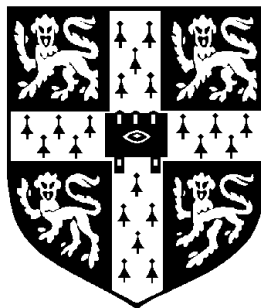


H. M. CHADWICK MEMORIAL LECTURES 29

GREGORY TONER

MANIFESTATIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN
MEDIEVAL IRELAND



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H. M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland

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Manifestations of Sovereignty in Medieval Ireland

The sovereignty goddess is perhaps the most enduring image in the Irish tradition.¹ It is widely believed that she is inherited from native religious belief about the sacral nature of kingship in which the Otherworldly woman weds the incoming king and ensures fertility of the land and the success of his reign. However, she survives only as a trope in medieval literature, a narrative element marking the success of kingship. Herbert argues cogently that the myth is merely literary in the historical period and has no function within society beyond that.² Most scholars now eschew the term ‘sovereignty goddess’ when dealing with the literature, preferring the more neutral terms ‘sovereignty figure’ or ‘sovereignty woman’, as in most cases she is not depicted as a goddess at all but rather as a mysterious or otherworldly figure.³ There has been a tendency to treat a wide variety of female figures associated with kingship as sovereignty goddesses, often without much justification, and in reality we must distinguish a range of characters not all of whom can be linked to sovereignty at all. Her potential as a validator of real kings and lineages makes her a highly significant figure in the

¹ I am very grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic for the invitation to deliver this lecture and to Prof. Máire Ní Mhaonaigh who carefully read the script and made many valuable suggestions that have greatly improved the clarity and cohesion of the text.

² Máire Herbert, ‘Goddess and king: the sacred marriage in early Ireland’, in *Women and sovereignty*, Cosmos 7, ed. Louise D. Fradenburg (Edinburgh 1992), pp. 264–75.

³ On the use of the term sovereignty goddess see Erica J. Sessle, ‘Exploring the limitations of the sovereignty goddess through the role of Rhiannon’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 14 (1994), 9–13; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘On Gormfhlaith daughter of Flann Sinna and the lure of the sovereignty goddess’, in *Seanchas. Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*, ed. Alfred P. Smyth (Dublin 2000), pp. 225–37, at pp. 229–31; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Tales of three Gormlaiths in medieval Irish literature’, *Ériu* 52 (2002), 1–24, at pp. 2–4. It seems to me that sovereignty figure/woman is an all-embracing term for a female figure that represents kingship in some way, while ‘sovereignty goddess’ can legitimately be applied to those sovereignty figures who are depicted in the texts as an otherworldly being (see, for example, Kevin Murray (ed. and trans.), *Baile in Scáil. The phantom’s frenzy*, Irish Texts Society 58 (London 2004), p. 15). Of course, the literary sovereignty goddess may be as much an imaginative construction as any other sovereignty figure and cannot be taken as a simple reflex of a pre-Christian goddess.

literature of the early medieval period, but we will see that the myth is rather more fluid than is often thought.

An illustration of the persistence and adaptability of the myth of sovereignty is provided by the account in the Annals of Connacht of the inauguration of Feidhlimidh Ó Conchobhair in 1310. The note is remarkable in that it appears to indicate that the ancient ritual of sacred marriage was still being practised in parts of Ireland as late as the fourteenth century:

O'tconnaire Maelruanaid Mac Diarmata a dalta arna dilsiuagad foa duthaig ⁊ truma thabaig cache tuaithi ina timchell, ⁊ ro mothaig co mor Gaill oca cengal dochum becnerta, ar ba demin le Gallaib da mbad anfang e-sim 'na aenar comad leo fein coiced Connacht co comlan fa a commas, ⁊ is hi comuirli ar ar cind in cungid .i. a dalta do degtoebail ⁊ a rigad ar ecin, ⁊ rucustur leis he co Carn Fraich meic Fidaich ⁊ do rigustur arin carn he do rer nois na naem ⁊ Daonna Esa do sundrad, amail is rigda ⁊ is airechda ⁊ is linmairi do rigad aenduire da cined fein o re Briain meic Echach Muidmedoin anuas cosin laithi-sin .i. Fedlimid mac Aedo meic Eogain. Et ar feis d'Feidlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain re coiced Connacht doronne a oiti a frithailem an odchi-sin do rer cumne na senduire ⁊ na senleeabar [sic], ⁊ is i sin banais rige is oiregdo doronad a Connacht riam cusan laithi-sin.

Maelruanaid Mac Diarmata, seeing the exclusion of his foster-son from his patrimony and the heavy exactions on each tuath about him, and much resenting the action of the Galls in restricting and diminishing his power—for the Galls felt sure that if this one man were weak the whole province of Connacht would be in their own hands—determined, like the warrior he was, to take his foster-son boldly and make him king by force. So he carried him to Carnfree and installed him on the mound according to the practice of the saints, and of Da Conna of Assylin in particular; and he, Fedlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain, was proclaimed in a style as royal, as lordly and as public as any of his race from the time of Brian son of Eochu Muigmedoin till that day. And when Fedlimid mac Aeda meic Eogain had married the Province of Connacht his foster-father waited upon him during the night in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books; and this was the most splendid kingship-marriage ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day.⁴

⁴ A. Martin Freeman (ed. and trans.), *Annála Connacht: the annals of Connacht (A.D. 1224–1544)* (Dublin 1944), pp. 223–4, s.a. 1310.7.

The inauguration here appears primarily to be a Christian one, as might be expected, for it is conducted in accordance with ‘the practice of the saints’ (*do rer nois na naem*). But in addition to the conventional Christian ceremony, the inauguration is described as a ‘kingship-marriage’ (*banais rige*) in which the young king married the Province of Connacht. However, the appeal to a long tradition is immediately suspicious, and the annalist rather gives the game away when he says that it was performed ‘in the manner remembered by the old men and recorded in the old books’ (*do rer cumne na senduine 7 na senleeabar* [sic]). This was no familiar ritual but a re-enactment of what they thought a *banais rige* would have been. It is the invention of tradition for political expediency in which life imitates art. The need for such validation is made clear within the entry itself: Máel Rúanaid feels that the English are undermining Gaelic power in Connacht so he wishes to install his foster-son as ‘king’. By using the ‘traditional’ *banais rige*, he is asserting Fedlimid’s rightful position in a long line of Gaelic kings.

Sovereignty Everywhere

Kim McCone accepts that Ireland inherited many of the features of sacral kingship from the Indo-European world, stating ‘there is no shortage of comparative evidence indicative of an appreciable pagan Celtic and Indo-European input into the early Irish concept of kingship’, but he rightly points out that scholars have been ‘particularly prone to stress the conservatism of the medieval Irish outlook’ on kingship.⁵ Moreover, the sovereignty goddess has been distilled down to such a small number of bare essential characteristics that almost any female associated with a king could be identified as a goddess.

There has been pushback against this trend, and the ease with which we have identified female characters as sovereignty figures has been called into question. Trindade considers the case of the three Gormlaiths, a triumvirate

⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990), pp. 107, 108.

picked up and developed also by later scholars including Ní Dhonnchadha and Ní Mhaonaigh.⁶ Trindade observes that their stories include elements that are reasonable approximations of real life, and notes that multiple serial marriages, often taken as a key marker of the sovereignty myth, were common among the aristocracy. She holds, however, that reality will not explain all the features of the stories and ultimately views the tales about Gormlaith as a mixture of myth and history.⁷ Ní Dhonnchadha takes the argument somewhat further, arguing that the depiction of Gormlaith, daughter of Flann Sinna, was not influenced by the sovereignty myth.⁸ She raises the important point that the emphasis on goddesses ‘has obscured from view the coherence with which [Gormlaith] is represented across the whole range of texts ... [which] constitute the largest dossier there is on an historical Irishwoman before the twelfth century’.⁹ In other words, modern scholars have abandoned real women in favour of a homogenized deity. I would add that not only are we in danger of losing sight of the historical queens, but that the sovereignty figure itself becomes muddled and debased. If anyone can be a goddess, then the category ceases to be meaningful. Only by stripping away these accretions can we hope to achieve a clearer picture of the representation of the sovereignty figure across the ages.

A similar argument of sorts has been made in relation to Medb of Crúachain who has functioned as one of the key examples of the sovereignty goddess since Tomás Ó Máille’s seminal article on the subject.¹⁰ Erica Sessle argues that ‘by preventing Medb’s characteristics from being examined as a literary person outside of the divine, one fails to fully comprehend her character

⁶ W.A. Trindade, ‘Irish Gormlaith as a sovereignty figure’, *Études celtiques* 23 (1986), 143–56; Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘On Gormfhlaith’; Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Tales of three Gormlaiths’. Ní Mhaonaigh (pp. 2–3) points out that the case for supposing that they were goddesses is very weak.

⁷ Trindade, ‘Irish Gormlaith’, p. 152.

⁸ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘On Gormfhlaith’, pp. 229–33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁰ Tomás S. Ó Máille, ‘Medb Chruachna’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 17 (1927), 129–46.

and thus the text itself'.¹¹ For Sessle, Medb is an anti-goddess, 'a negative manifestation of the [sovereignty] figure'.¹² She has been let down by Ailill and Fergus, neither of whom are suitable kings, and '[w]ithout her proper mate, Medb is a harpy, her character is a negative one and she becomes the anti-goddess'.¹³ Doris Edel takes this revisionism even further, insisting on treating Medb as a fully corporeal, human being, and Sarah Sheehan deconstructs the sovereignty interpretation of Medb as a product of Irish nationalism.¹⁴

What I would like to do in this contribution is to look again at some of the narratives about hideous hags who appear in tales to do with sovereignty. I hope to show that the hag is a far from static figure, and that there is considerable variation in her representation and meaning in different texts. There has been a tendency in some quarters to treat all stories as of equal value when assessing the sovereignty myth, and a surprisingly large edifice has been built from very late material. I hope to bring some historical perspective to the texts and thereby shed light on how the figure has emerged and developed over time.

