairrngire*) (Vendryes 1953, l. 176) on the night of Conn's birth over Loch Léin (one of the few instances in early Irish literature where the Otherworld is located in the upper world). *Tesmolad Cormaic*, a text showing a close lexical similarity to the final eulogy from *AF*, gives Cormac

mac Airt, the king of Tara, even more power over the elements: *Dorigine tra tir tairngire d'Erinn ana ré* ('he made then the Land of Promise out of Ireland in his time') (Meyer 1885, 73).

The next striking parallel between *AF* and *Tesmolad Cormaic* is a passage on 'fish in the streams'. The model for this image might have been taken from the wisdom-texts, namely from *AM*. The general context of the abundance of rivers during the ideal reign is also known in many other early Irish texts. *Tecosca Cormaic* (§1,23) for example speaks of *íasc i n-inberaib* (the mast and fish appear in the same order in *TC*). The most curious information on the abundance in the rivers due to an ideal reign comes from *TBDD*, where Conaire's reign is characterised by the *imbas for Búais & Boind i medón in mís mithemon cacha blíadna* (Knott 1936, ll. 184–186) ('abundance/great knowledge in the Bush and in the Boyne in the middle of June each year'). Here we encounter an ambiguous use of the word *imbas*, which means either 'great abundance' or 'great knowledge' (given that the Boyne was known as a source of the nuts of great knowledge/*imbas*) (Gwynn 1913, 26).

Without commenting much on such a natural feature as the abundance of fish, the lexical and syntactical correspondence must be admitted between the text of *AF* and *Tesmolad Cormaic* (*gach abhunn... ro soicht glún (AF) = Cech abund, acht co roised glun (TesC)*). The verbal form *ro soicht* is rather dubious: J. Vendryes proposed it to be 'une forme refaite pour *-siacht*, prétérit. act. et pass. de *saigid* "reaches"' (Vendryes 1953, 63); and it corresponds phonetically to *roised* in *TesC*. The correspondences support close relations between the two texts and indicate the possible origin of the eulogy from *AF* (a curious passage on calves being milch cows reveals new parameters acquired by time during the ideal reign). Even the word order in the sequence of iniquities absent during the reigns of both Conn and Cormac is the same (*buí flaith Chuinn, cen chreich, cen gait, <...> cen fhoréicin, <...> cen fhaire, cen ingairi. (AF) = cen gaid <...> cen foreicin cen faire cen ingaire (TesC)*).

While *AF* mentions *Senfhúath éices* and the praise of Cormac (*tesmolta*) and *TesC* is silent on *AF* and the matter of Conn, it is possible that the compiler of the final part of *AF* in the Book of Lismore had the use of a certain earlier variant of *TesC*. It has been pointed out already by Gwynn that the images of Cormac mac Airt (in his capacity as a sage and a judge) and of Tara under his reign are often drawn from biblical sources, the models being king Solomon and the Temple (Gwynn 1903, 70–74). Both the metrical *dinnshenchas* and *TesC* compare Cormac to Solomon (Gwynn 1903, 37; O'Grady 1892, 89). Nevertheless the formulae of the true rule discussed seem to belong to native tradition influenced by Christian moral values. To my knowledge Conn Cétchathach was never compared to any biblical king. His depiction in the first poem of praise from *AF* as a man of war is not very consistent with a Christian image of the true reign and may therefore reflect a pre-Christian image of an ideal king.

In conclusion I stress the significance of Conn's name in association with his presence in the earliest Irish genealogical poetry. Continental Celtic personal names *Conduis*, *Connos* (Delamarre 2001, 103) and the context in which they occur strongly suggest the existence of a similar name in early Ireland. In my opinion it renders highly unlikely the possibility suggested by D. Sproule that **connacht* could have meant 'primacy, leadership' (of the northern dynasty), that it was later reinterpreted as 'Conn's descendants', and that the pseudohistorical Conn is derived from **connacht* not vice versa (1984, 32). It is more natural to assume that the name Conn was popular among aristocratic and royal families in early Ireland and belonged consequently to one or several early Leinster dynasts who could have served as prototypes for the eponymous Conn Cétchathach. This historical basis does not exclude the mythological significance of Conn Cétchathach as the 'first king' with his own archaic cosmological features. These features, and especially those reflected in the first poem on Conn from *AF*, might reflect an earlier 'thunder god'-type image of a ruler, possibly influenced later by Christian apocalyptic imagery. Finally Conn Cétchathach, as one of the pseudohistorical kings of all Ireland, constitutes an important centre of attraction both for early Irish quasi-political ideology and for Irish pseudohistorical and mythological megatext.

Abbreviations

AF= Airne Fingein

AL = *Ancient Laws of Ireland*

CML=Cath Maige Léna

DIL = *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (or *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*)

LG= Lebor Gabála Éirenn

TC= Tecosca Cormaic.

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