

SIR JOHN RHYS MEMORIAL LECTURE

*REGNUM AND SACERDOTIUM: NOTES ON
IRISH TRADITION*

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RELATIONS between Church and State have posed problems and fuelled controversy for the greater part of European history. Even in modern times they can still breed contention, though individual states have devised their own widely varied remedies and palliatives, from official sponsorship of religion by the state to total dissociation of both, while in many societies the spread of secularism on the one hand and of the so-called 'Protestant ethic' on the other has drained the old conflicts of much of their fire and urgency. In medieval Europe, however, the relative dominion of Church and State was still frequently a burning issue for kings and popes and prelates. Ever since the conversion of Constantine the *modus vivendi* between the two powers invited a clearer definition and demarcation in theory than could ever have been possible in the untidiness of reality, though there were times—since power cannot be dissociated from those who exercise it—when the zeal or ambition of kings and popes brought the biting edge of actuality to the speculative arguments of lawmen and scholars.

The broad underlying theory of Church-State relations was that expressed by St. Ambrose in the fourth century and Pope Gelasius I in the fifth: that human society was governed by two powers, the temporal and the spiritual, and that these are embodied in two authorities, the secular and the ecclesiastical, both of divine origin and each independent in its own sphere. This ideal duality, and the supernatural origin of its twin constituents, are set out clearly in the words of the canonist Stephen of Tournai, writing in the latter part of the twelfth century: 'In the one commonwealth and under the one king there are two peoples, two modes of life, two authorities, and a twofold jurisdiction. The commonwealth is the Church; the two peoples are the two orders in the Church—that is, the clergy and the laity; the two modes of life are the spiritual and the carnal; the

two authorities are the priesthood and the kingship; the two-fold jurisdiction is the divine law and the human. Give to each its due, and all things will be brought into agreement.¹

'Give to each its due'—but since the concerns of Christian state or sovereign could never be wholly temporal nor those of a richly endowed Church wholly spiritual, inevitably there were areas in which they converged and overlapped and where, through unfavourable circumstance or unwise counsel, they might all too easily give rise to a clash of interest. There were theologians who argued the superior dignity of the *sacerdotium* and even those, like Honorius Augustodunensis in the twelfth century, who held that the *regnum* was historically derived from it and subservient to it.² There were popes who claimed the power and authority not merely to excommunicate unrighteous rulers but in effect to depose them.³ It is true that views such as these were normally confined to the pretension of clerical theory and, when tested in the crucible of political action, more often than not gave way to the determined resistance of temporal rulers, but they illustrate the difficulty of establishing a permanent and universal relationship which would satisfy equally the rights and aspirations of both spiritual and temporal powers.

One important element in this protracted argument is the fact that the very nature of kingship throughout western Europe was profoundly influenced over the centuries by the teaching and example of the Church. 'It will not be disputed', says J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'that kingship . . . in the ninth century is extremely unlike kingship, in so far as we see it at all, in the fourth and fifth centuries; and the difference is not of size merely. It has been transformed into an office with duties and rights defined by churchmen.'⁴ Neither he nor other historians who have discussed the matter can say with much confidence how much, if any, of the sacral character of medieval European kingship stems from pre-Christian usage, but there seems to be general agreement that it is mainly of Christian inspiration.

In this respect Europe, or rather the rest of Europe, presents

¹ Quoted by R. W. Carlyle and A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West* (Edinburgh and London, 1903–1926), iv. 395. Much useful work has been done on medieval Church–State relations by more recent authors such as Walter Ullmann and R. W. Southern, but the basic statements of attitude by the medieval protagonists naturally stand unchanged.

² *Op. cit.* iv. 286 ff.

³ *Op. cit.* iv. 175 f., 391.

⁴ *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), 151.

something of a contrast to the Celtic fringe, and to Ireland in particular. It is not that in Ireland the institution of kingship was unaffected by Christian influence, as we shall have cause to note presently, but simply that, whatever the realities of day-to-day practical politics may have been, Irish kingship seems to have remained relatively unaltered by ecclesiastical interference either in its morphology or its ideology. Reasons for this disparity are not far to seek: in general terms, the cultural conservatism and geographical isolation of Irish society and more particularly the fact that only among the Celtic peoples is there clear evidence for a well-organized class of learned men, independent of the Church, who controlled and maintained the structures and ideology of native kingship. In the ninth century this class was known as the *filid*. They were a fellowship of learned poets, but, as the original literal meaning of their name, 'seers', indicates, they were very much more than that. Since, however, their status and functions have been described admirably and with a wealth of comparative detail by Professor J. E. Caerwyn Williams in an earlier lecture in this series,¹ it will be unnecessary for me to do so here except in so far as it is strictly relevant to my present purpose. By the ninth century they were known as *filid*, but if, to take the earlier period of Professor Wallace-Hadrill's comparison, we could somehow translate ourselves to fourth- or fifth-century Ireland, we should probably find them identified primarily as 'druids'. The evidence, being dependent on the written record, is for the most part very much later than the pre-Christian and missionary periods, and it is not only incomplete but also suffers from the inevitable bias of the monastic scribes and redactors who gave it written form, but nevertheless it shows clearly that in pre-Christian times, and perhaps for some time after, the druids were the dominant learned class in the country and, more importantly, that they represented for the founders of Christianity the most formidable obstacle to the success of their mission. This is reflected in the general odium attaching to the druids throughout the hagiographical literature and especially in texts that have to do with the missionary activities of St. Patrick. As Charles Plummer has said, 'In all the legends which have to do with the beginnings of Christianity in Ireland the druids meet us at every turn as the chief, if not the only, opponents of the new faith.'²

¹ 'The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland', Rhys Memorial Lecture, 1971.

² *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910, 1968, I, clviii)

However apocryphal most of the incidents recounted in these legends, they none the less imply a crucial period of active hostility towards the druidic order. The Church could not simply rid itself of the druids, as did the Roman Suetonius Paulinus when he massacred the British druids gathered in Anglesey in AD 58, and its policy seems to have been directed towards undermining their power and authority by diplomatic and political means. The inadequacy of the extant records makes it impossible to retrace this process except in the broadest outline, but one of its most notable effects is that by the early seventh century, when written literature in Irish was getting into its stride, the status and functions which had formerly belonged to the druids now rested securely with the *filid*. One of the normal requisites for resolving disputes involving principles—and which do not?—is to save face on both sides by devising formulas to free the parties from the implications of their own commitments; in this instance the druids *qua* druids provided a convenient scapegoat to carry off the heathen iniquity incompatible with Christianity, leaving the *filid* to continue what they could—and it was not inconsiderable—of druidic privilege and practice. The druid dies and yet he lives, suitably modified of course to fit the new *modus vivendi* between the Church and the *filid* based on the unwritten principle of complementarity of rights and functions.

The Gaulish druid had, by the testimony of Classical authors, several important functions. He was a prophet and divinator. He was judge and arbiter. He was concerned with sacrifice. He was, in some instances at least, a therapist or medicine-man. Perhaps most important of all, he was an educator, giving training and instruction to the sons of the nobility and to those who aspired to membership of the druidic order. That the Irish druid once commanded the same range of activities is evidenced in the literature, though law and leechdom were hived off as semi-independent specialisms at a very early date, while by the end of the sixth century education (outside the monasteries), vaticination, and what remained of institutional ritual had devolved upon the *filid*. Armed with such faculties the druid was obviously a powerful figure in Irish society, but the exercise of his power was very much associated with the kingship and its extent can be seen most clearly in relation to the authority of the king.

In the archaic society reflected in the early Irish law-tracts there were three grades of king: the *rí* (or *rí tuaithe*), king of the

small tribal kingdom; the *ruiri* 'superior king', who was overlord of several other tribal kingdoms as well as direct ruler of his own; and lastly the *rí ruirech* 'king of superior kings', who was in turn overlord of a number of *ruirig* or of a whole province, in which case he might be called *rí cóicid* 'king of a fifth, or province'. But however broad the extended influence of *ruiri* or *rí ruirech*, his primary and essential sovereignty was that of his own *tuath*; here alone could he assume all the immediate responsibilities and the prerogatives of the sacral kingship; here alone could he maintain the personal rapport with his people which was the very basis of archaic Irish social organization. For the tribal kingdom was of extremely modest proportions—it has been estimated that there were some one hundred and fifty of them in Ireland—and there was evidently no difficulty in bringing together the freemen or even the people at large in the several kinds of assembly (*óenach*, *dál*, *airecht*) at which political and legal business was transacted. In dealings with other kingdoms the king acted on behalf of his own *tuath*, whether in forming alliances with his peers or accepting obligations to a royal overlord. He was thus not merely the symbol but also the actual focus of tribal integrity. There are many indications in the literature that he had once been judge and lawgiver, before his office was taken over by druid and *fili* and finally by the specialized class of jurists known as *brithemain*, 'brehons'. Otherwise his executive functions were simple and few in number, and the only officials associated with him in the legal texts are his brehon and his *rechtaire*, 'agent, administrator'.

In point of fact, however, at the beginning of the Christian period, and probably for a long time after, the king's social importance stemmed much less from his legal and political functions than from the sacral character of his office. He was, we are told, subject to a series of tabus which were evidently part of the machinery by which he was insulated against the perils of the profane world, and, as with his analogues in other parts of the world, so intimately was he identified with his realm that it reacted in its very substance to his own moral and physical traits: if he had the qualities of a just ruler, which are epitomized in the term *fír flaitheam* 'truth of the ruler', the Irish equivalent of the Indian *rājadharmā*, then the land responded with an increase in its fertility and general prosperity; if he was an unjust or illegitimate ruler, or blemished in his person, it became barren and strife-torn.