The Hideous Hag

The transformed hag is widely attested in later English and Icelandic stories, and it is generally thought that these owe their origin to Irish exemplars, which are best known from the tale of Níall of the Nine Hostages and his brothers (see below). While the majority of parallels are later than the Irish texts, Stevenson suggests that Aldhelm's *De virginitate* (c. 680 x 700) contains an example of the

¹¹ Sessle, 'Exploring the limitations of the sovereignty goddess', p. 10.

¹² Erica J. Sessle, 'Misogyny and Medb: approaching Medb with feminist criticism', in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the first international conference on the Ulster Cycle of tales*, ed. J.P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (Belfast 1994), pp. 135–8, at p. 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Doris Edel, *Inside the Táin: exploring Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Ailill, and Medb* (Berlin 2015); Sarah Sheehan, 'Loving Medb', in *Gablánach in scélaigeacht: Celtic studies in honour of Ann Dooley*, ed. Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon and Westley Follett (Dublin 2013), pp. 171–86.

motif and that Aldhelm borrowed it from an Irish source.¹⁵ The Emperor Constantine lies sleeping in Byzantium when he sees an old woman in a dream. Constantine prays and the old woman is turned into a beautiful young maiden; he places a diadem on her head and covers her with his cloak. St Silvester appears to him a week later and explains that the old woman is Byzantium ‘whose walls are now wasted away because of their age’ (*cuius muri iam prae venustate consumpti sunt*).¹⁶ He instructs Constantine to mount his horse which he is to let have free rein, and wherever it goes he is to build a new wall for the city and so ‘shall resuscitate this veteran and nearly dead city into (the likeness of) a young lady’ (*et hanc veteranam civitatem et paene mortuam in iuenculam suscitabis*).¹⁷ However, Irslinger demonstrates that Aldhelm’s loathly lady is more probably derived from biblical and classical analogues.¹⁸ She identifies a combination of two distinct motifs in Aldhelm’s story, the personification of the city as the ruler’s bride and the rejuvenation of an old woman, both of which she shows to have parallels elsewhere beyond the Irish context. The personification of a city as a woman and bride of a ruler is found, for example, in Lamentations 1.1 where Jerusalem is depicted as a widow (*vidua*) and former mistress (*domina*), as well as a mother.¹⁹ The rejuvenation of an old woman is found in Classical and ecclesiastical sources and Irslinger concludes that the motif of the city as bride in

¹⁵ Jane Stevenson, ‘Constantine, St Aldhelm and the Loathly Lady’, in *Constantine: history, historiography and legend*, ed. Samuel N.C. Lieu and Dominic Montserrat (London 1998), pp. 189–206.

¹⁶ Rudolfus Ehwald (ed.), *Aldhelmi opera*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores antiquissimi 15 (Berlin 1919), p. 259; Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren (trans.), *Aldhelm: the prose works* (Ipswich 1979), p. 84.

¹⁷ Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, p. 259; Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm*, p. 84.

¹⁸ Britta Irslinger, ‘Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*, *Flaithius* and the Loathly Lady motif’, in *Proceedings of the first European symposium in Celtic Studies, Trier 2013*, ed. Jürgen Zeidler and Sarah Junges (forthcoming), preprint available at academia.edu: https://www.academia.edu/17513229/Aldhelms_De_virginitate_Flaithius_and_the_Loathly_Lady_motif.

¹⁹ *Quomodo sedet sola | civitas plena populo! | Facta est quasi vidua | domina gentium; | princeps provinciarum | facta est sub tributo* (Lam. 1.1). See Irslinger ‘Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*’, pp. 14–15.

Aldhelm ‘has its closest parallels in the Biblical passages ... and in the Christian traditions that developed from there’, while the rejuvenation has its closest analogues in *The Shepherd* and *De bello Gildonico*.²⁰ Irslinger’s analysis demonstrates that we need not invoke an insular source for the loathly lady motif in Aldhelm, although she seems to remain open to the possibility that the Irish material is genuinely archaic, concluding that ‘the medieval description of a pre-Christian goddess sheds light on the medieval notion of said goddess, rather than conveying first-hand information on inherited pre-Christian beliefs’.²¹

Echtra mac nEchach Mugmedóin

The legend of Níall of the Nine Hostages and his brothers is recounted as follows in the tale *Echtra mac nEchach Mugmedóin* ‘The Expedition of the sons of Eochaid Mugmedón’.²² Níall is born of a slave and the king of Tara, Eochaid Mugmedón. He is exposed and left to die but is saved by a poet, Torna, who carries him off to Munster. Later, he returns to Tara and the men of Ireland acclaim him as king, even though he is the youngest of five brothers. A test set by the druid Sithchenn fails to decide among the young contenders. They set out on a hunt but get lost. They eat their quarry but become thirsty, so each of the boys goes off in turn to find water. They encounter a hag at a well who offers water in return for a kiss. Each refuses, apart from Brían who gives her a quick peck, and Níall who kisses her and then sleeps with her. She is transformed into a beautiful woman and reveals that she is Sovereignty. Níall thereby secures the kingship of Tara after his father and founds the longest running dynasty in Irish history.

²⁰ Irslinger, ‘Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*’, pp. 15–20, 23. See Charles Taylor (trans.), *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 2 vols (London 1903–06), i, pp. 92–4; Elzbieta M. Olechowska (ed. and trans.), *Claudii Claudiani De bello Gildonico* (Leiden 1978).

²¹ Irslinger, ‘Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*’, p. 27.

²² Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), ‘Echtra mac Echach Muigmedoin: the adventure of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón’, *Revue celtique* 24 (1903), 190–203.

The tale exists in two main versions which differ in some important respects. A prose version is found in several manuscripts including, from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan) cols 783–785 (= facs. 902–906), Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote) f. 146ra–b, and Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 48a (Liber Flavus Fergusiorum), part 1, ff. 28ra–28va. It is generally dated to the twelfth century, but McCone points to ‘a reasonable smattering of good Old Irish forms in the text’ which would indicate that the story had been ‘reworked from a rather older original’.²³ Unfortunately, he does not specify what these are and I can find no evidence for any diagnostic Old Irish forms.²⁴ We may note that many late verbal forms and the use of the independent object pronoun favour a twelfth-century date. The poetic version beginning *Temair Breg, baile na fian* (‘Tara of Bregia, home of warrior-bands’) is found in two twelfth-century manuscripts: Oxford, Bodley MS Rawlinson B.502 (75va–76rb) and Trinity College Dublin MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster) 33b–35a. In the Book of Leinster but not in Rawlinson, it is ascribed to Cúán úa Lothcháin (who died, according to the Annals of Ulster in 1024), a royal poet in the service of Máel Sechnaill, king of Tara 980–1022, from whom a considerable body of verse survives.²⁵ Ó Corráin casts doubt on the attribution of the poem to úa Lothcháin and argues on internal grounds that the prose version is actually anterior, but this is convincingly dismissed by Jaski who reasserts the later date of the prose.²⁶

²³ McCone, *Pagan past*, p. 183.

²⁴ He may have been thinking of the preposition *fri*, later *re/ria*, and *ol*, later *or/ar*, but these are mixed with the later forms and are probably mere archaising or dialect features.

²⁵ Maud Joynt (ed. and trans.), ‘Echtra mac Echdach Mugmedóin’, *Ériu* 4 (1908), 91–111, at p. 91. On Cúán’s oeuvre see Clodagh Downey, ‘The life and work of Cúán ua Lothcháin’, *Ríocht na Midhe* 19 (2008), 55–78.

²⁶ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Historical need and literary narrative’, in *Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Celtic Studies*, Oxford 1983, ed. D. Ellis-Evans, John G. Griffith, and E.M. Jope (Oxford 1986), pp. 141–58, at pp. 144–6; Bart Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession* (Dublin 2000), pp. 166–9.

The prose version of Níall's story identifies the hag as *in Flaithius* 'the sovereignty'²⁷ but the poem makes no such identification, describing her as *écess óenmná* 'a sibyl' (q. 35); *úath ind alla* 'spectre of the cliff' (q. 38), *húath* 'spectre' (q. 39), *deilb ndochruid* 'hideous shape' (q. 44) and, after her transformation, *ingen* 'maiden' (qq. 51, 53a, 61).²⁸ The fact that she is described as a poet (*écess*) may suggest quite a different role for her as a prophetess, and we may question whether she can be interpreted as a sovereignty figure at all in this text. In her examination of the prose version, Downey postulates that 'the association of Niall Noígíallach with the 'sovereignty goddess' may not go back as far as has been thought', and Borsje considers the hag among various spectres (*úatha*) who appear in a wide range of tales, invariably to test the hero.²⁹ It might be suggested that a contemporary audience would have understood that the hag in our poem was Sovereignty, but this is fatally undermined by the fact that her sleeping with Níall is not regarded as a determining factor in the selection of the new king as we would expect: a further test at the forge is required before he is accepted as the rightful king. If the hag was the goddess of sovereignty, surely we would expect her sleeping with Níall to mark his confirmation as king – it, rather than the events of the burning forge, should be the ultimate determination of his sovereignty.

We should note, moreover, that the poem does not represent the encounter with the hag as an inauguration ritual and, significantly, that there is no indication that he becomes king immediately: while the prose explicitly declares that Níall goes to Tara when he is fit to be king (*inrígh*, § 4), the verse has him appearing

²⁷ Stokes, 'Echtra mac Echach Muigmedoin', p. 200, § 16.

