

## The Mythical Period.

*The story of the Irish before the conquest : from the mythical period to the invasion under strongbow*

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Aborigines preyed on by African pirates—Colony of Partholan—Colony of Nemed—Siege of Tor Conaing— Battle of the White Strand—Arrival of the Firbolgs—Their works in stone—Arrival of the Tuath-De-Danaans—Battles of Moyturé—Characteristic differences in Arms—The “ Fate of the Children of Lir,” one of the “ Three Sorrows” of Celtic Song—Arrival of the Milesian Scoti—Chivalrous conduct of the Scoti—Battle of Tailti—The Scoti conquer the island—Its distribution—The laws and social polity of the conquerors—The remains of these races.

No race which has left its impress on the history of our globe has preserved its primitive traditions with the same care as the Celtic, that early swarm from the Japhetic hive which, the bardic traditions tell us, reached Europe long before the dawn of authentic history.

Even then, the Celtic story affirms, there wandered through the pine forests of Ierne an aboriginal people. The traces of a population ignorant of the use of metals and of the practice of agriculture have been found over all the west of Europe. In Gaul and Britain the record of their existence is the bone-cave and the drift-bank, where Nature has sealed up their knives and hatchets of stone, along with the half fossil remains of the elk, the cave-bear, and the elephant. In addition to similar evidence in Ireland, bardic tradition tells us that the leader of these *autochthones*, on the arrival of Partholan with the first Gaelic swarm from the East, was named Cical.

Of Cical and his hunter tribes the varied lay began,  
And how in Grecian galleys borne Maeonian Partholan,  
Sire of great Slangé on a day, with sight of sail and oar,  
Amazed the dwellers of the woods by Inverskene's shore,  
Where first invasion first brought in the arts of life ; and how  
Erin untill'd till then, from him received the spade and plough. [1]

And who was Partholan ? and how came he to be dignified with Greek associations ? the reader will ask. The name whencesoever derived, is imprinted in the old local nomenclature of the country. The traveller, taking the direction of Blessington from Dublin, about five miles out of the city, passes a decayed village called Tallaght ; and this name *Tam lacht*, signifying a “ plague sepulchre,” has been, from time immemorial, understood to be the Tam-lacht of the people of Partholan. For the tradition is, that the whole colony brought into Ireland by this chieftain perished in a great plague, and that a multitude of them were buried in a common tomb at this spot ; and that this plague had pursued Partholan as a punishment for the guilt of parricide, under the sting of remorse for which he had become a voluntary exile. Similar stories are told of Brutus, the fabled progenitor of the Britons, and of other mythical leaders and founders of nations ; and the reader will remember that in this chapter the subject belongs altogether to the Mythical Period.

It is observable, however, that local tradition also had, from immemorial time, given the name of Slangé, son of Partholan, to the highest peak of the Mourne mountains in Down, up to the time when Slieve Donard acquired its present name, from Domangart, a holy person of the sixth century, whose hermitage occupied the site of the cairn of the buried warrior on the mountain summit.

Forgotten Partholan himself lies 'neath his royal mound  
On green Moynalty, hushed at eve by drowsy ocean's sound ;  
And clangorous song of flocks by night, when through the wintry  
air  
The wide-winged wild geese to their pools by Liffey's side repair.  
But promised Slangé, tombed aloft on that great mountain's  
head,  
Which now, since Domangart hath used the chamber of the dead  
For cleric rites, no longer owns its name of old renown,—  
Slieve-Slangé,—but Slieve-Donard sounds, awaits his calling  
down. [2]

However apocryphal the name of Partholan may now appear, we must recognise the voice of a remote antiquity in favour of the story of the parricide ; of the aborigines whom he invaded and civilized ; and of the avenging plague before which his race, though not his memory, has been obliterated.

Even thus early the shores of our Island are said to have been the resort of organized sea-plunderers, or pre-historic Vikings, who made their descents from Africa.