Given such a concept of the sacral king as one who generates good or ill fortune for his kingdom by his own person and conduct, it is hardly surprising that much of the orthodox literature relating to kingship is of an exemplary or hortative nature. The staple genre of the *filid*, praise-poetry, belongs to this category. Each poem is a eulogy of the royal patron to whom it is addressed, but generally it is couched in terms which tell us more about the ideal qualities of a righteous ruler than about the real character of the individual in question, so that in addition to perpetuating the patron's name it also associates him with the exemplary paradigm of kingly behaviour.

Another and even more explicit formulation of the exemplary text for kings was the *speculum principis* or Fürstenspiegel, of which we have a number of instances from the Old Irish period. The earliest of these is *Audacht Morainn* 'The Testimony of Morann' (a mythical judge), which lists the many benefits that flow from the king's justice; it was recorded probably in the seventh century and shows singularly little trace of Christian influence either in its content or in its vocabulary. Clearly the genre was traditional and pre-literate and an integral part of the pagan liturgy of sovereignty. It is therefore easy to believe, as has been suggested, that the later European fashion for compositions of the *speculum* type is at least partly derived from the Irish usage. The seventh-century moralistic treatise *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, which is of Irish authorship, has a section on the *rex iniquus* whose conduct corresponds to the Irish *gáu flaithemon* 'the injustice (lit. "falsehood") of the ruler,' the antithesis of *fír flaithemon*. It was widely quoted in continental sources of the ninth and later centuries and according to J. F. Kenney it made 'a real contribution to the development of European political theory'. In this connection it is worth noting that the eighth-century *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, which was used widely on the Continent, dealt with the issue of clerical independence from secular control as well as with other issues that figured largely in the medieval debates on the mutual relations of Church and State.¹

Nowhere is the sacral character of Irish kingship more clearly marked than in the traditional rite of inauguration. The king was considered the spouse of his kingdom, in other words of the goddess who represented both its abstract sovereignty and

¹ See J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland* i (Columbia, 1929), 248.

the physical reality of its territory, and as such his installation was validated by a sacred marriage referred to by the term *feis*, the verbal noun of *foaid* 'spends the night, sleeps (with)', or *banfeis rígi* 'marriage of kingship', where *banfeis* is a compound of *feis* and *ban-*, the composition-form of *ben* 'woman'. No theme or concept has exercised such a constant and pervasive influence on orthodox Irish tradition as did that of the *hierós gamos*; its evidences are ubiquitous in the literature of all periods and particularly in the poetry: it is, for example, something of a commonplace in the formal praise-poetry of the post-Norman period, reflecting the old nexus between ritual eulogy and royal legitimacy, and finally in the eighteenth century, when the native social organization had already been destroyed, the device chosen by the poets as the vehicle for their last concerted exercise in social self-assertion was the old perennial theme of king and goddess, which, for want of a likely native candidate, they now attached to the dubious aspirations of the Stuart Pretenders. By then it had, of course, been emptied of most of its original meaning and social efficacy, but it continued to be expressed in the same sexual terminology which must once have had a literal as well as an allegorical significance in the context of the ritual.

Each kingdom and, it would seem, each over-kingdom had its own solemn inauguration with the advent of a new ruler, though, as in other societies where the ritual validation of the new monarch might be extended over a considerable period of time, there are indications that the actual ceremony could occasionally be delayed even for several years after the king's initial accession, perhaps until such time as he had given practical demonstration of his quality as king.¹ In pre-Christian times the ceremony presumably included an enactment of the union of king and goddess with all its rich connotations of fertility for land and people, but sooner or later it was suitably modified to observe the proprieties of the new religion.

Perhaps not soon enough, however, to satisfy the churchmen. In prehistoric times the royal site of Tara had been regarded in some sense as the centre of sacral kingship and as such it enjoyed a special dignity which later political propagandists used freely to support their theory of a High-kingship of all Ireland. The actual consecration of the sovereign evidently took place during the Festival of Tara, in Irish *Feis Temra*, the traditional title which in its primary sense probably referred to the

¹ See D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* xviii. 135.

consummation of the sacred marriage. Because of the remarkable prestige of the Tara monarchy it must have been difficult for the leaders of the Christian church to suffer its continued association with practices of such rank paganism and there is indeed some evidence that they effectively opposed it. The festival was celebrated by Lóegaire mac Néill (454 AU, 456 AI), the king whom later ecclesiastical propagandists brought into dramatic confrontation with St. Patrick, and by his successor Ailill Molt, but not by the three who followed even though they were probably pagans like Lóegaire. If the omission was the result of ecclesiastical pressure, then Diarmait mac Cerbaill would seem to have acted in defiance of such pressure when he revived the festival in AD 560,¹ and this is perhaps borne out by the accretion of pagan myth attaching to his name and by the well-known legend that Tara was cursed by St. Ruadán of Lorrha during his reign. No doubt Tara's ritual associations and those of the other great royal centres were much in the minds of later clerical poets who pointed to their deserted sites in order to contrast the transience of mortal kings and their courts with the permanence of Christ and his Church.

The mighty fortress of Tara has perished
with the death of her princes;
with its choirs of sages
great Armagh lives on.

When Óengus mac Oengobann wrote these lines about the year 800, he was in effect asserting the victory of Christianity over pagan kingship.² The fact is that the rite of royal inauguration was the focus of sacred and secular power within the kingdom, and, whatever barbarities the Church might condone elsewhere, it was vital that she should make her influence felt here if she were to enhance her own role in society at large. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same considerations obtained in Ireland as obtained later on the Continent when clerical authors and prelates sought to mould the inauguration ceremony to their own purposes by elaborating full ecclesiastical rituals, or *Ordines*, for the royal consecration. This was a consciously political enterprise: 'The churchmen who did this had their feet firmly on the ground of contemporary politics. . . . Certainly West Frankish bishops were staking a claim to an indispensable role in the king-

¹ James Carney, *Studies in Early Irish Literature and History* (Dublin 1955, 1979), 338; D. A. Binchy, *op. cit.* 136-8.

² *Féilire Óengusso*, 'The Martyrology of Óengus', ed. Whitley Stokes (London, 1905), 24.

making rituals; and it then became possible for Hincmar [archbishop of Rheims in the middle of the ninth century] . . . to construct a theory of the king's accountability to his episcopal consecrators. But the bishops in their new role acted, in turn, as guarantors of the law and justice of all the king's subjects, as guardians of the Christian people and thus as representatives, in some sense, of the realm as a whole.¹ There can be little doubt that Irish churchmen of the fifth, sixth, and later centuries had as keen a sense of political realities as the continental clerics referred to here by Dr Nelson, and if they were less successful in transforming the king-making ritual, it was not for lack of ambition, but rather that they were operating in a much more difficult terrain. For not merely was Irish society markedly conservative; it also already had a complex kingship ritual of long standing and a learned class to maintain it which was without equal in western Europe for prestige and professional solidarity.

Obviously their aim, like that of their brethren on the Continent, was not merely to cleanse the inauguration rite of the worst of its pagan excesses but to Christianize it in its content and structure. Already in the sixth century St. Colum Cille consecrated Aedán mac Gabráin as king of Dál Riata in Scotland (with laying on of hands, but without anointment, it would seem).² A similar ecclesiastical consecration is implied in the epithet of Áed Oirdnide, where *Oirdnide* is the past participle of *oirnid*, a borrowing from Latin *ordinare*. Though Áed succeeded to the kingship of Tara in 797, he is first given his epithet in AU at 804, and D. A. Binchy would connect this with the *congressio senatorum nepotum Neill* at Dún Cuair in Co. Meath which is reported for the same year.³ This convention was presided over by Condmach, abbot of Armagh, and was probably arranged as a peace conference between the representatives of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill.

The fact that Áed is credited on that occasion with relieving all clerics of their obligation to participate in royal hostings lends further weight to Binchy's inference that he was on the same occasion 'solemnly "hallowed" by the successor of Patrick'.

¹ Janet L. Nelson in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), 50 ff., esp. 61 f. Cf. also Wallace-Hadrill, *op. cit.* 134 f.

² *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (London, etc., 1961), 474 f.: 'Et inter ordinationis verba de filiis et nepotibus pronepotibusque ejus futura profetizavit, imponensque manum super caput ejus ordinans benedixit.'

³ *Ériu* xviii. 119.

This would be in line with the increasing emphasis on the consecration and anointing of Carolingian and English kings during the eighth century, but whether or not they were prompted by foreign example, the fact is that the Church leaders had, for the first time it would seem, asserted their influence over the primal seat of sacral kingship by consecrating its incumbent with the proper Christian ceremonial. On the other hand, it is not clear that this is more than a single instance of successful hard-nosed bargaining on the part of the clerics, nor is it certain that it was in fact an inauguration; after all, Aed had already ruled for seven years and might already have been legitimized by a more traditional ceremony.

Certainly in the event the Church does not seem to have been particularly successful in consolidating and extending its control of the king-making process. Even if we ignore as a bizarre survival or—which is perhaps more likely—a tradition of an obsolete custom Giraldus Cambrensis' notorious account of the barbaric inauguration rite of a *gens quaedam* of Cenél Conaill with its inverted echo of the Indian *asvamedha* ritual,¹ such evidences as we have of the actual inauguration in later times indicate a scenario that is essentially traditional. The site was normally a hillock, and often a neolithic burial mound, such as was commonly associated in Irish tradition with the epiphany of the supernatural. The king was garbed in a white habit which 'did afterwards belong to the poet by right' (together with his arms). He was also presented with the rod of kingship (*slat na rígh*) by the officiating *ollam* or chief-poet. The latter seems normally to have composed an inauguration ode for (or after) the occasion, and there is some evidence that at least in earlier times he also read out a *teagasc ríogh* or *speculum principum*, for the guidance of the royal ordinand.² A single shoe or slipper crops up frequently among the symbolic regalia of the rite; it could be left at the inauguration site to assert a disputed claim to the kingship, and during the actual ceremony it could, according to varying accounts, be placed upon the ordinand's foot or cast over his head; in classical praise-poetry the expression *fer an énaís* 'the man of the single shoe/sandal' is sometimes used to indicate that the subject is either the duly ordained ruler or the legitimate claimant.³ A standard

¹ *Topographia Hibernica* iii, ch. 25 (Giraldi Cambrensis Opera, ed. James F. Dimock, v (1867), 169).