²⁸ Translations are from Joynt, 'Echtra mac Echdach Mugmedóin'.

²⁹ Clodagh Downey, 'Intertextuality in *Echtra mac nEchdach Mugmedóin*', in *Cín Chille Chúile: texts, saints and places. Essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain*, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Kevin Murray (Aberystwyth 2004), pp. 77–104, at p. 103; Jacqueline Borsje, 'Fled Bricrenn and tales of terror', *Peritia* 19 (2005), 173–92, at pp. 186–7.

as just a boy of nine years (*nóiblíadnach*, q. 11; also q. 12).³⁰ Conaire Mór is known for his tender age when he becomes king of Tara – he is described as beardless (*amulchach*), indicating that he is not yet a full-grown man – but the reference to his lack of facial hair implies that he was on the verge of adulthood rather than a child.³¹ Cormac mac Airt appears to have gained the kingship at a young age in some versions of his biography, and appears as a little boy (*'na mac bic*) sitting on his foster-father's couch when he pronounces his famous judgement in *Cath Maige Mucrama* 'The Battle of Mag Mucrama'.³² It is possible that Níall was being portrayed as a particularly precocious king but it is more probable that this episode is just one of his boyhood deeds that marked him out for future greatness. Instead of marking his accession to the kingship, the hag merely advises him to gain a promise from each of his brothers that he will be permitted to speak first at court. When the other brothers do not raise their voices on their return to Tara, Eochaid declares: *A micc, tucsaid dó ... is don macc sin, is maith lemm, doratsaid ríge nÉrenn*, 'O sons, ye have given him (this) ... it is

³⁰ Níall and his brothers are described throughout the poem as *meic* 'boys' (qq. 9, 15) and one brother, Fergus, is described as *gilla* 'a lad' (qq. 10, 12, 13). Níall himself is described as a child (*nóidíu*, qq. 19, 42), but this is contrasted with his actions which the hag declares are 'not the reply of a puny boy' (*nirb aithesc meic minairbeich*, q. 48). His physical form, therefore, is contrasted with his mettle. In the Book of Leinster version of the verse, Eochaid declares, 'Bold Níall, the boy-chief, shall be king' (*Bud rí Níall menmach macdond*, q. 72a). Downey discusses whether Eochaid's authority is undermined by his unwillingness to decide among his sons himself and particularly by Mongfhind who refuses to accept his judgement concerning the kingship ('Women, the world and three wise men: power and authority in tales relating to Níall Noígíallach and Lugaid Mac Con', in *Essays on the early Irish king tales*, ed. Dan M. Wiley (Dublin 2008), pp. 127–47, at pp. 139–44). If so, then Níall would have been in a position to succeed him immediately despite his tender age.

³¹ *Atar lind is coll ro coillead ar tarbféis ⁊ ar n-ór fírinde inad gilla óc amulchach tarfás dúnn and*, 'It seems to us that our bull-feast and our spell of truth are a failure, if it is only a young beardless lad that we envisioned in it', Eleanor Knott (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 8 (Dublin 1936), p. 5, ll. 160–61; John Koch and John Carey (trans.), *The Celtic heroic age: literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales* (Malden, MA 1994), p. 158. It is significant that the people of Tara object strongly to his candidature on the basis of his youth.

³² Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin 1977), p. 63; Máirín O'Daly (ed. and trans.), *Cath Maige Mucrama. The battle of Mag Mucrama*, Irish Texts Society 50 (Dublin 1975), p. 58, § 63.

to the son whom I favour most that ye have given the kingship of Erin' (q. 66). So the hag plays an advisory role only: it is the brothers who concede the kingship to him.

Despite the earlier date of the poem, its literary artifice is clear and it seems to show the influence of Aldhelm's *De virginitate* or related sources in the representation of Tara as a city and in the portrayal of the hag.³³ Tara is described as the 'citadel (*cathir*) of Cormac' and 'conspicuous court of the western world' (*less n-aurdairc íarthair domain*) (q. 2), and perhaps most significantly, as a 'second Rome' (*Róim aile*) (q. 4). Moreover, the transfiguration of the female figure is given clear allegorical significance in the poem:

*Is amlaid sain bis ríge,
garb a thús, tosach ndíne,
bláith a mmedón, mét nemed,
ocus sáim a sírdeirid.*

Even so shall be thy rule; rough its beginning, rise of generations, smooth its mid-course, store of honour; peaceful shall be its final close.³⁴

Her body is like kingship itself from its early difficult stage, through to a productive middle and a peaceful end. The verb *bis* as transmitted is actually present tense and there is no possessive adjective answering to Joynt's 'thy', so we should read this as a more generic statement on the nature of kingship: 'It is thus that kingship is ...' This is not about Níall's kingship, but about all kingship. Precisely the same allegory is pressed in the prose version:

³³ Amy C. Eichhorn-Mulligan links elements of the description of the hag in the prose version to the symptoms of leprosy, and ties this into hagiographic narratives concerning lepers healed by Christ and of Christ disguising himself as a leper to test a saint ('The anatomy of power and the miracle of kingship: the female body of Sovereignty in a medieval Irish kingship tale', *Speculum* 81 (2006), 1014–54, p. 1015).

³⁴ Joynt, 'Echtra mac Echdach Mugmedóin', p. 106, q. 56.

Acus amail adcondarcais misi co granna connda aduathmar artús 7 alaind fadeoid, is amlaid sin in flaithius, uair is annam fogabar he cen chatha 7 cen chongala, alaind maisech immorro ria nech e fodeoid.

Thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial, horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the sovranity; for seldom it is gained without battles and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is beautiful and goodly.³⁵

This entirely subverts the transformation myth – she is not ugly and decrepit because she is without a rightful king but rather her body reflects the trials of kingship – kingship is arduous, but in the end it is ‘beautiful and goodly’. The woman’s form, as well as being a test of the future king’s courage, is a reflection of the burden of leadership. The man who can bear her repulsive form is also capable of bearing the burden of sovereignty.

One of the defining features of Sovereignty – the proffering of a drink of wine, ale or mead – is missing from both versions of the tale, and it may be significant that the drink that the hag offers is water from the well. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’, the lack of water, which is withheld by all the streams in Ireland, marks the end of Conaire’s reign and he dies soon after, so the water symbolism in Níall’s story may also be reflective of sovereignty.³⁶ When Fíachna returns to his brothers empty-handed having refused to kiss the hag, ‘he said that he had found no fount, that Erin’s water was hidden from him’ (*atbert ní fúair tìprait tall, rocelt fair usce Hérenn*, q. 37). The hiding of ‘the water of Ireland’ may be read on one level as ‘all the water in Ireland’ but on another as a symbol of the fecundity of the land. It is noteworthy that not only could he not find the water but that it was concealed from him just as it was concealed from Mac Cécht in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. When the hag proffers the water to Níall, it seems again to act as a metaphor for his future kingship:

³⁵ Stokes ‘Echtra mac Echach Muigmedoin’, pp. 200–1, § 16.

³⁶ Yolande de Pontfarcy, ‘The sovereignty of Paeonia’, in *Ogma: essays in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin*, ed. Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin 2002), pp. 145–50, at p. 147.

*In lind ara tánac cenn ...
bid bláith do deog a dind chuirn,
bid mid, bid mil, bid mórchuirn.*

The water which thou camest to seek ... smooth shall be thy draught from the royal horn; 'twill be mead, 'twill be honey, 'twill be strong ale.³⁷

Arguably, the three drinks here represent the drink of sovereignty that he will receive on becoming king but honey is decidedly odd in this context. It might be argued that honey represents mead by metonymy: the fact that mead is already mentioned does not necessarily mitigate against that possibility as there were different kinds and grades of mead. However, the correlation with the trifold metaphor in the previous quatrain (q. 56) strongly suggests that the drinks symbolise the same three stages of kingship with mead representing the rough beginnings, honey (or mead) representing the smooth middle and strong ale its final ending. If I am right in this, then there is no drink of sovereignty – rather, the water merely symbolises fertility and gives Níall a bargaining chip to use against his brothers.³⁸

Thus, there is little within the earliest account of Níall's encounter with the hag that supports an interpretation of her as a sovereignty goddess. Rather, she functions as a test for the would-be sovereigns and she is a prophetess and a helper for Níall in his quest to take the kingship. Her transformation, and probably even the drinks of mead, honey and ale, are presented as metaphors for kingship. The transformation motif may ultimately be taken from external sources, so that the story as we know it is unlikely to owe much to native mythology of the sovereignty goddess, whatever form that might have taken. The later prose version seems to be a further development of the story found in the poem and has evolved into the narrative that is now interpreted as a sovereignty myth. The hag

³⁷ Joynt, 'Echtra mac Echdach Mugmedóin', p. 106, q. 57.

³⁸ On a simpler level, it could be argued that the three drinks are merely intended as indicative of the luxuries that will accompany his kingship. However, the metaphorical bent is clearly established elsewhere in the poem.

becomes Sovereignty and sleeping with her becomes the final deciding act that confirms Níall as king. However, only by retrofitting this version to the older poem can this reading be pushed back before the twelfth century.