They are known in the recollection of our ancestors under the name of Fomorians. Critical scholars have surmised that this is but another name for Pomerania, and that for Africa we should read the shores of the Baltic. In the glossary, however, of King Cormac of Cashel, compiled not long after the age of Alfred, in the ninth century of our era, the word Fomorian is said to signify “ under sea,” in the sense of their ships being descried on the horizon, rising, as it were, from beneath the rim of the ocean, and indicating their approach from the Atlantic rather than the narrow seas. From whencesoever they came, they were expert navigators, and had a fortress upon Tor Inis, or Tory Island, which, from its name of the Glass Castle, may possibly have been a vitrified fort. Round its walls, and on the strand beneath, was waged, we are told, one of the earliest of the many “ Battles of the White Strand,” which supply the place of the “ tale of Troy divine” in early Irish and Welsh bardic history. Nemed, of the same race as Partholan, was the next invader, and subjected to the servile toils of tillage and building, the remnant of the former population. But the galleys of the “ under sea” invaders still rose on the horizon, and poured their troops of Fomorian pirates on the thinly-peopled shores. The tower of Tor Inis was the great stronghold of the strangers. Nemed with his chief warriors crossed the turbulent straits and laid siege to the wonderful castle.

Fierce conflicts were waged upon the shore. The combatants in their fury disregarded the rising tide which overwhelmed them, the crew of one ship only of the Nemedians escaping. Amongst those saved were three chieftains of Nemed's blood, who, though now abandoning the country, were, we are told to believe, destined to re-people Ireland at a subsequent period.

They fought ere sunrise at Tor Conainn,  
All day they fought on the wild sea-shore ;  
The sun dropp'd downward, they fought amain,  
The tide rose upward, they fought the more.

The sands were cover'd, the sea grew red,  
The warriors fought in the reddening wave ;  
That night the sea was the sea-king's bed,  
The land-king drifted past cliff and wave.

Great was the rage in those ancient days,  
(We were pagans then) in the land of Eire ;  
Like eagles, men vanquish'd the noontide blaze,  
Their bones were iron, their nerves were wire.  
We are hinds to-day ! The Nemedian kings,  
Like elk and bison of old stalk'd forth ;  
Their name—the sea-kings—for ever clings  
To the “ Giant Stepping Stones” round the north. [3]

We must endeavour to imagine the island during these vicissitudes, under successive conditions of populousness and desertion, rude wealth and sterility, until a third swarm of adventurers came upon the scene, making their entrance also by the common avenue of Greece. These are the Firbolgs, exiles from Thrace. They had been slaves, compelled, under the lash of task-masters, to cultivate the terraces on the steep sides, it may be, of Pindus or Hæmus. Each man was provided with a leathern bag, in which he carried up soil to these hanging gardens. Hence, say the Irish traditions, the name of Firbolg, men of the bag. They conspired, rose, and fled together, and a new infusion of Greek characteristics was thus imparted to the Isle of Destiny. Traces of the Firbolgs remain, not only in the names given by them to different localities, which are yet retained, but in the Duns and earthworks which they erected. The western isles of Aran contain, in admirable preservation to this day, the great stone fortresses of Dun Conor and Dun Ængus, built at a subsequent period by chieftains of this race, who, as will be seen in the sequel, were themselves destined to become a servile population under the sway of succeeding invaders.

Dun Ængus is a marvellous dry-stone erection. On a promontory which slopes gradually upwards from the land-ward side, and terminates in an abrupt cliff which frowns over the Atlantic, a considerable space of ground has been enclosed by a massive cyclopean wall. This consists of three concentric rings of building, each complete in itself, yet in immediate juxtaposition, and well fitted for defence. The sloping landward side is thickly studded with pillar-stones, firmly fixed in the soil, intended, apparently, to act as a kind of *chevaux-de-frise*, and embarrass the advance of an enemy on the only avenue of approach.

It is inaccessible from the sea. The cliff rises grandly above the wild Atlantic waves, which dash themselves against its base, and threaten its total destruction ere long. It has evidently been largely undermined already. Part of the vast edifice has tumbled into the deep water beneath. That which yet stands overhangs the ocean abysses. A more grand and impressive scene can scarcely be imagined. The utter solitude of the spot : the boundless expanse of ocean, dark-heaving and sublime : the old, old, strong-hold—more ancient probably than any building now standing in western Europe, counting its age not by hundreds, but by thousands of years—powerfully impress the imagination. The feeling is enhanced by the loneliness of these rarely-visited and inaccessible islets of the far west, which contain at present the huts only of simple peasants, and ruins of the cells and churches of the earliest Christian ecclesiastics. These are touching in their simplicity and antiquity, yet appear insignificant and comparatively recent, when compared with Dun Ængus and Dun Conor, pagan strongholds of Firbolg chiefs.