² Cf. F. Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976), xiv.

³ Cf. P. Mac Cana, *Celtica* x. 160 ff.

expression for inauguration is *gairid gairm rí de* 'to proclaim someone king,' and it may be that on certain occasions the elaborate ritual could be dispensed with so that it was sufficient to make formal proclamation of the election.¹ In any event it might be wrong to imagine a rigidly fixed pattern without occasional or regional variation.

Such then is the catalogue of elements which constitute the ritual of the actual inauguration ceremony in its fullest form. It is clear beyond question that the primary officiating role belongs to the *ollam filed* or chief-poet, and no doubt it is one he has inherited from his druidic predecessors.² It is true that several of the extended accounts of the inauguration process—all of them written in the post-Norman period—credit the clerics with a prominent or even primary role in the proceedings,³ but this is clearly part of the conscious attempt of churchmen to insinuate themselves into a pre-existing scenario. For the remarkable thing is that, however much they may have increased their participation in the ceremony, they do not seem to have seriously altered its essential character and structure. By the same token, one of the most speciously Christian versions is that in the Life of St. Maedóc (see n. 3 *infra*), and yet a young French scholar has recently used this as one of his main sources to argue persuasively and perhaps even convincingly that the Irish inauguration ceremony preserves a reflex of the Indo-European trifunctional system; at the very

¹ Cf. SG i. 322: *doberat Ulaid ríge fí chétóir do Fergus Fhoillebar ocus doberat cathbarr an ríge im a chenn ocus gairter gairm ríge de ac Ulltaib* 'The Ulstermen immediately give the kingship to Fergus F.: they place the king's diadem upon his head and he is proclaimed king'. Admittedly the circumstances are rather exceptional: an immediate replacement for a king slain in the heat of battle. Also Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973) 21.

² Among the Aedui of Gaul in the middle of the first century BC kings were obsolete and sovereign power was wielded instead by a magistrate elected annually. According to Caesar (*BG* vii. 33) his appointment was presided over by 'the priests', and one is probably justified in seeing this as a residual survival from the role of the druids in the rites of kingship.

³ The principal accounts of the inauguration rite on which I have based the foregoing comments are *Kilkenny Arch. Soc. Jrn.* ii (1852-3), 340-5; (a variant text of the same tract) *Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn* S.J. (Dublin, 1961, 186 ff.; *The Genealogies, Tribes and Customs of Hy Fiachrach*, ed. John O'Donovan (Dublin, 1844), 425 ff.; *Highland Papers*, ed. J. R. N. Macphail, Scottish Historical Society, 2nd series, vol. 5 (1914), 23-4; *Bethada Nám nÉrenn* (Oxford, 1922), i. 202 (447), 203 (46), 257 (216). For commentary see Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 15 ff.; P. Mac Cana, *Celtica* vi. 291 f., viii. 179-81, x. 160 ff.

least he reveals some interesting analogies between the Indian and Irish rites.¹

The policy of the clergy in this instance was one of infiltration rather than suppression, and one suspects that it was one concerning which they had little choice. Their failure, for whatever reason, to suppress the native inauguration rite and to displace the *fili* from his role in it is a useful indication that the Church's influence was limited once it touched upon politics and political institutions. Needless to say, there are numerous instances where churchmen intervened to affect political issues, particularly where their own personal loyalties were concerned. We have already noted that Condmach, abbot of Armagh, probably acted as mediator between the Northern and Southern Uí Néill in 804, while a few years later, in 811, the community of Tallaght carried out an effective boycott of the great Óenach or Fair of Tailtiu in retaliation for Aed Ordnide's violation of this sanctuary. Their pretensions were unbounded in this regard and, as Professor F. J. Byrne remarks, 'It was a hagiographical commonplace to ascribe the rise and fall of dynasties to the blessing or malediction of a saint'; but, since these masterful strokes were for the most part safely *ex post facto*, they have little bearing on the historical realities. That the clergy had considerable weight in secular matters, particularly those of them who commanded the wealth and prestige of the great monastic confederations or themselves belonged to the major ruling families, is beyond question, but it is probably somewhat inflated in the annals and other historical documents compiled under their own aegis.

As I have observed elsewhere, one of the most important social and cultural facts in Irish history before the seventeenth century was the *modus vivendi* that was evolved in the sixth century between clerics and *filid*. It had its moments of tension and discord, but it endured for as long as the social order of which it formed part. Already the Old Irish legal tracts give it formal recognition by granting the bishop equal status with the king and *ollam*, but here again the process was one of insinuating the Church into the existing institutional structures, not superseding them or substantially transforming them, and this seems to have been the prevailing pattern of ecclesiastical policy throughout. This

¹ D. Dubuisson, 'L'Équipement de l'inauguration royale dans l'Inde védique et en Irlande', *Rev. de l'histoire des religions*, 1978, pp. 153-64. Unfortunately his central argument is based upon a slightly erroneous interpretation of a passage in the Irish Life.

is why, perhaps, it is possible for an Irish historian of the late medieval period to declare that 'the Irish Church had never succeeded in extending beyond the purely religious sphere, and such a matter as marriage remained in Ireland a purely secular concern'.¹

The fact that the *sacerdotium* was shared by clerics and *filid* since the fifth century adds a complication to Church and State relations which is not paralleled in Europe. There are indeed those—or at least there have been those—who might quarrel with my applying the terms *sacerdos* to the druids, not to speak of the *filid*, but this is surely little more than a pedantic quibble. If one accepts that the Indian brahman is a priest, and there are very few who do not, then I fail to see how one can describe the druid otherwise. It is true that as a result of what Dr Eleanor Knott has called 'the protective metamorphosis' of the *filid* the priestly functions which they inherited from the druids were much attenuated, but so much still remains and so much of their peculiar status and influence is explicable only in terms of their pre-Christian role that they are best seen in the perspective of history as a residual priesthood. This is confirmed by the part they played in the inauguration rite, which is essentially that of the officiating priest, and in the marriage rite, where, as I have pointed out elsewhere,² their role seems to have been virtually the same as that of the brahman in India.

The fact that the *ollam* enjoyed the same legal status as the king of a *tuath* is an index of the close relationship and interdependency which bound them together. To begin with, his association with his patron was familiar and continual, and, as James Carney has pointed out, one of his professional conceits was his right to the shared intimacy of his patron's bed and affections, almost as if he were his spouse or lover. Obviously this was the kind of relationship few clerics could aspire to, even if we make due allowance for the presumable hyperbole of the poetic, and it must have offered the *fili* endless opportunities of influencing political decisions in ways that never reached the public ear, much less the pages of history. He also enjoyed personal immunity and could travel the different kingdoms without fear of molestation, which made him admirably suited, like the druid before him, to act as ambassador or negotiator

¹ Kenneth Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1972), 91.

² *Celtica* vii. 174–81.

between his own and other kingdoms. Kings were probably much more circumscribed in their movements, especially before the rise of the great dynastic confederations, and one suspects that most of their travelling outside their own dominions took the form of forays and cattle-raids and, in the case of minor kings, participation in the hostings and assemblies (*óenaige*) of their over-kings.¹

What was even more important in the early period, the *ollam* was the mediator and the manipulator of the supernatural powers which affected the king and through him his kingdom, and the aura this conferred on him never quite deserted him even in the more pragmatic environment of the post-Norman period. One of his duties, we are told in a legal text, was to be near the king at the perilous time of Samain 'Hallowe'en' to protect him against enchantment.² By his very nature the sacral king was notoriously vulnerable to occult and supernatural interference and for that reason he had to have by him a specialist skilled in the appropriate techniques for warding off the mischief of gods, demons, and sorcerers. In the Vedic text *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* (viii. 25) the king's priest, the *purohita*, who has so much else in common with the druid/*fili*, is referred to explicitly as *rāstragopa* 'protector of the realm' because he preserves both the king and the kingdom by means of his spells and rites.³ In other words, both in India and in Ireland the king was the champion and benefactor of his people, but only so long as he himself was protected by the spiritual expertise of his priest.

Similarly, as we have already noted, in the ceremony which ensured the very continuance of sovereignty and the social order it was the druid/*fili* who installed, in other words who sanctified, the new ruler and proclaimed his legitimacy. And as he was thus indispensable to the new king at the inception of his reign, so was he indispensable to him afterwards in the maintenance and conduct of his lordship. By his eulogy he expressed formal and quasi-ritual approval of the manner in which the ruler was discharging the responsibilities of his royal

¹ I cannot recall any such clear prohibition as Caesar reports as obtaining among the Aedui, where tribal law forbade the chief magistrate to leave the country (*BG* vii. 33).

² *Dlegar don ollamain beth i fail in rig im snam* (leg. *samain*) *dia snadúdh ar siabrud, uair is and bo mo an tslainti quo tempore*. H. 3. 18, 133b = CIH, p. 668.

³ Cf. W. Norman Brown in *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, ed. Milton Singer (Philadelphia, 1959), 37.

office and at the same time reaffirmed the ideal conduct to which he should aspire. Presumably, to withhold his praise would in itself have amounted to tacit disapproval, but where the king's shortcomings called for a sterner response he then had at his disposal a much more formidable sanction, that of satire. No doubt there were many ways in which kings could forfeit the favour and co-operation of their *filid*, but there was one cardinal quality which lay at the very core of the Celtic and Indo-European concept of kingship and without which a would-be king was as utterly unqualified as if he were maimed in his person: he must be generous beyond reckoning. In pure economic terms his bounty complemented his subjects' taxes to maintain the vital circulation of goods within the community; in mytho-economic terms it quickened the fertility and prosperity of the land to which he had been ritually wedded. But conversely, where a king lacked liberality his kingdom was afflicted by poverty and misfortune, and for this the *fili*'s satire was the prescribed remedy.