Lugaid Laígde

The tale of Lugaid Laígde is less well known than that of Níall and is often ignored in discussions of the sovereignty myth or mentioned only in passing. Gwynn was of the opinion that the Lugaid story was written in imitation of the latter, and Mark Williams dismisses it as ‘evidently a new story’.³⁹ Jaski argues that the core of the Lugaid story predates the Níall legend, on rather dubious grounds that the last named king in the collection is Níall Caille (833–846) and that Lugaid and Mac Con appear in a number of Old Irish tales.⁴⁰ Versions of the tale are preserved in the shorter and longer versions of *Cóir Anmann* ‘The Fitness of Names’ and in the metrical *Dindshenchas* of Carn Máil which appears in the Book of Leinster.⁴¹ Arbuthnot dates the compilation of the earliest version in *Cóir Anmann* (CA) to the latter part of the twelfth century.⁴² In my opinion, the language of the *Dindshenchas* poem points towards the second half of the eleventh century or the early twelfth century,⁴³ so the text is roughly

³⁹ Edward Gwynn (ed. and trans.), *The metrical Dindshenchas*, Part 4 (Dublin 1924), p. 409; Mark Williams, *Ireland’s immortals: a history of the gods of Irish myth* (Princeton, NJ 2016), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Jaski, *Early Irish kingship*, pp. 168–9. He also cites Rachel Bromwich’s now dated study which argued on mythological grounds that the fawn was the original element of the hunt (‘Celtic dynastic themes and the Breton lays’, *Études celtiques* 9 (1960), 439–74, at pp. 446, 451).

⁴¹ Sharon Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann: a late Middle Irish treatise on personal names*, 2 vols, Irish Texts Society 59–60 (London 2005, 2007), i, pp. 101–4; ii, pp. 20–3; Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas* iv, pp. 134–43.

⁴² Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, p. 72.

⁴³ So dated by Bromwich, ‘Celtic dynastic themes’, p. 446, n. 1. There are no deponent verbs (see *rosdilsigset* l. 99 and *rodorchaig* l. 109 and note the unusual hybrid ending in *rosfuachtastar* l. 89). The long vowel preterite is absent in *roscuch* l. 117 and the t-preterite has been replaced in *roiaraifaig* l. 121. Note the replacement of the future stem by that of the present in 2 sg. future form *mbeffaide* l. 119 and the innovative 1 sg. future ending in *faifet* l. 107. The infix pronoun 3 pl. -s- occurs several times but is not diagnostic: there is an example of an innovative 2 pl. infix pron. in *ro-for-n-íss* (l. 104 – my punctuation). We have dat. for

contemporary with the prose version of the Níall story. Importantly, none of the existing versions of the Lugaid narrative is any earlier than the Níall story as recounted in Cúán úa Lothcháin's poem.

According to the earliest version of CA, Dáire Doimthech named his five sons Lugaid for it had been prophesied that a man of that name would take the kingship of Ireland.⁴⁴ The Assembly of Tailtiu (*óenach Tailten*) was being celebrated by Dáire when a golden fawn (*laegh*) appeared. A druid foretold that whichever of his sons captured the fawn would become king. Dáire's sons hunted it as far as Benn Étair where they were enveloped in a magic mist. A heavy snow fell on them and they came upon a house in which lived a dreadful old woman (*caillech aduathmar*). The first son asked for shelter to which the woman replied that he could share her bed with her. When he refused, she said that he had forfeited the kingship. Lugaid Laígde, however, agreed to sleep with her in return for food and drink. She was transformed into a beautiful maiden and she declared 'I am Sovereignty and you will take the sovereignty of Ireland' (*is misi in Flatus 7 gebasu flatus Erenn*).⁴⁵

acc. in *coa hachsaluib* l. 86 where there is unstressed rhyme with *dam*. The comparative conjunction *ná* appears after a vowel in ll. 72, 81, 83 where it is probably for *iná* (cf. *iná* l. 73, 78 vll. *anda*, *inda*, and *indás* l. 80). We also find *mar* 'when, like' ll. 69, 88, 109, never *amal*; Jackson reports no examples of *mar* in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* and says that it is not common in *Lebor na hUidre* but there is one example in *Saltair na Rann* (l. 1268) where, however, the reduced form may be poetic (K.H. Jackson (ed.), *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Dublin 1990), p. 102). The nom. pl. masc. of the definite article appears twice where it is *na* rather than *ind* (ll. 70, 126). Hiatus has been lost in *fóed* l. 102 and *faifet* l. 107 but is seemingly preserved in *foit* l. 126 (with good manuscript support). Gwynn edits the same verb as disyllabic in *las' fóim* l. 131 but this is against the evidence of the manuscripts which have predominantly *lassa*. It would seem, therefore, that hiatus had taken place but that the poet could use it for metrical requirements. Liam Breatnach ('An Mheán-Ghaeilge', in Kim McCone et al. (eds), *Stair na Gaeilge in ómós do Pádraig Ó Fiannachta* (Maynooth 1994), pp. 221–333, at p. 231) notes its use by Flann Mainistrech (d. 1056) but of course it still exists in Scottish Gaelic. The poem falls into two sections with *dúnad* (on *óebind*) in each section, with the second perhaps being produced as a continuation of the first. Note that the predicative adjective is inflected by gender in *corbat láin* l. 19 in the first section which usage was probably extinct by the middle of the twelfth century and uncommon before this (Jackson, *Aislinge*, p. 89).

⁴⁴ Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, pp. 101–4, 139–41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

There are some substantial differences between this and the older *Dindshenchas* version which appear to suggest that the former has fallen under the influence of the Níall legend. The *Dindshenchas* text states that there were seven sons of whom four engaged in the hunt and are later named explicitly.⁴⁶ CA, on the other hand, states at the outset and in the conclusion that the tale concerns five Lugdaig, which corresponds to the number in the Níall story, and names five in the subsequent narrative concerning the hag (Lugaid Orc, Lugaid Cál, Lugaid Láegas, Lugaid Corb, Lugaid Laígde). A sixth name is given in the description of the slaying of the fawn: *Ocus tairisis Lugaid Laigi, .i. Macnia, in laegh. Ocus coscrais Lugaid in laeg. Conad de ata Lugaid Cosc*, ‘And Lugaid Laígde, i.e. Maicnia, caught the fawn. And Lugaid [Cosc] killed the fawn. That is how Lugaid Cosc came about.’⁴⁷ It is uncertain whether this is a sixth brother or simply another name for Lugaid Láegas – it is arguably more natural for the person who caught the deer to also be the one who gets the privilege of slaying it. Indeed, if we ignore the first ‘Cosc’ in the translation, which is an insertion by the editor, we can read this as a single individual. In any case, in the subsequent narrative in which soubriquets are given to the youths, Lugaid Cosc is not mentioned, and only five brothers are named.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, the number of brothers varies. One section of the genealogies in the twelfth-century manuscript, Oxford, Bodley, Rawlinson B.502 names three but gives five as a variant;⁴⁹ the names of the five are the same as in CA save that we find Lugaid Fer Corb for Lugaid Corb and Lugaid Lon for Lugaid Láegas. In the genealogy of Corco Loígde there are said to be five brothers, who are named exactly as in CA, but a

⁴⁶ Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, p. 136, ll. 37, 43, 53–68.

⁴⁷ Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, p. 102.

⁴⁸ There is a further apparent anomaly which might be taken to refer to a sixth brother: after the hunt, one of the brothers (unnamed here) goes to seek shelter. However, the unnamed brother is not a sixth brother but merely one of the five brothers, narrated from a different perspective. See further below.

⁴⁹ M.A. O’Brien (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1962), p. 155.

sixth brother, Lugaid Coscaire, corresponding to Lugaid Cosc in CA, is added.⁵⁰ It is likely, therefore, that Lugaid Cosc is an intrusion in the CA narrative. The number five in relation to this topos may well be old, as we shall see, but the indications are that in the Lugaid story the number was originally given as seven or four.

There is also a significant difference in the depiction of the encounter with the hag in CA which is much closer to the Níall story. In the *Dindshenchas* poem, the brothers are in a house when the hag approaches them and behaves in an openly aggressive manner, threatening to eat the brothers and their hounds unless one of them sleeps with her.⁵¹ In CA, on the other hand, the boys come upon the woman while looking for shelter which closely echoes the search for water in the Níall legend. The dialogue, as befits the wider context and function of *Cóir Anmann*, focusses on the acquisition of their soubriquets,⁵² but it is preceded by a description of the first encounter between an unnamed brother and the hag. The text states that ‘one of them went to look for shelter’ (*tet mac dib d’iarraid tige*),⁵³ and although the scene is not repeated for the remaining brothers, it is obvious that that is intended, which again echoes the Níall story. The hag offers the anonymous brother in CA a bed for the night if she sleeps with him and he refuses, to which she retorts ‘You have forfeited sovereignty and kingship’ (*Ro teipis flaithus 7 rigi*). Thus, this closely follows the text of Níall’s story with minor differences such as the location and the hag’s demand for a kiss from Níall rather

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 256–7.

⁵¹ Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, p. 140, ll. 101–4.

⁵² In CA, the woman gives them their soubriquets based on their division of the fawn: although the naming of the brothers is an element of the *Dindshenchas*, it is quite different, less consistent, and less central. The latter concentrates rather on how each of the four brothers gave name to a particular kingdom: Dál Mess Corb, Cálraige, Corco Oirche, and Corco Laígde (Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, p. 138). There may be some functional equivalence, however. In CA, Lugaid Corb eats the leftovers, while none of the brothers, except Lugaid Laígde, gets any of the fawn, and in the *Dindshenchas* he gets to carve the pig. In both, therefore, he seems to be ranked second to Lugaid Laígde.

