

Traditions and Legends

The races of Ireland and Scotland

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.....the people known as the Scots, who gave their name to Scotland, passed over to that country from ancient Scotia, the modern Ireland. The traditions and legends of these Irish settlers in ancient Alban (part of the modern Scotland) became the common inheritance of both countries, and form the connecting link in the chain that stretches forward to authentic Irish and Scottish history, and backward to traditions concerning the shadowy races who preceded the Gael in the occupation of Ireland.

These races have provided Irish writers, more particularly, with plenty of scope for the exercise of ingenious guessing. The obscurity of the subject has stimulated rather than repel-led persistent research. Yet it must be admitted that the result has been to envelope these pre-historic peoples in a more impenetrable mystery than ever. The prevailing tendency of the present day is to dehumanise them ; to treat them as myths ; to read symbolic meanings into the records of them handed down by tradition ; or to regard them in part or in whole, not as races of real men and women who occupied Ireland before the Celts, but as a pantheon of Celtic gods and goddesses.

This tendency is so contrary to the interpretations of mediæval transcribers and comment-ators, that it can only be regarded as an alternative solution of the problem that has baffled investigation, or as an easy method of evading an admitted difficulty. In either case, it is not a convincing attitude. Any one endowed with a glimmer of imagination can construct a pantheon to suit his own fancy. It is not so easy to offer a sane ethnic theory that shall satisfy the requirements of modern science. It seems probable that the mediævalists have rational-ised too much, and modern critics too little.

What do the Irish traditions tell us about the ethnology of the country ? These traditions, it is well to remember, must have been in their original form rhymed stories handed down orally by the shanachies, or professional historians, from generation to generation, from century to century, until they were clothed by monastic scribes in prose, after the art of writing in Roman characters had been acquired. Transcribed and redacted time and again by monks with views of their own, they appeared finally in the dress in which we see them to-day, a dress the fabric of which was woven mainly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The nearer the source the purer the stream ; and the same law applies to tradition. If the varnish which overlies these stories could be cleaned off, we should see the picture clearly and in its proper perspective. The deliberate emendations and the unintentional errors in which, neces-sarily, the traditions abound would then be obliterated, and there would be less reason perhaps for rioting in symbolism. It is the accretion of legendary matter around the genuine traditions of the country that has concealed a good deal of the historical value, which, beyond doubt, the traditions intrinsically possess.

The Book of Leinster, a compilation of the twelfth century, contains, in common with later compilations, a record of the successive colonies that occupied ancient Ireland. The “ Book of the Invasions,” as this record is usually called, discriminates between the races who settled in the country and those who visited it for spoil. An account of each invasion or settlement is given with the tribal name, or the eponym, of the settlers. The etymology of these tribal names, or eponyms, has baffled philologists, and has thus added to the confusion of ideas in which the whole subject is immersed. Neither Irish nor Scottish Gaelic provides an adequate key. But Cymric is of some help, and for reasons which will presently appear, Cymric is the language above all others that unlocks the door of obsolete Irish words and shows their original meaning.

The first eponym that meets us is that of “ Cesair,” “ a grand-daughter of Noah,” who, with her company, arrived in Ireland very conveniently before the Flood. It is useless to speculate on the racial problem presented by this eponym, and even Irish antiquaries who accept the later Invasions as historical, dismiss Cesair as a myth. The word, or a similar one, is, however, used in Welsh bardic literature, where it denotes “ lordship.” Thus Cesair may well stand as the eponym of the earliest tribes who had dominion over Ireland.

Equally nebulous are the second people who occupied Erin under the leadership of “ Partholan.” This eponym seems to mean land-sharers (Cymric *Parthu*, to divide). According to Keating, the first division of Ireland (he gives seven in all) was by Partholan, originally a Scythian, who came from Greece. He is said to have divided the country into four parts. The tradition tells us that Partholan and the whole of his followers, numbering 9,000 people, were carried off by a plague ; yet the descendants of some survivors appear in later traditions.

The third Invasion places us on slightly firmer ground. This occupation was by “ the sons of Nemed,” and the eponym seems to point to a race regarded, for some specific reason, perhaps for the superiority of its magic, as sacred. The Nemidians, who were the progenitors of the Firbolgs and the Tuatha de Danann (two peoples whom we shall presently meet), were brought under subjection by the Fomorians, who first appear in the time of Partholan. With the Fomorians we can commence to investigate the ethnic problem of Ireland seriously.

It is difficult to imagine a race of beings with aspirations more mundane, and activities more human, than those of the Fomorians. Yet the mythologists are agreed in regarding them either as giants or as mermen. Both assumptions have a philological basis ; but they cannot both be right. It is quite certain that a Fomorian cannot be at one and the same time a “ giant” and a “ being from under the sea.”

The Irish traditions describe these Fomorians without a trace of uncertainty. They were African pirates ; they were Shemites who wished to separate themselves from the race of Ham ; pre-eminently, they were oppressors of the men of Erin. There is nothing here that consists with the idea either of giants or mermen. Etymologically, the name “ Fomorians” may be held to support the plain statements of the traditions, for it seems to mean “ sea-refugees” (Cymric *Ffo*, flight or retreat, and *Môr*, the sea). That the word essentially means “ pirates” would appear to be borne out by the fact that, at a later period, by a people described as “ Fomorians,” the Scandinavian sea-rovers are plainly indicated.