This corrective function is exemplified in a little tale in Old Irish about the 'first satire that was made in Ireland'. When Cairpre mac Edaine, *fili* of the Tuatha Dé Danann, visited the household of the king, Bres mac Eladan, he received only a niggardly welcome, and when he left he delivered himself of a maledictory quatrain which produced prompt and decisive results: the king's riches suddenly came to an end and he was expelled from the kingship.¹ The moral was short and clear, and it was one which is endlessly reiterated throughout the literature of all periods: the king who forfeited his good name through lack of generosity could not survive, and the inexorable instrument of his downfall was the *fili*'s satire—*sochlu cách co áir*, says the Old Irish maxim, 'everyone is fair-famed till he is satirized'. But as our *exemplum* also makes clear, the best index of a king's open-handedness was his treatment of his *filid*, a fact of which the *filid* tirelessly remind us. The literature abounds in stories of extravagant and cruel demands extorted by famous poets of antiquity under threat of satirizing their noble victims, and the assiduous propagators of this image of the importunate poet were none other than the poets themselves, perhaps with some notion of contrasting their own moderation with the exaggerated, yet irrefutable, claims of their ancient predecessors. However, as Professor Calvert Watkins has shown in his admirable study of the related terms *dúan* 'poem' and *dán*

¹ Ed. V. Hull, *ZCP* xviii. 63 ff.; also in *Cath Maige Tuired*, *RC* xii. 71.

'gift, poetic faculty, craft', and finally 'poem', this pride in extravagant excess belongs already to the primitive Indo-European heritage of which Irish poetic usage is a distant reflection.¹ The poem or *dán* was, he concludes, 'originally the gift which the poet bestowed on his patron in exchange for his bounty', while *dúan*, with its Latin cognate *damnum*, is from a root whose derivatives 'group themselves around the idea of gift-giving, of generosity carried to the point of destruction'.

The *fili*'s *der* or satire was the reverse of his *dúan*, to be brought into play where the king failed to discharge adequately his obligation as benefactor. In the exemplary myths and legends bearing upon the relations of king and poet its use and its effects are inevitably highly coloured, bordering on fantasy, but it is also clear that in more general practice satire—like ritual fasting—was a perfectly respectable mechanism for pressing rightful claims where no other accommodation was possible. This is borne out by the law tracts, where a sharp distinction is made between satire for which there is just cause and satire for which there is not, in other words defamation; the latter is a delict, the penalty for which is the compensation of the victim to the full extent of his honour-price.² Thus satire properly executed was, like suretyship (though doubtless much less frequent in practice), part of the flexible system of controls devised and elaborated by the druids and the *brithemain* or jurists who succeeded them for the purpose of maintaining order and equity in a society which lacked all but the most rudimentary elements of state administration. That it worked so effectively despite the absence of state sanctions was, as D. A. Binchy has stressed, because of 'the veneration due to hallowed ancestral tradition' and 'the enormous prestige of the learned class who were the custodians and practical interpreters of that tradition'.³ This obviously placed very great power in

¹ *Celtica* ix. 270 ff.

² D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Crith Gablach* (Dublin, 1941), 69.

³ *Early Irish Society*, ed. Myles Dillon (Dublin, 1954), 63. Something of this moral force of social custom survives into our own times even in the face of modern legal usage. The anthropologist Robin Fox saw it at work on Tory Island off the Donegal coast: 'Underlying all these considerations is the feeling that a principle of equal shares should operate. Thus, if a man and a woman decide to marry, and the woman has a claim to a sizeable piece of property, then it is right that the land of the marriage should come from her if her husband is from a family more hard pressed. "If a man get land from his marriage," I was told, "then he has no right to take it from his brothers and sisters." He has of course an equal claim de jure, but it is felt that he has no

the hands of the learned 'sacerdotal' class affecting almost every aspect of social life and organization within the tribal kingdom, all the more so because the king, by the period reflected in the law tracts, had relinquished such law-giving functions as legend and a few shreds of legal tradition credit him with for the prehistoric period. Professor Binchy in stressing how very limited were the functions of government in the Ireland encountered by Christianity remarks that 'the king of an Irish *túath* could say with more truth than could Louis XIV: "L'état c'est moi" '; but in the light of what Binchy and others have revealed of the actual working of the system this perhaps does less than justice to the role of the priest-savant, at least in the pre-Christian period, since it was he who shaped the very ideology which controlled the actions of the king and who by his moral sanctions ensured the maintenance of the social order.

Doubtless there were many kings (as well as druids) of exceptional personal quality who enhanced the powers of their office, and indeed many of them, whether mythical or historical, are perpetuated in the literature; but communal custom and ideology are strong masters and in primitive Ireland these were securely in the tutelage of the druids. More often than not the great kings of tradition fell in the toils of supernatural powers which they themselves were powerless to resist; for these were things which lay within the province of the druids and *filid* armed as they were with their superior knowledge that encompassed the world of the gods as well as the world of men.

Satire was but a small item in the specialist repertoire of the *filid*, but one which came to be intimately associated in the extant literature with the maintenance of rightful kingship, *rājadharmā* or *fir flaitheamón*, and the liberality which was its touchstone. One may well ask why this should be so, and why satire should loom so large in the whole literature of kingship; after all, Welsh poetic theory, which runs parallel to Irish in so many things, tends to discountenance the use of satire by the learned poets, the *beirdd*, and to associate it rather with the lesser orders. The explanation, I suspect, has to do with the circumstances in which Ireland became Christianized. Cormac's Glossary has it that St. Patrick banished those mantic rites of

moral right to press his claim. Because there is no land court on the island, such matters ultimately depend on pressures of family and public opinion. But, as always, it is difficult to go against the "custom of the island". We saw above in the case histories many examples of this principle in operation' (*The Tory Islanders* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), 124 f.).

the *fliid* which involved offerings to demons, the implication being that the Church took particular pains to stamp out ritual sacrifice. Now we have it on the testimony of Diodorus Siculus and Strabo (both perhaps drawing upon Posidonius) that the Gauls would not offer sacrifice without a druid, 'for they say that thanks should be offered to the gods by those skilled in the divine nature, as though they were people who can speak their language, and through them also they hold that benefits should be asked',¹ and from Caesar that the druids' strongest sanction was exclusion from sacrifice: 'When a private person or a tribe disobeys their ruling they ban them from attending at sacrifices. This is their harshest penalty. Men placed under this ban are treated as impious wretches; all avoid them, fleeing their company and conversation, lest their contact bring misfortune upon them; they are denied legal rights and can hold no official dignity.'²

Similarly in India the brahmans' power was largely founded on their control of the sacrifices which regulated man's relations with the supernatural. If they were deprived of the rewards that were ritually due to them for their services they could withhold these in the future or otherwise lay their malediction on the unfortunate backsliders: 'Sacrifice without gifts brought evil enchantment; moreover, his magical power enabled the Brahman to avenge severely the denial of gifts by curses or intentional ritualistic errors in the performance of the sacrifice, bringing misfortune to the lord of the sacrifice. Righteous vengeance was actually developed into a methodical procedure.'³

That sacrifice was a feature of pagan Irish religious observance is certain, even though its role has been obscured by the censorship of selective silence exercised by the monastic redactors of the oral tradition. I suspect that it was in fact a major source of druidic power as it was in Gaul. But as it withered under the pressure of Christianity, and as the *fili*/druid accommodated himself to the changing circumstance, then, it would seem, satire found its relatively minor and occasional function inflated to fill the void and from being predominantly the medium of low-class rhymers and lampooners it now became the classic weapon of the *fili* in his guardianship of royal justice and social order.

¹ J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Procs. of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 C (1960), 251, 269.

² *Op. cit.* 271.

³ Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, transl. (New York, London, 1967), 60.

The obvious analogy to the Gaulish exclusion from sacrifice and the (later) Irish use of satire is the Church's excommunication of recalcitrant members, particularly in the context of kingship. It is significant that much of the controversy generated by the relations between the temporal and spiritual powers in the Later Middle Ages centred on the question of the lawfulness and the effectiveness of a pope's (or even a bishop's) excommunication of a king: for men like Gregory VII an excommunicated king was anathema and his expulsion from the Church was, or should be, merely the prelude to his deposition. This was precisely the same power that the Irish *fílid* claimed for their satire. It is very doubtful, of course, whether they could have fully substantiated their claim within the historical period, particularly after the influx of the Vikings, when native institutions seem to have taken a considerable buffeting. On the other hand, it is probably wrong to consider the matter in such absolute terms: for the later historical period the question is not so much whether the poet's satire could automatically depose a king as whether it could seriously discomfit him and strengthen the hand of his challengers, and of that there is little doubt. That it still carried weight as an institutionalized sanction even as the Gaelic order was moving towards its dissolution is succinctly confirmed by a formal agreement drawn up in 1539 between Maghnus Ó Domhnaill, Lord of Tír Conaill, and a Connacht chieftain, Tadhg Ó Conchobhair. To it is appended a list of sureties comprising leading churchmen and *fílid*, and it is stipulated that in the event of Tadhg's violating the terms of the contract he should be solemnly excommunicated by the former and satirized by the latter.¹ Even in the hard-headed politics of the sixteenth century the poet's ordinance was far from being a dead letter.

And if it was not, it was essentially because the *fíli* still possessed some of the traits and much of the influence of a man of religion. In his relations with kings and kingship there is a strange and often bewildering blend of idealism and opportunism, of high spirituality and gross materialism which is not unknown among men of religion of whatever persuasion. But in his case as in that of the brahman—and in this regard they are closely matched—there is at least a metaphysical justification for the grasping cupidity which tradition so frequently attributes to him. One of the three solemn (one might almost

¹ See Maura Carney, *Irish Historical Studies* iii (1942-3), 282 ff.; also James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), 363.

say sacramental) duties of the brahman was to receive gifts—from the king in the case of the king's brahman—and, as Professor Watkins and others have pointed out, the rewards the *fili* received for his eulogies derive their meaning and motivation from the same kind of ideological system. But where duty and self-interest converge only the strong and pure of heart can constantly distinguish them, and inevitably there were many of weaker fibre among brahmans and *filid*. R. C. Zaehner, remarking that the 'eternal and timeless dimension' possessed by the brahmans is not always apparent in their actions, suggests that this 'has been largely responsible for that tension in Hinduism between what is and what ought to be, between the "eternal *dharma*" that invisibly *is* and the *dharma* elaborated by the Brahmans here on earth'. Of the *filid* one might say virtually the same, and it would seem to have been this discrepancy between principle and practice which most often created tension between them and the class which normally offered them patronage.