⁵³ Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, p. 102.

than copulation in Lugaid's case,⁵⁴ and this in itself suggests that it came under the influence of the Uí Néill narrative.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two tellings is that in the *Dindshenchas* account Lugaid Laígde does not become king. We have seen that Níall does not become king immediately in the earliest version of his kingship tale but he does so eventually, whereas Lugaid never achieves this status. The sovereignty figure addresses him, saying:

*Duit rotócbus cend innocht,
acht sain ní bia diar comrocc:
mac bías ocut, óebdu de,
issé mac la' fóimse.*

To thee have I revealed myself this night, yet nothing more shall come of our meeting: the son thou shalt have, he it is that I shall sleep with – happier fate.⁵⁵

So although she declares herself to be the sovereignty of Ireland and Scotland (*flathius Alban is Hérend*, l. 128), she asserts that the kingship will bypass Lugaid in favour of his son, Lugaid Mac Con (l. 134; cf. ll. 65–6), the well-known king of Tara in several texts, most notably in the tale of Cormac mac Airt's accession.⁵⁶ This declaration stands in conspicuous contrast to the CA version in which the woman makes it clear that Lugaid himself 'will take the sovereignty of Ireland' (*gebas flatus Ereann*),⁵⁷ which directly parallels the Níall story. The failure of Lugaid to take the kingship in the verse account is striking. The hag declares that she is the Sovereignty of Ireland and Scotland, adding that 'with me sleep the

⁵⁴ Stokes, 'Echtra mac Echach Muigmedoin', pp. 196–8, §§ 10–13; Joynt, 'Echtra mac Ehdach Mugmedóin', pp. 100–02, qq. 32–41.

⁵⁵ Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, pp. 142–3.

⁵⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography*, pp. 119–27; Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin and Paul Byrne, 'Prosopography I: Kings named in *Baile Chuinn Chétchathaig* and *The Airgialla Charter poem*', in *The kingship and landscape of Tara*, ed. Edel Bhreathnach (Dublin 2005), pp. 159–224, at pp. 164–5.

⁵⁷ Arbuthnot, *Cóir Anmann*, i, p. 103.

High Kings' (*limm-sa fóit na haird-ríg*).⁵⁸ Following on from her demand that one of the brothers sleep with her, this surely suggests that Lugaid, upon consenting to do so, should become king. There is a direct parallel in the prose version of the Níall legend in which Fíachra offers kisses in exchange for the hag's water and as a result two of his descendants are permitted to become king.⁵⁹ Just as Fíachra gains benefits for his descendants by kissing the hag, so does Lugaid by agreeing to sleep with her. As the hag ultimately rejects him, however, he himself cannot attain the kingship. It might be argued that the existing poem is an inversion or a distortion of a lost version of the tale in which he would have taken the kingship as in CA, but this is unlikely because there is, as far as I know, no other recorded tradition of him becoming king of Tara. CA is anomalous in this regard, so it is more likely that the poet, or some predecessor, has adapted the topos of the sovereignty hag and inverted it to explain how Lugaid's father and son were both kings of Tara but Lugaid was not.

The Lugaid story contains one feature that might be assigned to the pre-Christian period. The Corcu Loígde are named from Lugaid Laígde in our story as if from *lóeg* + the adjectival suffix, but in fact the second element is the name of a goddess, *Loigo-dēvā 'calf-goddess', who appears also to have supplied an old name for the River Bandon.⁶⁰ The name is also represented by LOGIDDEAS on an ogam stone from Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny.⁶¹ Therefore, we seem to have a Lugaid 'of the calf goddess' hunting a calf/fawn (*lóeg*) leading to his acquisition of the kingship. However, it is more likely that the idea of the calf/fawn is merely a product of medieval etymologising, for if the connection to the calf-goddess

⁵⁸ Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, p. 142, l. 126.

⁵⁹ Stokes, 'Echtra mac Echach Muigmedoin', p. 198, § 13.

⁶⁰ Thomas F. O'Rahilly, 'Notes on Irish place-names', *Hermathena* 23 (1933), 196–220, at p. 219.

⁶¹ See Damian McManus, *A guide to Ogam* (Maynooth 1991), pp. 73–5.

were genuine we would surely expect the story to relate to the kingship of Corcu Loígde but the fact is that all the extant accounts concern the kingship of Tara.⁶²

The hag in the oldest version of this story, therefore, is significantly different from the hag in the Níall legend. She appears as aggressive and predatory, and seeks out the boys rather than waiting in a house or at a well for them to appear. Unlike the older versified account of Níall's story, however, she does identify herself as Sovereignty, adding that high-kings sleep with her. But in an echo of that version, sleeping with her does not automatically confer kingship – Lugaid is denied the kingship just as for Níall it was postponed. A fundamental function attributed to the sovereignty woman is that whoever sleeps with her becomes king: this tale provides important evidence that this was not the case.

Macha Mongrúad

Linked thematically with the story of Lugaid, as well as that of Níall, is the story of Macha Mongrúad which is recounted in a number of texts including genealogies,⁶³ the *Dindshenchas*,⁶⁴ the tract on the kings of Ireland (*Do Fhlaithiusaib Érenn*),⁶⁵ and 'The Courtship of Emer' (*Tochmarc Emire*).⁶⁶ The earliest account is that preserved independently in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy

⁶² Thomas M. Charles-Edwards notes that the Corcu Loígde may well have been among the rulers of Munster before the rise of the Éoganachta: *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2000), p. 541.

⁶³ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, pp. 118–19.

⁶⁴ Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The prose tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue celtique* 15 (1894), 272–336, 418–84; *Revue celtique* 16 (1895), 31–83, 135–67, 269–312, *Revue celtique* 15, p. 44; Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Edinburgh Dinnshenchas', *Folklore* 4 (1893), 471–97, at p. 480; Edward Gwynn, 'The Dindshenchas in the Book of Uí Maine', *Ériu* 10 (1926–28), 68–91, at p. 81; Gwynn, *The metrical Dindshenchas*, iv, pp. 124, 308.

⁶⁵ R.I. Best, Osborn Bergin and M.A. O'Brien (eds), *The Book of Leinster, formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, vol. 1 (Dublin 1954), pp. 79–80, ll. 2514–54; Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue celtique* 15, pp. 279–83.

⁶⁶ A.G. van Hamel (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and other stories*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 3 (Dublin 1933), pp. 33–5.

manuscript 23 N 10.⁶⁷ It has been suggested that this story may have been contained in the lost codex *Cín Dromma Snechtai* ‘The Book of Drumsnat’ although Mac Mathúna is sceptical about this claim.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, there is linguistic evidence within the text that suggests a possible Old Irish or early Middle Irish date.⁶⁹ Therefore, this may be the earliest form of the ‘hag’ story that we have in Irish. The following summary is based on the version in 23 N 10:

Rúad, Cimbáeth and Díthorbae used to share the kingship of Ireland on a rotational basis, each spending seven years as king before passing it on to the next. Díthorbae died, and his share in the kingship passed to his sons. Rúad died without issue except for a girl, Macha, who made her case for her share in the kingship when her time came. Cimbáeth refused but was defeated in battle by Macha who then took the kingship. When Cimbáeth’s turn came around again, Macha refused to concede to him and she defeated him again in battle. After seven years it was the turn of the sons of Díthorbae, but again Macha defeated them in battle and took their portion of the kingship. The sons of Díthorbae took to plundering. Macha disguised herself by donning rags and, covering herself in a rye paste, journeyed throughout Ireland until she found them sitting by a fire in the wilderness.⁷⁰ They offered her food and demanded that they be allowed to lie with her. The eldest, Báeth, went first, but she wrapped her thigh around him and overpowered him. She did the same to each and bound them all before taking them back to Ulster where she forced them to dig the rampart of Emain.

⁶⁷ Kuno Meyer (ed.), ‘A medley of Irish texts: XIV. The Dindshenchas of Emain Macha’, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 3 (1907), 325–32.

⁶⁸ Séamus Mac Mathúna (ed. and trans.), *Immram Brain: Bran’s journey to the Land of the Women* (Tübingen 1985), p. 457.

⁶⁹ For example, preservation of the neuter (*ríghe* § 1 (x 2)), the infixed pronominal system (note Class C *nod-gebed*, § 1), the suffixed pronoun in *maoite* (§ 3, but petrified with feminine subject), the archaic spelling of the prepositional pronoun *aurut* (§ 1: see Rudolf Thurneysen, *A grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin 1946), p. 272), relative *lluide* § 4, and the feminine enclitic anaphoric pronoun *-adi* § 4).

⁷⁰ She is also said to be carrying a *ballán* which is a type of vessel seemingly associated with paupers or the sick. See: *Ballān ... ian duine beill .i. duine t[h]rōigh* (Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Sanas Cormaic: an Old-Irish glossary compiled by Cormac Úa Cuilennáin, king-bishop of Cashel in the tenth century* (Halle 1913), p. 16, § 167); *ballān .i. ian mbille .i. lobair*, *ibid.* p. 18, § 187.

This tale has been interpreted as an instance of the sovereignty myth in the same vein as the Níall and Lugaid stories. Carey summarizes the argument as follows:

The main elements of this account – brothers claiming kingship, a hunt in the wilderness, a disguised queen, an apparently repugnant sexual union – recur in the famous legends told of Níall Noígíallach and Lugaid Laígde; there the woman personifies the sovereignty of Ireland, and becomes beautiful after the union is consummated. The queen's wanderings and ferocity also find parallels in stories with this theme; and Macha's concern with *anfír* further indicates the tale's preoccupation with the concept of sacred kingship. In the legends of Níall and Lugaid the true claimant is united with the goddess, and in the present case she subjugates the unworthy.⁷¹

For Carey, then, Macha Mongrúad represents the terrible aspect of the sovereignty-goddess and exists in binary opposition to the wife of Cruinn, commonly known also as Macha, who 'displays traits borne by the war-goddess on those occasions when she appears benevolent, or promotes birth'.⁷² I have shown elsewhere that the wife of Cruinn was not called Macha in the earliest versions of the tale – this is a later innovation – so that the notion that Macha Mongrúad is somehow an alter ego is not supported by the texts.⁷³ A second and more fundamental problem with an orthodox sovereignty interpretation is that, despite the fact that Macha sleeps with the sons of Díthorbae, they do not become kings but are enslaved to Macha.