These erections belong, as we have said, to the latest period of Firbolg history, when the colony was closely pressed by their conquering kinsmen, and forced from the rich provinces

of the south and east, to seek refuge in more remote and inhospitable districts. The Firbolg blood to this day exists to an appreciable extent in Connaught, and the outlying isles of the west. They were a dark-haired and dark-skinned race, small in comparison with their fair-haired foemen, whose superior *physique*, no less than their higher civilization, and knowledge of arts and metals, assured them a speedy supremacy.

A fourth and fifth invasion remain to be chronicled. The Tuath-De-Danaans, like their kinsmen the Firbolgs, are said to be descended from Nemed through Iboth, his great-grandson, one of the chieftains who, with the ancestor of the Firbolg, escaped from the battle of Tor-Conaing. It is claimed for this people also that they came from Greece, but by way of Scandinavia. We may imagine them to have pursued the course of the rivers which flow to the Baltic, unless—as their traditions seem to indicate, and for which some slight probability may be traced in the features of the country between the Don and the Vistula—that part of Europe was then under water, and the western portion, from the Carpathian mountains, virtually an island, and the passage effected, as the *Argo* is fabled to have performed it, by sea. The present form of our continent would thus result from the gradual elevation of the soil on the low-lying, flat, alluvial plains of Poland and Russia.

Nuad of the Silver Hand was chieftain of the Tuath-De-Danaans, when they encountered Eochaid, the reigning Firbolg monarch, in the battle of Southern Moytura. The scene of the engagement is supposed to be identified near Cong. The fugitive Firbolg king was pursued, overtaken, and slain, at Ballysadare, in the county of Sligo. His cairn still exists on the strand there, and was formerly deemed one of the “Wonders of Erin.” Indeed the whole of this district of Sligo, as well as the field of Moytura itself, abounds with stone monuments—archaic enough to be co-eval with the scenes and actors of whom we treat. The conquering Nuad is said to have lost his hand in the battle, and to have used a silver substitute, framed by the skill of Credné Cerd, that is, the Smith. The mutilation, however, incapacitated him for the throne, in accordance with a law which, in Ireland, debarred any one who had a personal blemish from exercising regal functions. The story indicates, at least, the mechanical skill possessed by the Tuath-De-Danaans, which was so inexplicable to the vanquished Firbolgs, that they considered their conquerors to be necromancers or demons.

“The Battle of Moytura” has come down to us from a period long prior to the twelfth century in the form of a bardic tale; one of those romantic pieces which every well-instructed poet was expected to have in readiness when called on to entertain an assembly with song or recitation. It is one of a large class of similar compositions, but distinguished from most others by affording tangible evidence on a question of archaeological interest. In our great museums the visitor may observe two classes of bronze weapons, one being of broad, short and comparatively clumsy proportions; the other slender, elegant, and of the leaf-bladed or classic form. The Tale of the Battle of Moytura affords an unsuspected proof that, at whatever time it was composed, the popular belief among the Irish was, that weapons of the former class were peculiar to the Firbolgs, and of the latter to the Tuath-De-Danaans. It describes an interview between the scouts of the adverse armies, who encounter one another in a solitude. They plant their shields in the ground, and, from behind these defences, commence their colloquy. Acquiring greater confidence, they then proceed to examine one another’s arms, when the distinction we have mentioned is referred to and commented on. Now it is a remarkable fact, that in all the sepulchral mounds of the kindred Belgic tribes of Britain, the broad, trowel-like blades only have been found, while the classic form of weapon is common in North Britain, through which Irish tradition brings the De-Danaan invaders.

Two kings of the Tuath-De-Danaan race—Lir and Bove, have been celebrated in bardic song. *The Fate of the Children of Lir* [4] one of the “Three Sorrows of Song,” has inspired a poet in whose rendering of the legend the story is given in modern form—not without an

infusion of modern sentiment—yet with exquisite tenderness and beauty. We are told of the happy life led by King Lir, his queen, and their children.