The three proscriptions of the poets

There were times, we are told, when this tension flamed into open hostility towards the *filid* as a corporate body. For instance, a well-known legend has it that their exactions had become so unbearable by the second half of the sixth century that they were threatened with banishment, only to be saved by St. Colum Cille's intervention at a great convention held in AD 575 at Druim Ceat (OI Druim Cetta) near the present Newtownlimavady in Co. Derry. Áed mac Ainmirech, the king of Tara, and the men of Ireland decided to expel them because of their oppressiveness (*ar a tromdacht*), 'for there used to be thirty in the retinue of each *ollam* or chief-poet and fifteen in each *ánrud*'s retinue', and there were twelve hundred *filid* in the whole of Ireland. Agreement was finally reached through Colum Cille's mediation and the poets were given leave to remain, but their retinues were reduced, so that from then on there were only twenty-four in the *ollam*'s company and twelve in the *ánrud*'s.

This legend is preserved in the several versions of the late prose preface attached to the *Amra Choluim Chille* (henceforth ACC), the eulogy attributed to the poet Dallán Forgaill and probably composed by him shortly after the saint's death in 597.¹

¹ The relevant texts are LU l. 292 ff.; YBL 71a; Rawl. B. 502, 95a = RC xx (1899), 36 ff.; Eg. 1782, 1a; LBr 238c; *Liber Hymnorum*, ed. Bernard and Atkinson, i. 162; Nat. Lib. Irel. MS 50, p. 1; RIA MS C iii 2, fo. 6.

The convention, we are told, included all the kings of Ireland and Áedán mac Gabráin of Dál Riata, and was presided over by Áed mac Ainmirech. There were three issues to be resolved there: first, the plea for the release of Scandlán Mór son of the king of Ossory, who was Áed mac Ainmirech's prisoner; secondly, the threat to banish the poets from Ireland; and finally the problem of the status of Dál Riata in relation to the king of the Uí Néill. In fact, however, it is very unlikely that the first of these was really on the agenda and the most recent detailed study of the convention concludes that the last of the three items is the only genuine one, in other words 'that the Convention was held for one reason only, to decide the future relationship of Irish Dál Riata to the kings of the Uí Néill and Scottish Dál Riata respectively'.¹ But even if we assume that the proposal to impose sanctions on the *filid* was not one of the reasons for the assembly at Druim Ceat, it does not follow that the account in the preface is without historical value.

The account of the threatened expulsion of the *filid* in the preface to ACC is complicated by the fact that most versions mention other attempts at expulsion, but without making it clear whether or not they belong to a separate tradition. According to the version in the twelfth-century MS Rawl. B. 502 there were three occasions on which the *filid* faced banishment, and on each of these occasions they were granted temporary sanctuary by kings of Ulster, first by Conchobor mac Nessa and later by Fiachna mac Baetáin and Mael Coba, who flourished in the second half of the sixth and the first half of the seventh century respectively.² These are evidently intended to be exclusive of the threat to proscribe the poets at Druim Ceat, but the text does not explicitly say so and the sequence of the narrative could perhaps be misread to mean that the threat averted at Druim Ceat was identical with that fulfilled during the reign of Mael Coba. The distinction is made clearly in Eg. 1782, which likewise associates the three proscriptions with Conchobor, Fiachna, and Mael Coba but goes on to add that the *filid* then dispersed throughout Ireland and were not banished until the time of Áed mac Ainmirech, when the threat to expel them led to the convention of Druim Ceat and to Colum Cille's intervention.

¹ John Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh and London, 1974), 157 ff. (= *Scottish Gaelic Studies* xi. 114 ff.). Cf. Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 110 f.

² RC xx. 42-4.

Obviously the ambiguity exemplified by Rawl. B. 502 was liable to lead to misunderstanding, as indeed it has in Keating's account of Druim Ceat. After discussing Áed mac Ainmirech's decision to banish the *filid*, he recalls that 'they had been banished before then in the time of Conchubhar mac Nessa, king of Ulster, on account of their unjust demands . . .', but then he goes on: 'After this they allowed the *filid* to disperse throughout Ireland, and they were not banished from that time forward until the time of Fiachna mac Baodáin, king of Ulster, nor from the time of Fiachna to that of Maol Cobha mac Déamáin mhic Cairill, king of Ulster, nor from the time of Maol Cobha to that of Áed mac Ainmireach. Thrice then did the men of Ireland cast off the *filid*, and the Ulstermen retained them on each occasion.'¹ But Keating can only get his group of three here by excluding either the first or the last in the series, and furthermore he implies that Áed's proscription of the poets was the latest of them, although we know in fact that Áed was earlier than Mael Coba and was probably a slightly older contemporary of Fiachna. Not satisfied, however, he proceeds to give a little additional detail about the three expulsions drawn from whatever versions he had to hand, and this time the three are quite definitely, as in Rawl. B. 502 and Eg. 1782,² those which took place in the reigns of Conchobor, Fiachna, and Mael Coba. On the other hand, in LBr, YBL, and Nat. Lib. 50 they are associated with Conchobor, Mael Coba, and Áed mac Ainmirech.

Assuming that the former is the authentic triad of the deliverers of the poets, one can see how the later confusion may have arisen.³ Whether or not the threat to the poets was originally on the agenda at Druim Ceat, it is clear that at some stage one of the proscriptions became associated with the

¹ *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, ed. P. S. Dinneen, iii. 78–80.

² The passage listing the three deliverances in Eg. 1782 corresponds closely to that in Rawl. B. 502, but the immediately preceding part of the text is somewhat contradictory. It tells at some length how Conchobor rescued the poets and says that they then scattered throughout Ireland and were not banished again until the time of Mael Coba, who in his turn offered them succour. This is the version of the banishments found in YBL and LBr, and Eg. 1782 has simply combined it with that of Rawl. B. 502.

³ Conchobor is accounted a deliverer, but in point of fact according to the several texts of the preface it was Conchobor himself who threatened to banish the *filid*, but when he heard that they intended going to Scotland, he and Cú Chulainn then came to their aid and offered them extended hospitality.

assembly and with Áed mac Ainmirech as convener (and as author of the edict). Moreover, given his prominence as convener it was inevitable that he would tend to overshadow the corresponding deliverer of the poets and even displace him in some accounts (note that the formula *7 ní buí díchor forru iarum co haimsir Mail Choba/Áeda meic Ainmirech*, which occurs with slight variations in several of the versions,¹ does not make any distinction of roles). In this way one can readily explain the frequent omission of Fiachna mac Baetáin, whose reign, it may be noted, coincided partly with that of Áed mac Ainmirech.² Moreover, in those versions which include Áed instead of Fiachna, he comes at the end of the series following Mael Coba, and this cannot be correct since the latter clearly must be the Mael Coba son of Fiachna mac Demmáin who died in 647 (AU, AI), as indicated in the quatrains given in the preface itself, *Mael Coba . . . do chenéol delbda Demmáin*.³

The authentic form of the tradition is reasonably certain. How old it may be is quite another matter. It is included in the twelfth-century Rawl. B. 502, but not in LU, the earliest manuscript of the preface to ACC. On the other hand, while

¹ e.g. LBr 238 cb 58, 63; Eg. 1782 3 b 35, 3 vb 6.

² The length of Áed Mac Ainmirech's reign varies considerably in the Annals. His obit is given at 598 (AU), 594 (FM), and 601 (AI), and his accession to the kingship of Tara at 592 (AU), 585 (CS), and 568 (FM). The obit of his predecessor in the kingship, Báetán mac Ninneda, is at 586 in AU, and therefore Áed cannot have been king before that year. FM has Báetán's obit at 567 with Áed succeeding in the following year, but these early dates are evidently designed to support the orthodox view that Áed was high-king of Ireland at the time of the convention and that this was a national assembly attended by kings from all over Ireland. Fiachna's obit occurs at 626 in AU and his accession to the kingship of Ulster is probably to be dated c. 589, since the death of his predecessor, Áed mac Suibni, is entered at 588; the regnal synchronisms edited by Thurneysen in *ZCP* xix. 81 ff. can hardly be correct in placing his reign after Áed mac Ainmirech's death (§ iv). Already at 571 FM credits Fiachna with the battle of Tola (? *Cath Tola*). In AU this battle is entered at 573 and 574, but the first entry is a marginal addition and the second unfortunately does not name the victor. Thus it is not certain that Fiachna was sufficiently prominent and powerful in 575 to be able to provide protection for the *filid*. Even if he were not, it would in no way disprove the tradition that he was their protector at some time or other; it would merely add weight to the presumption that the triad of proscriptions was originally independent of the story of Druim Ceat. (On these problems of dating see also Fr. John Ryan, *Journ. of RSAI* lxxvi (1946), 50 ff.).

³ He is actually called mac Fiachna in Eg. 1782. Keating omits a generation in calling him Maol Cobha mac Déamáin mhic Cairill, and Stokes (*RC* xx. 45) wrongly identifies him with Mael Coba, Áed mac Ainmirech's son and 'king of Ireland' from AD 612 to 615 (AU).