I have argued previously that the tale is, in fact, a clever manipulation of the hag motif that we find in the tales of Níall and Lugaid.⁷⁴ Macha is a warrior queen who subdues her enemies by force and establishes the ancient capital of Ulster. She is not the sovereignty goddess but rather disguises herself as one by

⁷¹ John Carey, 'Notes on the Irish war-goddess', *Éigse* 19 (1982–83), 263–75, at p. 266.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷³ Gregory Toner, 'Macha and the invention of myth', *Ériu* 60 (2010), 81–109, at p. 85.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–101.

smearing herself in rye and wearing old rags in order to lure the sons of Díthorbae into a secluded place where she overpowers them. But the tale depends on a knowledge of the hag story – the audience must have understood that the sons of Díthorbae would wish to sleep with her if they thought that she was the hag of sovereignty. Having reviewed the other hag tales in more detail, I am now less confident that the disguise adopted by Macha can be termed ‘sovereignty’, although she certainly does seem to emulate the hags discussed above. As we have seen, the idea that the hag is Sovereignty itself seems to be a later development in the literary tradition. The earliest version of the Níall legend does not describe her in these terms at all, and the mating that occurs there does not lead to the immediate inauguration of Níall – indeed, a further test (the smithy) is required to confirm his kingship. The hag may be seen as a test, therefore, rather than as Sovereignty itself in the earliest Níall story.

Similarly, in the earliest version of the Lugaid story, although the hag calls herself Sovereignty, her mating with Lugaid does not make him king as it should according to the model of the myth constructed by modern scholarship. Therefore, we must acknowledge that the idea of the hag as Sovereignty in the case of the Macha legend is possibly anachronistic and is tantamount to interpreting the earliest tale in the light of later ones of the eleventh or twelfth centuries.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the sons of Díthorbae are the antithesis of candidates for kingship in this tale and even their names seem to reflect their ineptitude.⁷⁶ Their sense of entitlement is obvious yet they lose in battle against Macha and are duped by her in her version of single combat and reduced to servile status.

⁷⁵ A further potential problem with my earlier interpretation is that the sons of Díthorbae collectively demand sexual intercourse from the hag. One may question whether she could be understood as a sovereignty figure if she had intercourse with five would-be kings simultaneously: in the other tales under consideration here, the brothers are all in competition with each other and the formula requires this to be the case. However, I do not believe that this is a fatal weakness in that interpretation as the sons of Díthorbae behave as a single entity throughout the tale, waging war on Macha in defence of their claim to their father’s share in the kingship.

⁷⁶ Toner, ‘Macha and the invention of myth’, p. 101.

The tale makes it abundantly clear, therefore, that they are unsuited to kingship and this is a central element of it. As such, it seems likely that their encounter with the hag was seen as a test of their suitability for power. Unfortunately, some of the nuances are obscured by the extent of the manipulation of the topos in this story so that it is not possible to determine whether, from the narrative viewpoint, the sons of Díthorbae thought that she was Sovereignty. It may be the case that copulation with a leprous hag was intended of itself to indicate their unsuitability for the kingship.

We may note in passing that there are five sons in this tale, just as in the Níall legend and in the version of the Lugaid story in *Cóir Anmann*. I have suggested above that the *Cóir Anmann* version of the legend of Lugaid has been adapted to echo more closely the story of Níall's encounter with a hag, so it does not necessarily present any independent evidence of the number five. Nevertheless, there may be some significance in the number appearing in the Macha and Níall stories as bands of five are unusual. Arbuthnot states that bands of five men are particularly common in the Fenian tales, citing the example of Cormac mac Airt from *Tecosca Cormaic* 'The Instructions of Cormac'.⁷⁷ In answer to the question, what did you do when you were a young man, he replies:

*Nogonainn muic, nolenainn lorc i mba m'óenur,
nosinginn ar chuire cóicir i mba cóicer,
ba-sa oirgnech i mbsa dechenborach ...*

I would slay a boar, I would follow a track when I was alone,
I would march against a troop of five when I was one of five,
I was ready to slay and wreck when I was one of ten ...⁷⁸

We are also reminded of the British pirates – the five sons of Donn Désa – who attack and kill King Conaire in *Togail Bruidne da Derga* 'The Destruction

⁷⁷ Sharon Arbuthnot, 'Finn, Ferchess and the *rinne*: versions compared', in *The Gaelic Finn tradition*, ed. Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons (Dublin 2012), pp. 62–80, at p. 75.

⁷⁸ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *The instructions of King Cormac mac Airt*, Todd Lecture Series 15 (Dublin 1909), pp. 18–19, § 8.

of Da Derga's Hostel'.⁷⁹ The destructive connotations of a group of five are also seen in a story that bears closer comparison with the tales under consideration here. Oíbfínd, the wife of Conall Corc of Cashel, has a dream in which she sees four pups, representing the four sons that she will bear the king. She bathes the first in wine, the second in ale, the third in milk and the fourth in water. A fifth pup, who is equated with Cairbre Cruithnechán, enters the lair which she bathes in blood but it turns on her and consumes her breasts.⁸⁰ Ó Corráin demonstrates that the fifth pup represents the Éoganacht Locha Léin whose claim to the kingship of Munster is here rejected as that of an ungrateful and voracious intruder.⁸¹ Like Níall, he is an outsider and a half-brother of those who would see themselves as the real contenders for the kingdom, but the clear implication in Oíbfínd's story is that the supernumerary is disruptive. The number is suggestive, therefore, but a fuller treatment would be required before a more definitive statement could be made about its significance. We might conclude from this preliminary investigation, however, that the number five was borrowed from the Macha legend into the Níall prose story and from there to the later Lugaid narrative.

Sovereignty and Death

Máire Bhreathnach expanded the reach of the sovereignty goddess in an influential article which proposed that the sovereignty woman appears to the king before his demise in the death tales of two kings, Conaire Mór and Muirchertach mac Erca.⁸² In an inversion of the transformation stories that accompany

⁷⁹ See Máire West, 'Leabhar na hUidhre's position in the manuscript history of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Orgain Brudne Uí Dergae*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (1990), 61–98, at p. 67, n. 36.

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum*, p. 196.

⁸¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy: recurrent aetiologies', in *History and heroic tale: a symposium*, ed. Tore Nyberg et al. (Odense 1985), pp. 51–96, at pp. 79–80.

⁸² Máire Bhreathnach, 'The sovereignty goddess as goddess of death?', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 39 (1982), 243–260.

accessions, such as the stories of Níall and Lugaid, the sovereignty goddess takes on the form of a hag and appears to the doomed king. Conaire is linked to a sovereignty figure in *Do Shíl Conairi Móir* ‘Of the Seed of Conaire the Great’ where Mess Búachalla becomes the wife of Conaire and is instrumental in helping him to attain the kingship.⁸³ For Bhreathnach, she is Conaire’s sovereignty goddess, although this story lacks any account of the characteristic metamorphosis.⁸⁴ She links this hag to the two hags, Cichuil and Cailb, who appear to Conaire in ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’ (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*), one who appears while the king journeys towards the hostel and the other who comes to the door of the hostel at night in contravention of his *geis* (taboo). This interpretation is accepted, with some important qualifications, by O’Connor in his detailed study of the Da Derga tale, although he rightly focusses on the second of the hags, Cailb.⁸⁵ The description of Cailb is indeed reminiscent of that of the hags in the Níall and Lugaid legends in their grotesque appearance:

*Sithir cloideb ngarmnai ceachtar a dá lurcan. Batir dubithir dethaich. Brat ríabach rolómar impi. Tacmaicead a fés in t-íchtarach (= a fés íchtarach, Lebor na hUidre) co rrici a glúin. A beóil for leith a cind.*⁸⁶

As long as a weaver’s beam were each of her two shins. They were as black as smoke. A very woolly striped cloak was about her. Her pubic hair hung down to her knee. Her mouth was on the side of her head.⁸⁷

Bhreathnach emphasises the sexual element linking sovereignty to the death of the king, although this is to all intents and purposes absent from ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’.⁸⁸ Cailb is naked from the waist down,

⁸³ Lucius Gwynn (ed. and trans.), ‘De shíl Chonairi Móir’, *Ériu* 6 (1912), 130–43.

⁸⁴ Bhreathnach, ‘The sovereignty goddess’, p. 248.

⁸⁵ Ralph O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel: kingship and narrative artistry in a mediaeval Irish saga* (Oxford 2013), pp. 134–9, 147–50.

⁸⁶ Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, p. 16, § 61.

⁸⁷ O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel*, p. 137.