“ Beings they seemed reserved for some great fate,  
Mysterious, high, elect and separate.”

The mother dies. Lir devotes himself to his children, but after some time re-marries. His bride, the beautiful daughter of King Bove, is possessor of magical power, and, jealous of Lir's love for his children, changes them into swans.

“ That night in dream King Lir had anguish sore,  
And southward, ere the dawn, rode far away  
With many a chief to see his babes once more  
Beside Lough Derg ; and lo, at close of day  
Nighing to Darvra's lake, the westering sun  
In splendour on the advancing horsemen shone.

Straightway from that broad water's central stream  
Was heard a clang of pinions and swift feet—  
Unchanged at heart those babes had caught that gleam ;  
Instant from far had rushed, their sire to greet,  
Spangling the flood with silver spray ; and ere  
That sire had reached the margin they were there.

Then, each and all, clamorous they made lament.  
Recounting all their wrong, and all their woe ;  
And Lir, their tale complete, his garment rent,  
Till then transfixed like marble shape ; and lo.  
Three times, heart-grieved, that concourse raised their cry,  
Piercing the centre of the low-hung sky.

But Lir knelt down upon the shining sand,  
And cried ‘ Though great the might of Druid charms,  
Return and feel once more your native land,  
And find once more and fill your father's arms !’  
And they made answer : ‘ Till the Tailkenn come  
We tread not land ! The waters are our home !’

But when Finola saw her father's grief  
She added thus : ‘ Albeit our days are sad,  
The twilight brings our pain in part relief :  
And songs are ours by night that make us glad :  
Yea, each that hears our music, though he grieve.  
Rejoices more. Abide, for it is eve.’

So Lir and his, couched on the wave-lipped sod  
All night ; and ever as those songs up swelled  
A mist of sleep upon them fell from God,  
And healing spirits converse with them held.  
And Lir was glad all night : but with the morn  
Anguish returned ; and thus he cried, forlorn :

‘ Farewell ! The morn is come ; and I depart :

Farewell ! Not wholly evil are things ill !  
Farewell, Finola ! Yea, but in my heart  
With thee I bide : there liv'st thou changeless still ;  
O Aodh ! O Fiacre ! the night is gone :—  
Farewell to both ! Farewell, my little Conn.' ”

The doom of the children is that they must be tossed about the stormy waters of the Irish seas, till Christianity should prevail over Paganism, and bells should sound over the land to summon the Irish to Christian worship. Before this blessed consummation three hundred years had to be passed on the waters of Lake Darvra ; three hundred more on the stormy seas of Moyle, which separate Scotland from Ireland ; and the last three hundred in the Atlantic waters on Ireland's western coast :

“ The years ran on : the centuries three went by :  
Finola sang : ‘ The Second Woe is ended ! ’  
Obedient then, once more they soared on high ;  
Next morn on Erin's western coast descended,  
While sunrise flashed on misty isles far seen,  
Now gold, now flecked with streaks of luminous green.

And there for many a winter they abode,  
Harbouring in precincts of the setting sun ;  
And mourned by day, yet sang at night their ode  
As though in praise of some great victory won :  
Some conqueror more than man ; some heavenly crown  
Slowly o'er all creation settling down.

So thus those babes, in God's predestined hour,  
Through help of Him, the Lord of Life and Death,  
Inly fulfilled with light and prophet power.  
Believed ; and perfect made their Act of Faith ;  
And thenceforth all things both in shade and shine,  
To them came softly and with touch benign.

Thenceforth they roamed no more, at Inisglair  
Their change awaiting. In its blissful prime  
That island was, men say, as Eden fair.  
The swan-soft nursling of a changeful clime,  
With amaranth-lighted glades, and tremulous sheen,  
Of trees full-flowered on earth no longer seen.

There dwelt those swans ; there louder anthems chanted ;  
There first they sang by day—rapt song and hymn,  
Till all those birds the western coast that haunted  
Came flying far o'er ocean's purple rim,  
Scorning thenceforth wild cliffs and beds of foam ;  
And made then first, that sacred isle their home.”