LU does not record the triad as such, it does quote two quatrains on Mael Coba which occur in other versions in connection with one of the proscriptions. They speak of Mael Coba receiving the twelve hundred *filid* and maintaining them for three years, and ostensibly they are cited in LU simply as evidence for the total number of the *filid*; but they obviously must derive from some larger context and, occurring as they do in the same part of the narrative as does the account of the banishments in the other versions, the likelihood is that LU (or its source) has simply omitted the relevant prose context. One possible reason for such an omission—apart from the difficulty of harmonizing it with the *Druim Ceat* tradition—is that the passage reflected too favourably on the Ulstermen. In fact in its Rawl. B. 502 form it casts Ulster very clearly in the role of patron and final refuge of the poets whenever they were rejected by the rest of Ireland and seems to imply that Colum Cille, in now coming to their rescue, is in a sense merely being consistent with the high standards of generosity and respect for poetic learning that have always characterized the northern province.

Obviously this sort of consideration would have weighed differently with different redactors, but its effect can hardly be doubted.¹ The introductory material to ACC in the *Liber Hymnorum* (LH) comprises two versions of the preface. Both of these refer explicitly only to the proscription by Áed mac Ainmirech, but one of them quotes the two quatrains on Mael

¹ Cf. the following lines from a poem in praise of the Uí Echach of Ulster which Meyer assigned to the tenth century but which according to O'Rahilly was probably a later forgery (see Gwynn, *Ériu* xiii. 227); the poet freely exploits the tradition of the expulsions to the advantage of the Ulstermen:

An tan dobeirt[h]i fōgra	do c[h]liaraibh Fōdla anallain,
no tēigdis Ulaid d'fhorgla	go hor romra dia n-astudh.
Laigin dōibh ō ro dlomsat,	fir C[h]onnacht is fir Muman,
fobit[h] na bfiledh d'fastad	do leth alludh ufer nUladh.
Dia mbeith don nōs anallain	athc[h]or ar an ord ēiccus,
oighir Ollaman Fótla	a mbeōil böchna nīslēiccfed.

'Whenever in times past the poetic bands of Ireland were proscribed, the most distinguished of the Ulstermen would go even to the ocean's edge to detain them.

When the men of Leinster had turned them out, and the men of Connacht and Munster as well, the fame of the Ulstermen spread abroad because they kept the poets.

If it should happen as of old that the poetic order were to be expelled, the heir of Ollam Fótla would not abandon them to the perils of the ocean' (ed. Kuno Meyer, *Sitzungsber. der preuß. Akad. der Wissensch.*, 1919, v. 92, 94).

Coba given in LU, and the other, in describing the circumstances of Áed mac Ainmirech's threat against the poets, tells how the latter were maintained for three years by 'the king of Ulster', and this in terms which in other versions refer to Mael Coba. Then follows a rather curious comment to the effect that it was during this sojourn in Ulster the *filid* 'set about composing hero-stories¹ of their own invention; and things did not happen at all as they related, but it was in order to impose them on the uncouth people among whom they then were that eloquent *filid* invented these lying fictions'. This counter to the flattering picture of the Ulstermen in Rawl. B. 502 need not be credited to the writer of the LH text, for it occurs also in the Leabhar Breac, Eg. 1782, and Nat. Libr. 50 versions of the preface, but with the important difference that there the observation relates to the period of hospitality granted to the poets by Conchobor, not Mael Coba. The passage was evidently introduced by some earlier redactor who was more than a little sceptical of the high-mindedness ascribed to the Ulstermen (and who at the same time perhaps felt it necessary to explain—or rather explain away—the dominance of the Ulster cycle in the medieval literature). It is possible that a similar reservation has prompted the omission of the triad from LU.

What emerges, therefore, from this brief survey of the several versions of the preface to ACC is that there was already in existence in the eleventh century a legend or tradition that the *filid* had been expelled three times by the men of Ireland, only to be granted asylum on each occasion by a king of Ulster. That it derives from Ulster seems certain, but on the evidence at present available it is impossible to say definitely how old it is or how early its association with the convention of Druim Ceat. But in any case this is perhaps not the essential question to be asked, but rather what, if any, is the relevance of the legend for Irish history and ideology.

The seeds of discord

The ostensible reason why the *filid* were subjected to censure and sanction in the sixth century is that they were too numerous and too importunate, and there is no reason to doubt that this was so. As we have seen, the vital element in the relationship between patron and *fili* was the delicately balanced reciprocity

¹ Or 'stories of the fian'. Leg. *sgéla fēne* with Eg. 1782 and Nat. Lib. Ir. 50 or *scéla fénned* with YBL.

of spiritual and material gifts which bound them in mutual dependency; and since the *fili*'s were the material rewards, clearly his benefice was open to abuse, as innumerable stories testify. As in the case of the medieval church, many young men must have been attracted by the material advantages and by the social prestige and immunities conferred by membership of the poetic order, and there were probably times when the number of its adherents became so great as to constitute a burden on society. A. M. Hocart gives us a useful perspective on an analogous situation in medieval Ceylon:

Travellers in Ceylon have been impressed by the multitude of monasteries found in the ancient capitals, and have commented on the rampant parasitism they imply. It is not quite fair, however, to regard these swarms of monks as consisting entirely of drones. A great many were doubtless nothing more, but many others took the place of our schoolmasters, professors, parsons, hospital staffs, and charitable organizations. But there is a limit to the number of such persons which society can usefully employ, and if that limit is exceeded the surplus differ from drones only in that they are busy. A country which maintains as many intellectuals as Ceylon had to do in the tenth century is top-heavy. The excess of intellectuals is not only superfluous but mischievous, for men whose brains have been trained to activity but are given no useful outlet are sure to find one in pure destructiveness. Further, the multiplication must result in the decline of intellectual achievement, for with the larger intake of recruits the average is lowered, and those born to think are swamped by those for whom thinking is merely a claim to be exempted from the rough work of life.¹

But one need not go outside the Celtic world itself for evidence of the temporal attractiveness of the profession of druid and *fili*. Caesar makes the point with characteristic clarity:

The druids are wont to be absent from war, nor do they pay taxes like the others; they are dispensed from military service and free of all other obligations. Attracted by these prizes many join the order of their own accord or are sent by parents or relatives.²

It is therefore not unlikely that Irish society was in fact top-heavy with *filid* and would-be *filid* in the sixth century as the legend of Druim Ceat declares. But in the longer perspective the resentment then shown to them may be seen merely as an occasional manifestation of a permanent, if generally latent, tension between the *filid* and the secular ruling class, the same

¹ *The Life-giving Myth* (London, repr. 1973), 243 f.

² *BG* vi. 14, transl. J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Procs. of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 C (1960), 272.

kind of tension as one finds abundantly documented in Indian traditions concerning the relations of brahmans and kshatriyas.

Because the power of the brahman belonged to the spiritual order he enjoyed primacy in the hierarchy of social status: he controlled the rites which ensured the prosperity of the kingdom and by virtue of his sacred wisdom counselled the king in his important decisions. Conversely, he was without temporal power, which belonged to the king (though he could influence temporal decisions: a king had his brahman minister as well as his brahman priest) and he depended almost entirely on the king for his material welfare: 'il ne peut remplir tous ses devoirs de brahmane que s'il vit sous le règne d'un bon roi qui rétribue bien ses services, et il n'y a point de bon prince sans bon brahmane. La réciprocité est donc parfaite.'¹ But this complementarity of the moral order of *dharma* and the secular advantage of *artha* is often marred by conflicts of interest, for while the two spheres are distinct they are not insulated from each other. Contention between brahmans and kshatriyas is well attested in the literature, and if one were to believe some of the legends of the classical period, it occasionally issued in bloody conflict.² It seems even to have its mythic model in the well-documented rivalry between the gods Indra and Varuna.³

Dumont, it is true, maintains that commentators have tended to exaggerate the scope and misread the meaning of the tensions reflected in the literature; he would argue that the legends, far from reflecting a bitter competition for primacy, actually confirm the enduring balance and combination of two quite different orders of influence,⁴ whereas the western mind, accustomed as it is to an egalitarian society, tends 'to conceive of hierarchy as a scale of commanding powers—as in an army—rather than as a gradation of statuses'. There is doubtless much truth in this view, and yet one has the feeling that in his anxiety to exemplify his brilliant insights into the disparity between eastern and western concepts of social classification Dumont

¹ Madeleine Biardeau, *Clefs pour la pensée hindoue* (Paris, 1972), 29.

² Cf. Bouglé, *op. cit.* 53. See also Sukamari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony* (Cambridge, 1970), 289 f.; E. W. Hopkins, *The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India, as Represented by the Sanskrit Epic* (New Haven, Conn., 1889), 16 ff. and *passim*; Abinash Chandra Bose, *Hymns from the Vedas* (London, 1966), 15–18; G. Dumézil, *Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus*, 43.

³ Cf. R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford Paperback, 1977), 22, 24, 26 f.

⁴ Louis Dumont, *Religion, Politics and History in India* (Paris/The Hague, 1970), 64–70.

here tends to understate where others have exaggerated. Only once does he explicitly allow that there may be some reality behind the literary references: 'The most likely object of the conflicts which we can presume from the texts would be the privileges and immunities of the Brahmans, starting from the Atharva Veda which already tries to protect the very wife of the priest from the concupiscence of powerful people.'¹

This is already a great deal. Given the nature of these privileges and immunities, here is surely a potential source of friction sufficient to engender a legend of recurrent strife such as is commonly attested in Indian tradition and more exceptionally in the Irish triad of expulsions of the poets. The Rawl. B. 502 preface to ACC states that the men of Ireland rejected the *filid* on three occasions. *Fir Hérenn* 'the men of Ireland' is in effect a collective class term for the ruling warrior nobility, including kings; and as such it corresponds in reference if not precisely in connotation to the kshatriyas of India.² It corresponds also to Caesar's *equites*, who constitute one element of his binary classification of the Gaulish nobility (*BG* vi. 13-15). And here again, as Caesar makes clear, the balance is between two disparate authorities, one deriving from spiritual status, the other from secular power. It is a delicate balance continually assured by the mutual dependence of the two orders and continually imperilled by their several pretensions.