⁸⁸ Bhreathnach, ‘The sovereignty goddess’, p. 250.

exposing her nether regions in a sexual but deliberately grotesque image.⁸⁹ When Conaire asks what Cailb wants (*cid as áil dait?*) she responds elliptically ‘that which you want’ (*A n-as áil daitsiu*, p. 17, § 63) (my translation). So what does she mean? For Bhreathnach, Cailb appears ‘to be trying to inveigle herself into Conaire’s bed’.⁹⁰ This assumption is necessary to align her with the sovereignty goddess but the connection between her vague request and sex is not immediately obvious. Might it not simply be that, like Conaire, she is seeking shelter and hospitality? Is that not what Conaire desires at this stage (‘that which you want’)? Indeed, the subsequent dialogue is framed in these terms. Cailb protests that she will not leave ‘until hospitality is given me’ (*co ndecha m’áididecht*).⁹¹ The word she uses is *oígidecht* which the Dictionary of the Irish Language defines as ‘entertainment, lodging, hospitality’.⁹² Conaire instead offers her food – an ox and a flitch of pork, together with his own leftovers, if she agrees to stay somewhere else. She then comes to the core of the matter:

*Má dod-áinic ém dond rí, ol sisi, co praind ⁊ lepaid n-oenmná ina thig, ad-étar na aill ó nach ailiu oca mbiad ainech, mad ro scáich coiblide (= coible, Lebor na hUidre) na flatha fil isin Bruidin.*⁹³

“If food and a bed for one woman in his house are such a great matter for the king”, she said, “then something else will be got from someone else who has honour, if the generosity of the sovereign in the Hostel has come to an end.”⁹⁴

⁸⁹ We may also compare the first of the two hags: *Tacmaicead a bél íchtarach co a glún* (Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, p. 11, § 38); ‘Her lower lip hung down to her knee’ (O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel*, p. 134). This employs an almost identical formula but uses ‘lip/mouth’, perhaps with reference to her vagina. A parallel has been drawn with the grotesque Sheela-na-gigs which were formerly thought to derive from a similar myth but have now been shown to be medieval imports postdating the arrival of the Anglo-Normans: Eamon P. Kelly, *Sheela-na-gigs: origins and functions* (Dublin 1996). Importantly, as Barbara Freitag observes, the main characteristics of the Sheela-na-gig are absent from the hags in the tale: *Sheela-na-gigs: unravelling an enigma* (London 2004), p. 34.

⁹⁰ Bhreathnach, ‘The sovereignty goddess’, p. 251.

⁹¹ Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, p. 17, § 63; translation from O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel*, p. 137.

⁹² www.dil.ie/33645.

⁹³ Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, p. 17, § 63.

⁹⁴ O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel*, p. 137.

Note how she asks for food, and in particular how she suggests that he has no honour (*ainech*) for refusing her hospitality for the night, and that his generosity is no more. Her visit, therefore, parallels Cú Chulainn's dilemma in meeting three hags cooking dog meat in the wilderness – it is *geis* for him to eat the meat of his totem animal, but also for him to refuse an offer of hospitality.⁹⁵ Here, Conaire is torn between his obligations of hospitality as a noble and a king, and his *geis* about receiving a company of a single person.⁹⁶ However, we may note that in the Macha and Lugaid stories, and to some extent in the Níall story, hospitality, and specifically the sharing of food, is a pretext for sex. It might be argued that this is implicit here but this begs the question, what would a medieval audience have expected? Quite simply, we cannot know. None of the parallels is a death story but rather concerns accession or failed accession, so we can say nothing about what might have been expected in a death story such as 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'.⁹⁷

O'Connor accepts that there is a 'continuing debate' about whether the sovereignty goddess and the war goddess are 'aspects of the same (or any) goddess', but he argues that the redactor of 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' does deliberately construct links between them, specifically in the two figures of Étaín, Conaire's grandmother, and Cailb, the hag.⁹⁸ If true, a very

⁹⁵ On this, see Philip O'Leary, 'Honour-bound: the social context of early Irish heroic *geis*', *Celtica* 20 (1988), 85–107; Matthieu Boyd, 'On not eating dog', in *Ollam: studies in Gaelic and related traditions in honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. Matthieu Boyd (Madison, NJ 2016), pp. 35–45.

⁹⁶ Conaire says that it is *geis* for him to admit a retinue of a single woman (*dám oenmná*) after sunset, a reference to the prohibition specified earlier in the text as: *Ní tae dám aenmná nó énfir i tech fort iar fuinead ngréne* (Knott, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, p. 6, § 16), 'And after sunset a company of one woman or one man shall not enter the house in which you are' (Koch and Carey, *The Celtic heroic age*, p. 159). We may observe that in the formulation of the *geis*, it is the company of a single individual, whether man or woman, that is prohibited, so that there is no sexual element. The phrase *dám óenmná* is hapax and, indeed, paradoxical.

⁹⁷ Bhreathnach further notes that a drink is involved in the tale of Conaire's death which echoes the drink of sovereignty (Bhreathnach, 'The sovereignty goddess', p. 257; for discussion see above). However, the water is offered not by the sovereignty figure but by Mac Cécht.

⁹⁸ O'Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga's hostel*, p. 148.

different kind of relationship between the sovereignty figure and the harbinger of death is being described. If one is the inversion of the other, it operates on the literary level, not on the mythical. The parallels require us to compare them, or more particularly the position of the king, but we do not have to take them as reflections of the same person. In short, the hag is a portent and symbol of the king's downfall, not some reflex of an inverted sovereignty goddess. Of course, we have now seen that there is meagre evidence for an antique myth of inauguration in which a sovereignty goddess transformed herself upon mating with the rightful king, so even less should we expect to find a hag at a hostel operating as an inversion of this figure.

A hag also appears at a hostel in the closely related twelfth-century tale, *Bruiden Da Choca*, 'Da Coca's Hostel', and this has been advanced as further evidence of Bhreathnach's theory. One should have immediate pause for thought here, as it is well known that 'Da Coca's Hostel' is heavily influenced by 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'.⁹⁹ The story did exist before the twelfth century but there is some evidence that this now lost earlier tale was not used by the author of the extant version. The danger is, therefore, that any parallels between the two tales merely reflect the adaptation of the source text by the twelfth-century author of 'Da Coca's Hostel' and have no independent value in the examination of the motif. Nevertheless, the tale does at least reflect a twelfth-century understanding of the woman and is worth considering. 'Da Coca's Hostel' has added salience because it juxtaposes a beautiful young woman and an ugly hag (or rather two hags), which could be read as opposite manifestations of Sovereignty.

The young prince Cormac is in exile in Connacht along with the other Ulster exiles following the events of 'The Exile of the sons of Uisnech' (*Longes macc nUisnig*) and appears among the Connacht forces during the Cattle-Raid of

⁹⁹ Gregory Toner (ed. and trans.), *Bruiden Da Choca*, Irish Texts Society 61 (London 1997), pp. 30–6.

Cooley. He is nominated king of Ulster after Conchobar's death, and 'Da Coca's Hostel' recounts his journey to assume the kingship, his encounter with some Connacht forces that had ravaged Ulster, and his subsequent death in the hostel. He meets two hags: the first is commonly described as the washer at the ford and meets him at the ford of Athlone, and the second appears at the hostel, much like Cailb in 'Da Derga's Hostel'. He also meets a beautiful woman at Athlone.

McCone considers only the juxtaposition of the washer at the ford and Cormac's lover, Scenb, and concludes that this 'seems to vitiate Bhreathnach's equation of the [Badb] type with the sovereignty [figure]'.¹⁰⁰ By this, he seems to suggest that the washer at the ford cannot be the sovereignty figure if the beautiful woman is, but we cannot assume that a supernatural figure can be confined to a single manifestation in just one form. There is a very neat juxtaposition between the beautiful Scenb and the washer at the ford, particularly as they appear right after one another. Scenb represents beauty and youth, whereas the hag represents death and destruction, but there is no objective reason to suppose that they are, in that dreadful phrase, 'one and the same'. Once again, we have an attractive symmetry, but is the theory used to explain it sustainable?

McCone identifies Scenb as Sovereignty and cites this encounter as a way in which the sovereignty woman can act 'as a narrative index of failure or unsuitability'.¹⁰¹ In my edition of the text, I rejected McCone's interpretation. Scenb is, in fact, explicitly married to a druid of the Connachta who wreaks his revenge on Cormac's cuckolding by playing his magic harp to him, transgressing one of his *gessa*. Moreover, she lacks any royal connections; the hag (whether the washer at the ford or the hag at the hostel) does not have sexual relations with the king and there is no transformation.¹⁰² Nevertheless, McCone's interpretation has recently been reiterated by William Sayers who asserts that the maiden who meets

¹⁰⁰ McCone, *Pagan past*, p. 132.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, pp. 11–12.

Cormac at Athlone is not Scenb but a separate woman who represents sovereignty.¹⁰³ So to be clear, Cormac would be associated sexually with five women: his wife (who is mentioned but does not appear), his lover, Scenb, the anonymous sovereignty figure, and the two hags. What a tangled web we weave!

The woman at the ford is not named but is described as ‘a beautiful, shapely maiden’ (*ingen cōemh cruthach*) wearing a green cloak, a white-hooded tunic of golden thread and a decorated headdress (p. 110 § 19). It is peculiar that Sayers should attempt to argue that she is not Scenb and he seems to have been misled by a reference to her earlier in the story where we are told that Craiphtine, Scenb’s husband, played his *céis* (some kind of stringed musical instrument) in order to destroy Cormac’s life and his kingship (*di collad a fhlathae ⁊ a shaegail*) because of his affair with his wife.¹⁰⁴ There then follows an explanation of who Scenb was:

Ar ba lennān di Cormac Scenb ingen Sceithirn drūad di chōicced Ól nĒcmacht, ben Craiphtini cruitire. Is hī in Scenb sin ro-dāl na teōra dāla for Cormac ic Āth Lūain, ⁊ is sí ro-shāid Fedae Áthu Lūain.

... because his wife, Scenb daughter of Scethern the druid from the province of Ól nĒcmacht, was Cormac’s lover. It was that Scenb who granted the three trysts to Cormac at Athlone and who planted the Woods of Athlone.¹⁰⁵

However, this passage disrupts the narrative chronology for Cormac has not yet reached Athlone, and so must be taken as an authorial intrusion explaining why Craiphtine played his *céis* in contravention of Cormac’s *geis*. It sits outside the narrative time of the tale and so is not chronologically aligned with Cormac’s progress. As such, there is nothing to prevent us interpreting the maiden at Athlone as Scenb. It is true that Scenb is not specifically named when she

¹⁰³ William Sayers, ‘Interpreting narrative/textual difficulties in *Bruiden Da Choca*: some suggestions’, *Éigse* 39 (2016), 160–75, at p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 108, § 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

subsequently appears at Athlone, but this is to do with the formulaic description of the appearance of a beautiful woman rather than any uncertainty over her identity.