At last the great missionary Saint enters on his work and Erin becomes a Christian land.

“ Saint Patrick stretched above the wave his hand  
And thus he spake—and wind and wave were stilled—  
‘ Children of Lir, re-tread your native land,

For now your long sea-penance is fulfilled !'  
Then lo ! Finola raised the funeral cry :  
' We tread our native land that we may die !' ”

The Fate of the Children of Lir forms the subject of one of Moore's Irish Melodies, " Silent, oh Moyle." Finola is the speaker :

“ Sadly, oh Moyle, to thy winter-wave weeping.  
Fate bids me languish long ages away ;  
Yet still in her darkness doth Erin lie sleeping.  
Yet still doth the pure light its dawning delay.  
When will that day-star mildly springing,  
Warm our Isle with peace and love ?  
When will Heaven, its sweet bells ringing,  
Call my spirit to the fields above ?”

A belief in the magical powers of these “ God Tribes,” as the Tuath-De-Danaans were entitled, lingers in the country, where the fairies are still supposed to be their representatives. To them tradition ascribes the bringing in of the *Lia fail*, or stone of destiny, on which the kings of Ireland were inaugurated at Tara. The *Lia fail* is commonly believed to exist at the present time, under the coronation chair of the Sovereigns of the United Kingdom in Westminster Abbey, having been brought thither from Scone, where it has fulfilled a similar purpose for the Scottish monarchs. Fergus, king of Scotland, of the Dalriadic (Irish) dynasty, sent for it from Tara, desiring to be crowned on this stone of destiny, which secured, that a sovereign of the Scotie race should never fail to sit on the throne founded on it. The prophecy has not hitherto failed in its accomplishment ; for Queen Victoria is a true descendant of the Scotie line. Some of our antiquaries, however, maintain that the *Lia fail* still remains at Tara, and point to a standing pillar stone on a mound yet remaining as the veritable Stone of Destiny.

For the name of the Green Isle itself, we are indebted to this people, Eri being the name of a daughter of their race—forming Erin in the genitive. Ogma, another of the same family, is presumed to have given name to that species of writing—called ogham—formed by notches on the edges of stones : a form of record which certainly was in use about the lime of the introduction of Christianity ; while to the Dagda, one of their kings, is ascribed the great barbaric tomb on the banks of the Boyne, known as the mound of New Grange. This monument still exists in perfect preservation. It was opened and pillaged by the Danes, in the ninth century of our era, in common with its neighbour tumuli of Knowth and Dowth, and many other sepulchral monuments in different parts of the country. The gold ornaments which the ancient Irish buried with their illustrious dead, were, no doubt, the temptation to the Viking freebooters. This vast mound, covering nearly two acres in extent, and consisting of a conical grass-covered cairn of small stones, and still partly surrounded by a ring of majestic megaliths, is entered by a passage formed of standing stones of considerable size, guarded by a beautifully carved cill at the entrance. This passage measures sixty-three feet in length, and leads to a dome-roofed chamber. Almost every stone employed in the construction of this, and of the smaller chambers which open from it, is not only wonderful from its bulk, but is carefully ornamented with carvings in spirals, lozenges, and other rude, but not ungraceful figures. The plan of the sepulchre is analogous in general design to the Egyptian pyramids. The cairn of stones and clay covering the chambers and passage, corresponds, in the Celtic tomb, with the angular sloping mass of the pyramid. Bardic tradition indicates this as the grave of The Dagda and his three sons. This powerful monarch, “ The Great Good Fire,” is said to have ruled for seventy years. His death is stated to have been the result of a wound received long before at the battle of the Northern Moyturé. His grandsons, called

MacCoil, MacKeact, and MacGrené, because they are said to have worshipped the hazel-tree (*Coll*), the ploughshare (*Keáct*), and the Sun (*Grian*), had for their respective wives, Banba, Fola, and Eri, from whom our island obtained the names by which it is known to the Bardic historians. The objects of worship ascribed to the husbands of these ladies may indicate an advancing civilization and practice of the arts of agriculture.