North and South

The legend of the three expulsions sets Ulster against the rest of Ireland as the protector of the *filid* in times of stress. The fact that the first of their deliverers was Conchobor mac Nessa and the others kings of Ulster suggests that it may perhaps be connected with the literary dominance of the Ulster cycle and of

¹ If one were to credit certain early Irish tales, it was the king who sometimes found it difficult to protect his own wife from the exigent *filí*.

² My suggestion would seem at first glance to receive some useful support from Alwyn and Brinley Rees's interpretation of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in terms of the Indo-European threefold functional system. The immediate cause of the *Táin* was that Medb, who personified sovereignty, coveted the great bull of Ulster, which symbolized the warrior function; and since Dumézil regards 'Sovereignty' in its magical and judicial aspects as the primary attribute of the first function, 'the *Táin* appears as an example of the classic struggle between the priestly and the warrior classes, each of which tends to usurp the functions and privileges of the other' (*Celtic Heritage*, London, 1961, 124). In point of fact, however, kingship in general is associated with the warrior or kshatriya class, and Medb is not particularly noted for her 'magical and judicial' attributes.

Táin Bó Cuailnge in particular, for even though the written transmission of these tales was effected by monastic redactors there can be little question that they were propagated orally by the *filid*. In a more general sense, however, the legend is compatible with what we know of the establishment of Christianity in Ireland and its subsequent relations with the secular powers. Contrary to the view put forth by the medieval propagandists for the Patrician mission, the indications are that the independent evangelization of the south was already far advanced before St. Patrick arrived in Ireland, and in D. A. Binchy's view (which is accepted by other historians) the Eoganacht dynasty of Cashel which held the overlordship of Munster could well have been Christian from the time of its founder Conall Corc *c.*400.¹ This casts the Eoganachta in a very different role *vis-à-vis* Christianity from that of the dominant northern dynasty, the Uí Néill, who do not appear to have been securely Christianized until after the reign of Diarmait mac Cerbaill in the sixth century.

Moreover, Christianity seems to have acquired a somewhat different personality and orientation in the two areas. In the south it maintained a close liaison with the continent and in general followed the path of orthodoxy, whereas in the north, as in Celtic Britain, it tended to follow a more insular and more independent course. This dichotomy manifested itself most strikingly in the great controversy over the dating of Easter, when, broadly speaking, the south favoured conformity with Rome while the north clung stubbornly to its traditional usage. But it must also have had its effect outside the purely religious field. It has been noted for example that in its early stages the expansionist legend of St. Patrick was promoted by men who belonged to the part of Ireland which conformed with Rome on the Easter question,² and this circumstance may not be unrelated to the fact that Armagh itself appears to have played a surprisingly inconspicuous part in the literary movement which was in its full vigour *c.*700 in other monasteries of the north-eastern region.

But what is more important in the present context, the sixth and seventh centuries were the crucial period for determining the relations between clerics and *filid* and their relative status, and these cannot but have been affected by the differing

¹ D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, 38 ff. Cf. F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 184 ff.

² J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, p. 325.

inclinations of the Church in the north and in the south. For example, whereas in the north the efflorescence of the new written literature resulted from the coming together of native traditional and classical Christian learning, in the south monastic and secular learning seem to have remained more or less mutually exclusive preserves in the early period with consequently less rapport between *filid* and clerics. This suggests that the lines were more clearly drawn in the south and that the Church did not permit the same degree of compromise and collaboration with the *filid* as obtained in the north-east of the country. In itself, of course, this could not have created the tradition of southern antipathy to the poets, but it may well have contributed to it.

It is not always easy to discriminate between ideology and politics, particularly in the Middle Ages, but in so far as it is possible one may state it as a reasonably accurate generalization that clerical opposition to the poets was primarily ideological (if we exclude considerations of mere self-interest) while that of secular rulers was primarily political. Thus when one finds in the ninth-century *Baile in Scáil* (§ 29) the *ex post facto* prophecy, *Iurait Laigin a ndáma, combibsat a firdála* 'The Laigin will destroy their poetic companies; they will break up their rightful assemblies',¹ one can be fairly certain that the motivation was a political one.

In his edition of the Annals of Innisfallen the late Seán Mac Airt noted that the event referred to appeared to fall around about the time of Brandub's reign and suggested that it was related to the entry in AI s.a. 600: *Mors (m.) Cummascaig .i. orgain na dáme la Brandub macc nEchach* 'The death of Cummascach, i.e. the destruction of the poetic company by Brandub son of Eochu'. The death of Cummascach son of Áed mac Ainmirech, king of Tara, at the hands of Brandub (†605) is given in the other Annals, but without reference to the killing of the poets; nor is the latter incident mentioned in the story of Cummascach's death as told in the frame-story of the *Bóruma*²—unless perhaps the name of the satirist, *Glasdám* 'raw/sharp troop', be a clue to the existence of an earlier version of the story (or to a different story that has been fused with it). When Brandub sets fire to the house in which Cummascach and his company are feasting, *Glasdám* seeks and is granted permission to leave the burning building, but instead of going himself he gives his clothes to Cummascach and so contrives his escape. It is possible that *Glasdám's* death by burning is a

¹ ZCP iii. 465 = xx. 226.

² SG i. 370 ff., ii. 408 ff.

residue or a recasting of an older tale which told how Brandub had burned to death a *dám* or retinue of satirical poets, presumably because they exercised their art in the service of the king of Tara. But even if we reject this as mere conjecture, the fact that AI associates, or at least juxtaposes, the killing of the poets with the death of Cummascach does seem to set the former in the political context of the traditional hostility between the Lagen and the Uí Néill.¹

Moreover, Brandub was not the first of his people, the Uí Cheinnselaig, to fall foul of the poets. Four generations earlier tradition has it that Eochu son of Énna Ceinnselach king of Leinster and the eponym of the line slew Bécc mac Lethderggáin in his own home in southern Brega together with one hundred and fifty other poets. There are several references to the killing in texts of Leinster origin,² but the story which presumably recounted the circumstances in which it took place has been lost and nothing is now known of it except the reason why the deed was done: that the poet had satirized Eochu's father. In most of the references Bécc's death is coupled with that of another poet, Laidcenn mac Baircheda, also by the hand of Eochu mac Énna. This is recounted in some detail in a Middle Irish text about the death of the famed ruler of Tara, Niall Noígiallach. The story goes that Eochu was making his way homewards from the court of Niall Noígiallach, where presumably he had been held hostage, and that he called at Laidcenn's dwelling to ask for food. This was refused and Eochu went on his way; but it was not long until he returned with a band of followers and burned down Laidcenn's house, killing his only son Leat. Subsequently the poet brought desolation upon the province of Leinster for a whole year through the venom of his satire, and Niall himself led a hosting into Leinster to take Eochu prisoner; and it was during the ensuing campaign that Laidcenn met his death, when he was struck by a stone hurled at him by Eochu, apparently across the width of the river Slaney.³

¹ Seán Mac Airt suggests reading 7 for .i. in the AI entry, in which case the two events might not be identical as the MS reading implies. Since, however, we know from the *Bóruma* that Cummascach's death, as well as the destruction of the poets, was the work of Brandub, this lends plausibility to our suggestion that there was once a separate explanation or story of the killing of the poets which related it to the intermittent contention between the Leinstermen and the Uí Néill.

² See my note in *Celtica* xi. 128 ff.

³ Ed. K. Meyer from Rawl. B. 502, *Otia Merseiana* (Liverpool) ii. 84 ff. Also YBL 127a; BB 134b-135a.

The significant thing is that Laidcenn does not stand—or should we say fall?—alone. His death is constantly linked with that of Bécc and seems to be echoed in the cryptic reference to the killing of the poets by Brandub; which suggests a pattern of behaviour rather than chance coincidence. It is a familiar enough feature of traditional oral literature and history that events of general social and political significance are reduced in the telling to the scale of individual personal relationships, so that a single character may represent a nation or a tribe and a naively simple incident may conceal a web of political motivation. One has the *exemplum* without the exegesis.

Something of the sort seems to lie behind the creation of these stories of Eochu and Brandub on the one hand and the *filid* on the other. To begin with, the two poets named were no humdrum practitioners. In the second of the metrical tracts edited by Thurneysen it is laid down that the *pensum* for the student of *filidecht* in his final year should include four *cerda* 'artes', one of which is ascribed to Laidcenn and another to Bécc.¹ Thurneysen surmised that these *cerda* might have been manuals used by student-poets, though there is no evidence to support his implication that they were written texts. There can be little doubt, however, that their authors are the poets who were slain by Eochu and that these were later thought of as archetypes of the *fili* and his learning. Consequently, when tradition reports their death at the hands of the son of the king of Leinster, this can reasonably be interpreted as an attack on the whole poetic order.

As I have remarked, the motivation was probably political, but how accurately we define it depends on how successfully we translate the micro-data of the tale into the macro-data of history. For one thing, Laidcenn mac Baircheda's patronymic suggests that he was one of the Uí Bairrche, a people who had been driven out from their original home in south Wexford by the Southern Laigin, or Uí Cheinnselaig,² and there may therefore have been very good reason why he antagonized Eochu mac Énna. Brandub was also of the Uí Cheinnselaig, and it may be significant in this context that not merely was he one of the very few Uí Cheinnselaig kings of Leinster before the eleventh century but that he was outstandingly successful in

¹ *IT* III, i. 60, 130.