Sayers's interpretation leaves important questions unanswered, for example, why Cormac should go to Athlone to meet a woman who is meant to embody the sovereignty of Ulster? On a journey from Crúachain to Emain Macha, this is a major diversion taking him 55 km in the wrong direction. Furthermore, she refers to his taboo against listening to Craiphtine's *céis* but to none other:

Is dō di-dechaid [Craiphtine], do coll do geisi, comad garshēcle dit ar dāig nā comrīsmas. [Do]-lud-sa dno fodesta dāig nī conricfam fadestae.

The reason he [Craiphtine] came was to violate your taboo so that you would die shortly and we would not meet. Indeed, I came now because we will not meet again.¹⁰⁶

Seven other prohibitions are specified in the text¹⁰⁷ so why would a sovereignty woman focus on this one in particular? The answer is supplied earlier in the text in the narratorial intrusion discussed above when it is said that Craiphtine did it 'Because his wife, Scenb ... was Cormac's lover'. The text is quite explicit therefore: Craiphtine destroyed Cormac's kingship and ended his life because of his wife's infidelity. Sayers also misinterprets the verb *con-ricc*, which is twice used of the encounter between the maiden and Cormac at Athlone, arguing that it 'implies initial or single meetings of great significance, and not the reunion of lovers'.¹⁰⁸ That this is not the case is demonstrated by this very text when the woman uses the same verb in saying that they would not meet again (p. 110 § 20 cited above)! If they are being prevented from 'meeting' for a second time, it indicates that *con-ric* is not restricted to a single act.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p 110, § 20.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106, § 6.

¹⁰⁸ Sayers, 'Interpreting narrative', p. 167.

We may safely conclude, therefore, that the maiden at Athlone is, indeed, Scenb, a connection that is actually made in another Middle Irish tract drawn from a different version of the tale.

Gradh tug ben Craibhtine cruitiri do Corbmac Conn Loingios mac Concobhair, ⁊ an tan tainic Corbmac a Connachtuibh do ghabhail righe nUladh a n-ionadh a athar do-riacht co brú Linne Lo co torrcair a codladh fair líon a sluagh gur foillsighedh do Craiptine sin gur dealbh tri caoga macaomh i riocht tri ccaoga é n ⁊ briocht neimhe 'na n-eitibh co ttangadar ar Linn Lo go ro croithsiot a n-eitedha for na sluaghaibh badar 'na ccodladh ic ernaidhe Uladh co ttainic ben Craibhtine i ndedhaidh na n-en co ro mharbh uile iad gein motha aoinén co ttainic iar sin ar amos Corbmaic conadh ann at-bert:

*Rot bregsat eoin Linne Ló,
mo chridhe-si as crotball cro,
ro tairrgiredh combat rí
mun beith an chéis Craibhtini.¹⁰⁹*

The love that the wife of Craiptine the harper gave to Cormac Conn Loinges son of Conchobhar, and when Cormac came from Connacht to take the kingship of Ulster in succession to his father he came to the bank of Linn Ló and his host fell asleep and that was revealed to Craiptine so that he turned 150 youths into 150 birds with a poisonous charm in their wings. And they came to Linn Ló and shook their wings on the hosts who were asleep while waiting for the Ulstermen, and the wife of Craiptine followed the birds and killed them all except for one bird, and she came then to Cormac and said: “The birds of Linn Ló have deceived you, my heart is shrouded in blood; it was prophesied that you would be king were it not for the harp of Craiptine.” (my translation).

The verse given at the end of this passage corresponds to the second quatrain of the poem uttered by the maiden in § 20 (p. 110) of the extant early version of ‘Da Coca’s Hostel’, but we may note that here the speaker is explicitly identified as the wife of Craiptine. This identification considerably weakens the argument that the hags are inversions of the sovereignty figure. The washer at the ford is clearly acting as a portent of doom and is best compared with other female figures

¹⁰⁹ Brian Ó Cuív, ‘Some items from Irish tradition’, *Éigse* 11 (1964–66), 167–87, 290, at pp. 171–2.

who engage warriors in sexual or hostile acts.¹¹⁰ She is described as a ‘red woman’ (*mnaí ndeirce*), washing a chariot and battle spoils in the river (p. 108, § 15). She adopts the mantic position of chanting ill omens while standing on one leg with one eye closed (p. 108, § 16). There is nothing in her appearance or in what she says that suggests that she has any association with sovereignty, and there is no reference to her sexuality.

The second of the hags arguably presents a better analogue to Cailb in ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’, although she is more obviously a late borrowing from the latter.¹¹¹ She is not named.¹¹² She utters ill omens to the young king, predicting a slaughter in the hostel, but there is no sexual element either in her appearance or in what she says. Like the woman at the ford, she utters a doom-laden prophecy, but the emphasis is entirely on the outcome of the impending battle and there is no reference to Cormac’s kingship or the impact his death might have on Ulster.¹¹³

Conclusion

The analysis presented here suggests clearly that the tales concerning Níall, Lugaid and Macha are not reflexes of some inauguration myth in which the king sleeps with a sovereignty goddess. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the hag in the earliest tales is a sovereignty figure at all, let alone a sovereignty goddess. The Macha tale is almost certainly the earliest instance of the hag motif but the interpretation of the hag’s character is complicated by the fact that Macha only

¹¹⁰ Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 13, n. 54; O’Connor, *The destruction of Da Derga’s hostel*, pp. 151–2.

¹¹¹ Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 13.

¹¹² The later Early Modern Irish redaction calls her Badb (Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 250) but it does not follow that she was understood in the same light in the Middle Irish version.

¹¹³ The final stanza does contain a suggestion of a deep love for Cormac: *Uch uchān, mo chridhe im clī | dar ēis Corbmaic co cōemlí, || cen toisc im nōnaid il-le, | mo roiscc bid brōnach bete*, ‘Alas, my heart is in my breast after fair-hued Cormac; if there is no expedition hither this evening my eyes will be sad.’ (Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 118, § 33). However, in the absence of any references to sovereignty, we can hardly rely on this as anything other than the expression of sadness at the impending death of a noble warrior.

assumes the role as a disguise and that she is not herself Sovereignty. Whether she adopts the disguise of a ‘sovereignty goddess’ or just a hag testing the king cannot be determined without interpreting it in the light of later texts. Cúán úa Lothcháin’s poem concerning Níall and his brothers seems already under the influence of external sources as a result of which the hag’s appearance embodies and acts as an explicit metaphor for the state of Tara without its rightful king. As presented there, this does not appear to be a native idea. Moreover, úa Lothcháin presents Níall’s mating as just the first of two tests and a second test, the burning of the smithy, is required before Níall is acknowledged as the designated king. This does not sit well with the idea that the hag is Sovereignty and it is telling that she is described as a spectre (*uath*) and a poet (*écess*). There is no evidence here for the notion of a sovereignty goddess bestowing the kingship on a prince by sleeping with him. The suggestion that she is Sovereignty appears only in later texts, notably the prose version of Níall’s story and the tales concerning Lugaid. The sovereignty myth as modern scholars have understood it, therefore, hardly predates the eleventh century.

The sovereignty goddess has also been sought in the hag that appears to a king before his death but we have seen that the idea does not bear stringent scrutiny. The hags at the hostels show little similarity, apart from their physical appearance, to the hags that appear in royal succession stories, and there is no reason to suspect that they are in some way performing the inverse of conferring kingship. They lack any transformation comparable to that of the hags in the sovereignty stories, and the sexual element relates solely to their grotesque display rather than any act of transformative copulation or osculation. They act as portents of doom – necessary ones as they are listed among the *gessa* of Conaire and Cormac – and they may have had a literary purpose in bookending the king’s reign. Indeed, if we may be permitted to follow úa Lothcháin’s portrayal, we may read their bodies as metaphors for the trials of kingship rather than the fate of the land.

The lure of the sovereignty goddess myth is so strong that it has led scholars to attribute nearly every encounter between a king and a woman as a further manifestation of it. This began as an application of the comparative approach in mythological studies whereby similarities between stories in different traditions could be quarried in an exercise of reconstruction of lost or original myths. This approach has been largely rejected in medieval Irish studies and in other disciplinary areas,¹¹⁴ but the old methodology persists within the new framework. While we no longer seek a pagan goddess hidden within literary tales, some scholars continue to seek an iconic sovereignty figure. This approach still assumes that the essence of a figure such as the sovereignty woman can be detected by a comparison of all instances of it, and the emphasis remains on the similarity of the manifestations rather than on their differences. This approach is essentialist, tending towards homogeneity and distorted readings of texts that conceal their richness, diversity, multivalence and real meaning for contemporary audiences. This is frequently only achieved by treating texts as ahistorical – timeless and unchanging – so that an Early Modern text can be considered of as much relevance as an Old Irish text, depending on how well it fits the pattern. Comparison of texts is, of course, essential for reaching an understanding of the characters within them, but it should be done with a sensitivity to the differences as well as the similarities, and with respect for the actual written texts as transmitted to us rather than a constructed ideal that may never have existed. It should be remembered that if we are ever to glimpse vestiges of pre-Christian deities in these tales then we need to clearly distinguish between later accretions and genuine traces of early story.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Sarah Iles Johnston, ‘The comparative approach’, in *A handbook to the reception of classical mythology*, ed. Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle (Hoboken, NJ 2017), pp. 139–52.

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