But a fresh invasion of Erin by another swarm of Celto-Scythic wanderers was impending, and the Tuath-De-Danaan were now to be superseded as a dominant race, by the Milesian immigrants, after they had ruled in Ireland for nigh two hundred years.

The Scoti or Gael, according to their traditions, like the previous colonizers of Erin, traced their descent from Magog, son of Japhet. Unlike the Firbolgs and Tuath-De-Danaans, who passed through Greece on their western route, this wave of Celtic immigrants from their common home in Central Asia, claim to have come by way of Scythia, Egypt, and Spain. Under leadership of Breogan, they won for themselves a footing in Spain, and founded, say the bards, the city of Brigantium, near Corunna, in Galicia. These adventurers, according to their descendants' story (for we must remember we are still in the region of tradition), impelled by famine, which at that time ravaged Spain, resolved to seek a new country, and as a preliminary step, sent forth Ith, son of Breogan, to visit Ireland. He is said to have seen the island, like a cloud on the horizon, from the watchtower of Brigantium. The solitary vessel of Ith, with its crew of one hundred and fifty men, landed in the north of Ireland. He found himself able to converse with the people of the country in their common Gaelic tongue. He informed them that he had landed from stress of weather only, without any intention of settling in the country, but hearing that the three grandsons of the Dagda, of whom we have already spoken, were quarrelling among themselves, and desired his services as umpire, he advanced to meet them, and having made his award, reprovved them for their strife, praising the fruitfulness of the soil of Erin, and its happy temperature.

Ith had set out on his return to his ship, when the Tuath-De-Danaan kings, alarmed by his praises of their country, which they thought indicated a probable return to their shores with a larger armament, followed, and attacked him on the shores of Lough Foyle. Ith placed himself in the rear of his little army, and bravely protected their retreat to the ship,

He was, however, mortally wounded in the fight, but his people carried his corpse to Spain, where his kinsmen, the sons of his nephew Golamh, better known by his bardic name of Miled, the grandson of Breogan, excited by the outrage, resolved to avenge his death, and this is the tale of their expedition as told us by the bards.

The Milesians, with a fleet of thirty ships, each ship carrying thirty warriors, their wives, and attendants, eight of the leaders being sons of Miled, neared the Irish coast. The magical lore of the Tuath-De-Danaans was employed to raise a mist, and the spell-bound voyagers were compelled to sail round the island before they were able to land. This accomplished, they marched on Tara, and there encountered the three sovereigns, attended by their magicians. They demanded quiet possession of the country, or battle. MacColl, MacKeact, and MacGrené, unprepared for either alternative, offered to abide by the decision of Amergin, one of the sons of Miled, who pronounced that the Milesians should again put to sea, for a distance of nine waves or *tonns*, and then attempt a landing. Should the Tuath-De-Danaans fail in preventing this, they were bound by the award of Amergin to yield the sovereignty of Ireland to the invaders. The Gael were no sooner on the ocean than their fleet was scattered by a storm raised by the magical arts of the Tuath-De-Danaans. The greater number of their ships were wrecked, and their leader perished in the waves. Eber and Eremon, surviving sons of Miled, however, effected a landing, and in an engagement at Tailti (supposed to be Teltown in Meath), completely subdued the Tuath-De-Danaan princes, who perished with



their wives, Eri, Banba, and Fola. Two chieftains of the victorious Gael fell in the pursuit, whose deaths we record, as they gave names to districts long celebrated in Irish heroic story ; Cuailgné (now Cooley), in Louth, and the mountainous tract Slieve Fuad (now the Fewes), in the county of Armagh. Such is the story of the Milesian or Scotie immigration ; obviously not so old, in its present form, as the events which it purports to relate, but still a tale of very high antiquity ; and characterized by one of the earliest traits of that chivalrous spirit which has so strongly marked the Romantic school of European literature. From these invaders the Irish historians deduce the whole series of their kings, with one temporary interruption only, down to the end of the native Irish monarchy in the person of Roderick O'Conor A.D. 1172.