² T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), 35–7 (though, as O'Rahilly points out, in Rawl. B. 502 106c5 and LL 311a32 Laidcenn is said to belong to the Dál nAraidi).

halting and countering the expansion of the Uí Néill, especially by his defeat of Áed mac Ainmirech—the same who presided over the convention of Druim Ceat—at the battle of Dún Bolg in 598: when eventually the Uí Cheinnselaig won dominance over the whole of Leinster in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, they gave currency to the story of Brandub's achievement in order 'to point the moral that the Uí Chennselaig had been notably more successful than any of the northern Leinster princes in resisting the encroachments of the Uí Néill'.¹

Laidcenn had a brother, Brí mac Baircheda, who was also a druid-poet and is associated in the texts with Crimthann (†483) son of Énna Ceinnselach as well as with Catháir Már, ancestor of virtually all the kings of Leinster,² but Laidcenn himself is described as chief-poet to Niall Noígiallach in the Middle Irish tale of Niall's death already referred to³ and in this narrative his feud with Eochu and his death are closely associated with and parallel to the feud between Eochu and Niall culminating in the latter's death.⁴ Tradition has it that Catháir Már and other prehistoric Leinster kings had held the kingship of Tara before the time of Niall Noígiallach, and the archaic Leinster historical poems that have survived firmly assert the Laigin's continuing entitlement to it. This was obviously an area of great sensitivity and Professor Byrne has suggested that the failure of the kings of the Uí Bairrche, Uí Garrchon, and Uí Enechglais to protect Laiginian interests in the midlands must have played a part in the decline of these once powerful Leinster peoples.⁵

If the poets—particularly perhaps the poets of these tribes who once occupied the marches between Uí Néill and Laigin

¹ Cf. F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* 142 f.

² Corp. Gen. 8; Met. D. iii. 178; *Y Cymmrodor* xiv. 108.

³ It should be said that Laidcenn is also credited with a poem listing thirty-five kings of Leinster who at the same time held the high-kingship of Ireland (K. Meyer, *Ált. ir. Dicht.* i. 14 = Corp. Gen. 8 f.). Mac Neill is reported to have held that this poem was really composed by Lucreth moccu Chérai (in S. Pender (ed.), *Féilscribhinn Torna*, p. 210), to whom other early poems are ascribed, but his reasons are not given and it is unlikely that this ascription could be sustained.

⁴ Even the manner in which Niall and Laidcenn die is strikingly similar. The latter was standing at the bank of a river in the midst of Niall's followers when he was struck by a stone thrown by Eochu, apparently from the other side of the river; Niall also was standing in the middle of an assembly by the side of a great river when Eochu killed him by shooting an arrow across the intervening glen.

⁵ *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, 142.

power—did not wholeheartedly support the struggle of the Uí Cheinnselaig kings to maintain the Leinster claim on the sacred kingship of Tara, it is easy to understand the vengeance meted out to Laidcenn and Bécc and to those who were slain by Brandub. Some of them, such as Laidcenn himself, may have had sound historical reasons for being less than enthusiastic about the rights of the Uí Cheinnselaig, but this apart it would not be surprising that they should have acquiesced in the supremacy of the Uí Néill: the *filid* were conservative in the sense that they were committed to maintaining the established order and institutions of society, but for that very reason they would—like the Christian church itself—have tended to accept with equanimity even quite substantial shifts in the distribution of political power, so long as they did not subvert the traditional system of beliefs and values.

A time of change

The fifth and sixth centuries were a crucial period in Irish history. They saw the rise of a number of powerful dynasties who for many centuries afterwards were to control the fortunes of the greater part of the country, and it was in the conflict between two of these dynasties, the Uí Néill and the Leinster Uí Cheinnselaig, that the *filid* were caught and severely mauled. Whether there was any causal connection between this development and the more or less contemporary establishment of Christianity is a moot point, but certainly the two had a combined effect on the position of the druids and *filid*. In the event the poets contrived to ensure their corporate survival at the cost of compromising with the Church, but only after a period of instability when it is quite conceivable that there was a weakening of professional discipline and an access of adherents attracted by the privileges and immunities of the order.

Ostensibly the changes reflected in the Druim Ceat legend concerned only the poets and the royal patrons disgruntled by their excesses, but it is none the less certain that they were largely set in train—like the indiscipline which preceded them—by the presence in the land of a rapidly increasing fraternity of clerics whose functions at so very many points matched and overlapped with those of the *filid* themselves: It is not without significance that Colum Cille's role as mediator and friend of the poets at this troubled time is a common-place in Middle Irish literature—its antiquity seems to be confirmed by *Amra Choluim Chille* itself—and one can hardly doubt that

the reorganization of the *filid* associated with Druim Ceat was part of the evolution of the *modus vivendi* between *filid* and clerics which, amongst other things, was responsible for the remarkably early use of writing for the recording of secular oral literature.

The legend of the three proscriptions confirms the sixth century as a period of critical change for the *filid* and for their relations with kings and clerics. But it may also, as I have suggested, reflect a more deep-seated and less time-bound phenomenon: that of the close but sometimes uneasy union of the two very disparate categories of priests and princes.

In Dumézilian terms the royal or warrior class and the druids/*filid* are paired together in distinction from the rest of society, while at the same time they are radically distinguished from each other in function and status. Bound as they are in a web of interdependence their relationship is a delicate balance of collaboration and tension, the one nourished by the essential disparity of their interests, the other by their practical contiguity. For India Louis Dumont has emphasized the distinction between status and power in the hierarchical system of the *varṇa*, status belonging to the brahman, power to the kshatriya. As master of the sacred, notably of sacrifice, the brahman is superior to the king in the social hierarchy, in the same way that spiritual authority is superior to temporal authority, but in the practical exercise of power the king is paramount.¹ Subordinate to the priest in all that directly concerned *dharmā*, i.e. cosmic order and the conduct which confirms and reflects it, the king is otherwise free to do as he wishes in the pursuit of *artha*, material wealth and success. The primary link between the two planes of conduct is that of royal munificence: the obligation of the king to give and of the priest to receive and to sacralize material wealth. Once the king respects such ritualized expressions of *dharmā*, he is his own agent, and it is this interlocking pattern of dominance and subordination that accounts for the remarkably complex relationship between the royal patron and his priest-poet.

Dumont seems to believe that the situation he describes is peculiar to India, and notes that 'the supremacy of the priest is an Indian fact which has remained unexportable' to other countries of south-east Asia; but it can reasonably be argued that primitive Ireland offered a situation which was in many respects analogous. The political precedence of the ruler is a fact of life well attested in the literature, while the ideological

¹ *Homo Hierarchicus*, Paladin paperback (London, 1972), 104 ff., *et passim*.

primacy of the priest is borne out by explicit references to the druids and by a mass of implicit evidence on the *filid*. The ideological subordination of *artha* to *dharma* and its empiric dominance are equally evident throughout the tradition; herein lies part of the explanation of the dissociation of precept and practice which is, for example, such a marked feature of formal praise-poetry and which towards the end of our period, when men were perhaps more influenced by English and European patterns of thought and behaviour, was sometimes castigated as mere duplicity and time-serving. I have elsewhere discussed at some length what I take to be one of the most significant instances of this dissociation, namely the notion of an all-embracing 'national' unity which was an important element of the teaching of druids and *filid* and as such exercised a very profound influence in the religio-cultural sphere, but which at the same time was largely irrelevant to the realities of political activity and organization. This dualism is at the very core of the Irish social order and in particular it invests with a rich complexity the pivotal relationship between prince and priest.

I have said little of the Christian *sacerdos* in this lecture, not because there is little to be said, but rather because his role must be viewed in relation to that of the druid/*fili*, who was both his predecessor and his contemporary: the Christian clergy did not so much subvert the older order as insert themselves within it, with the aim—never quite realized—of ultimately appropriating it to their own ends. The clergy were the Christian pendant to the (culturally) pagan *filid* and in many things seem to have adopted them as their model. They did, however, belong to a tightly organized church which, however spiritual its primary motivation, was itself modelled on the political structure of the Roman Empire and which constantly aspired to temporal as well as spiritual power. In this they differ from the druids and *filid*, who seem to have acquired wealth and property individually but not corporately and to whom one might apply with reasonable accuracy Célestin Bouglé's comment on the brahmans: 'Their power is the more uncontested in that it is entirely spiritual; they have avoided those hazards which the priestly class has the most frequently met once it tries to increase its strength by arrogating temporal power. One might say that they have no part in government and yet are obeyed by all; they possess nothing and yet have all.'¹

¹ *Essays on the Caste System by Célestin Bouglé*, transl. D. F. Pocock (Cambridge 1971), 53 f.

One of the problems for the student of *regnum* and *sacerdotium* in Ireland is to determine to what extent the Christian attitude towards secular power was tempered by the pagan heritage which was such a large ingredient in the making of the Irish church, or, on the other hand, to what extent it was instrumental in shaping the Irish concept of kingship, particularly among the kings themselves, to bring it closer to that which prevailed on the Continent. That the character of Irish kingship underwent some such change, especially during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, is a matter of historical observation, but its range, its causes, and its implications are matters which still require much detailed investigation. Why, for example, was little or no effort made to codify Irish law, as was done so comprehensively with Welsh law, so as to adapt it to the changing role of kingship? Was it because of the conservatism and independence of the jurists (who were close kin to the *filid*), or lack of initiative on the part of the kings, or was it simply that the changes in the functions of kings were not so fundamental as to necessitate a recasting of the law? These are questions for the *periti* in history and I have skirted them with due caution. I have been concerned rather to emphasize that the basic configuration of the relations between king and priest had already been firmly established before the advent of Christianity and that it was never wholly superseded by subsequent change. In the case of the *fili* there is a danger that his ritual role may be recognized, or even exaggerated, at the expense of his political role, and this for two main reasons: first, because the annals and related historical documents have a natural ecclesiastical bias, and secondly because the *fili*'s authority is founded more on the Indo-European concept of status than on the medieval concept of power.

Above all else the peculiar interest and the peculiar complication of the Irish situation is that the relationship between *regnum* and *sacerdotium* was from the fifth century onwards a triangular one and that the *sacerdotium* was shared by two very disparate bodies which avoided serious conflict by evolving a complementary distribution of influence and authority. For the student of Irish kingship this presents many problems; but for the kings themselves within the Christian period the balance of influence between cleric and poet was probably a convenience that acted as a brake upon the influence of both.