The victorious leaders of the Scotie partitioned the island. Munster was assigned to Eber, Leinster and Connaught to Eremon, while Ulster was given to Eber, son of Ir, who had survived the shipwreck in which his father was drowned. Lugaid, son of Ith, the pioneer of the Milesians, had a territory in Munster assigned to him. It is from these successful adventurers that most of our native Irish families claim to trace their descent. But it is singular that while these Milesian representatives abound, and families with Firbolgic ancestors are not unknown, no race, clan, or family existing at the present time are reputed to have Tuath-De-Danaan blood in their veins.

Of the early kings of the Scotie race, the principal are Eremon, in whose time a body of Picts, a cousin-tribe of the Firbolg, arriving in Ireland obtained wives of the ruling race for their new settlements in the north of Britain on the stipulation that their monarchy should thenceforth descend in the female as well as in the male line.

Tiernmas, of the race of Eremon, was a prominent king. He is said to have introduced the public worship of idols. Crom Cruach, a hideous idol, surrounded by twelve smaller divinities, was worshipped with cruel rites on the plain of Moy Slaght, in that part of the ancient territory of Breffny which now constitutes the county of Cavan. Tiernmas was the introducer of those parti-coloured garments now represented by the tartan of the Scottish Gael. The dress of a slave was limited by him to one colour ; a peasant was permitted to have two ; a soldier or a noble, three ; while four colours were allotted to the keeper of a house of hospitality ; five to a chieftain, and six might adorn the robes of a king or a queen. It is recorded that this sovereign possessed among his household a refiner of gold, and we may not improbably trace to this period some part of that excellence of workmanship in the precious metals for which the Irish were so long celebrated, and of which such numerous and varied specimens exist in our National Museum.

A more advanced state of civilization is indicated by the character of legislator ascribed to Olav Fola, a prince of the race of Ir, who instituted the Convention of Tara. This national assembly was held every third year, and to it were summoned the classes illustrious in rank and learning. The monarch entertained all comers for six days, endeavouring, in the exercise of this frank hospitality, to promote good feeling and friendly relations among his subordinate chieftains. An examination and verification of laws, pedigrees and annals is said to have been one duty performed by the antiquarians, bards and sages who assembled at the *Feis* of Tara, but whether these were recorded in writing or orally recited does not appear. Other assemblies of the same character were held at stated periods throughout the subordinate territories. Of these the most noted were the great fairs of Tailtin in Meath, and Carman in Wexford. Vast multitudes resorted to these *Ænach's*, as they were called, for the sake not only of commerce and amusement, but for the purpose of having new laws promulgated, local annals, titles and pedigrees examined, and rival bardic poems rehearsed. As in Greece, many of these assemblies had their beginnings in funeral games celebrated at the obsequies of distinguished personages, as at Tailtin, dating back to the time of the Tuath-De-Danaan King Lugaid, who established those games in honour of his deceased Queen Tailti. These

“Lug-nasa” or “games of Lugaid” were celebrated on the 1st of August, which hence takes its designation of “Lammas” day.

It may readily be supposed that a people, with whom the transmission of property, and indeed their entire social system, depended on genealogical accuracy, would guard, by every possible means, against the intrusion of error or corruption into the pedigrees, which were the title-deeds of every freeman. The invariable custom of naming the father, grandfather, and even more remote ancestor, of each individual who is the subject of the bard or senachie’s pen, shows how important family descent was held by the Gael. Their usage of gavelkind, too, while it divided the property of a deceased parent equally among all his sons, and resulted in that minute subdivision which has been, on the whole, injurious to the progress of civilization and centralization, yet promoted the free development of the individual, and that consciousness of equality which has borne fruit in the courteous consideration for others, resulting from self-respect, which to our own day is so striking in the Celtic races. Michelet, in speaking of this law of equality and equitable division, which characterized the Celts of France as well as those of Ireland and Scotland, observes : “As this law of precious equality has been the ruin of these races, let it be their glory also, and secure to them at least the pity and respect of the nations to whom they so early showed so fine an ideal.”

While the Norman genius developed the feudal system, the Celtic developed that of the clan, which was formed on the family type. Their kings were head of the family, and held in patriarchal fashion their council-courts in the open air, with the advice and assent of their clansmen, who in the lands belonging to the tribe had their equal and indefeasible rights ; nor could the sovereign resort to war without their aid and concurrence. The sovereignty was elective in person, though hereditary in blood. When vacant, it was to descend, according to their law of Tanistry, to “the oldest and most worthy man of the same name and blood.” The *Tanist*, or heir-apparent, was generally, but not necessarily, the eldest son of the reigning monarch, while the younger members of the family were designated *Roydamna*, or “king-material.” The Tanist was generally named at the time when the chief king was elected. To this law of Tanistry may be ascribed, in part, those violent deaths which closed the career of so many Irish kings. This, with that tendency to subdivision which split the country into several petty states, each with its separate ruler, who rendered very equivocal allegiance to the *Ard Righ*, or supreme monarch, resulted in that turbulence and incessant party strife which, to so great an extent, form the subject of the Irish and other early West-European annals.

The professions of Druid, Bard, and Brehon were, in the main, hereditary. The former combined the offices of priest and physician ; the Bards were the poets and historians ; while the Brehons transmitted and administered that code of laws which is known by their name, and which, in its modes of procedure, is found to bear an unexpected resemblance in many points to the Common Law of England, both being probably to a great extent sprung from the same primitive original.

The custom of fosterage was general, families of rank undertaking the nursing and training in manly exercises of the children of their chiefs. The mutual attachments which sprang up between the foster parents, brothers, and sisters, and the scion of noble race who had passed his childhood with them, was one of the strongest feelings of the Irish heart, and led to innumerable instances of devotion which are scarcely intelligible to us at the present day.

But it may be inquired, what tangible remains still exist of these ancient times ? They are not few nor unsuggestive. In addition to the bardic traditions which have so far occupied us, we possess in the Celtic tongue itself, the oldest spoken language in Europe, a means whereby we can “repeople the past.” Its importance, in a philological point of view, is

second only to that of Sanscrit, a kindred tongue ; for we must not forget that the Hindús are a primitive emanation of that Aryan race, moving southwards from their cradle in central Asia, of whom the Celts are the earliest western off-shoots. Sanscrit ceased to be a spoken language some 300 years before the Christian era, very much about the period to which we have now brought the history of the Celts of Ireland. But the valuable knowledge to be gained from the Irish tongue is not lost to us, for its written literature exists to our day, and is now, for the first time, diligently studied by competent scholars, both native and continental. Few, indeed, are the men qualified to explore the mine of wealth which belongs to us in the Western Gaelic language. Its greatest Irish interpreters have recently been removed by death. But other labourers daily arise amongst us. German and French scholars are now pioneering the way for Continental inquiry, and even taking up their abode in Irish-speaking districts to familiarize themselves with the use of this new key to philological and ethnological knowledge. Let us hope that among ourselves prejudices, ignorances, and apathetic indifference to Irish subjects may pass away, and in their stead the desire to do noble work for home and country inspire in the breasts of Irishmen strenuous efforts to learn more and do more for the honour of their native land.

In Ireland, also, to a greater extent than elsewhere, existing remains, such as raths, forts, duns, cashels, cairns, and cromlechs, abound on all sides, to instruct the antiquarian inquirer. Our National museums and libraries, too, are rich in objects of interest illustrating this early period :—stone, bronze, and iron weapons, gold and silver ornaments, specimens of work in metals, together with manuscripts of great importance, and among these the most exquisite examples which Europe can show of illuminated art. On Irish soil may yet be examined the very oldest erections of western Europe, from the rude cranogues, or lacustrine habitations, built on piles artificially planted in shallow lakes, to the earthen forts and stone cyclopean duns, of the pagan period, such as we have already described ; the frequent cromlech, also, of unhewn stones, sometimes of enormous bulk ; the tumulus, with its central stone chamber, often adorned with hieroglyphical carvings, pillar-stones with ogham inscriptions ; Christian churches, cells, stone huts, and graceful round towers; and sculptured crosses, all works of a primitive time, and characteristic of a pure, unmixed, and isolated race.

[1] From *Congal*, by Sir S. FERGUSON.

[2] From *Congal*, by Sir S. FERGUSON.

[3] From *Inisfail*, by AUBREY DE VERE.

[4] The *Children of Lir*, from “ The Foray of Queen Meave,” by AUBREY DE VERE. .

The story of the Irish before the conquest : from the mythical period to the invasion under strongbow (1897)

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