If we go a step further, and ask to what nation these African pirates belonged who exacted an annual tribute, both of children and produce, from the inhabitants of Erin, we face a question of considerable speculative interest. Is it possible to associate the Fomorians with the Phœnicians, whose explorers are believed on excellent grounds to have supplied the Greeks with the earliest description of Ireland that we possess ? There are, in my opinion, good reasons for doing so. The evidence is mainly furnished by identity of religious customs, but it is reinforced by archaeological arguments that merit attention. Like the Fomorians, the Phœnicians were Africans ; they were sometimes pirates ; and they were the first people to visit Erin of whom authentic history has any record. But these would be insufficient grounds of identification if there were no others.

The word *Beltine*, applied in modern times to the fires kindled on hill-tops on May Day, was originally descriptive of a specific heathen custom of which the May Day bonfires are (or rather were, for the practice is now extinct) commemorative. The etymology of *Beltine* is disputed, modern scholars being reluctant to translate it by “ Baal-fire,” owing to the supposed lack of tangible evidences of the prevalence of Baal-worship in these islands. But these evidences seem to exist notwithstanding. In cases of disputed etymology, it is well to get as far back as possible, and that rule will be followed in these pages. Peculiarly helpful, therefore, is the glossary of Irish words

(obsolete or difficult to explain even in the ninth century) left by Cormac, the learned King of Munster and Bishop of Cashel, who was killed in battle in 908 A.D. We find there interpretations, a thousand years ago, of words to which a different meaning is now attached, or the meaning of which is now altogether obscure. One of these words is *Beltine*.

Cormac describes the custom itself in the following terms : “ Belltaine, May Day, i.e., *bil-tene*, lucky fire, i.e., two fires which Druids used to make with great incantations, and they used to bring the cattle (as a safeguard) against the diseases of each year to those fires.” A marginal note adds : “ They used to drive the cattle between them.” [1]

A little further on, Cormac gives the meaning of *Bil* as *Bial*, i.e., “ an idol god,” thus showing that in the first quotation he did not, as some suppose, intend to equate *bil* with “ lucky,” or if he did, that “ lucky” was a secondary meaning. There can be little doubt that Cormac’s *Bial* stands for Baal or Bel. [2]

A close study of fire-customs in ancient Ireland and in modern Scotland reveals the fact that they were of two kinds, one involving the idea of sacrifice, and the other that of purification or protection. One was propitiatory and the other was preventive. The clearest account of the sacrificial class that I have seen is contained in Jamieson’s *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, copied from the Statistical Account of the parish of Callander in Perthshire. The quotation is as follows :—

“ The people of this district have two customs, which are fast wearing out, not only here, but all over the Highlands, and therefore ought to be taken notice of, while they remain. Upon the first day of May, which is called *Beltan*, or *Baltein day*, all the boys in a township or hamlet meet in the moors. They cut a table in the green sod, of a round figure, by casting a trench in the ground, of such circumference as to hold the whole company. They kindle a fire, and dress a repast of eggs and milk in the consistence of a custard. They knead a cake of oatmeal, which is toasted at the embers against a stone. After the custard is eaten up, they divide the cake into so many portions, as similar as possible to one another in size and shape, as there are persons in the company. They daub one of these portions all over with charcoal, until it be perfectly black. They put all the bits of cake into a bonnet. Every one, blindfold, draws out a portion. He who holds the bonnet is entitled to the last bit. Whoever draws the black bit is the devoted person who is to be sacrificed to *Baal*, whose favour they mean to implore, in rendering the year productive of the sustenance of man and beast. There is little doubt of these inhuman sacrifices having been once offered in this country, as well as in the east, although they now pass from the act of sacrificing, and only compel the *devoted* person to leap three times through the flames, with which the ceremonies of this festival are closed.”

There is no trace here of the element of purification, but there is a distinct suggestion of a survival of the element of sacrifice ; and the worthy clergyman’s surmise that the practice originated in offerings to Baal may quite conceivably be correct.

On the other hand, the quotation from Cormac shows that Beltine in Ireland, a thousand years ago, was mainly an observance having as its object the curing of cattle-disease and the protection of the cattle from the ills of the coming year. It is not quite clear whether Cormac’s fire was ignited in the ordinary way, or whether it was *tein eigin*, or forced fire, commonly called need or neid-fire (A.S. *gnidan*, to rub ; Dan. *gnide*).

In his chapters on “ Fire Customs,” [3] Frazer shows the origin and widely-spread character of the need-fire, the various methods throughout the world of making these fires, and the significance attached to the practice. A peculiar virtue belonged to this fire owing to its purity ; it was a “ living fire.” In historical Rome the duty of making the sacred fire pertained to the vestal virgins and the chief Pontiff. Need-fires and perpetual-fires have a history that is full of interest. We find the

“perpetual” method in Ireland as exemplified by the fire of St. Brigid (Bridget) at Kildare, which was plainly a survival of a heathen custom adapted to Christian practice. [4] Martin in his *Western Islands* gives an account of the need-fires of the Hebrides late in the seventeenth century ; [5] and the late Dr. Carmichael describes the custom in the same islands as practised about 1829 ; [6] he states that in Reay (Sutherland) the need-fire was made as recently as 1830. In some cases, the people as well as the cattle, rushed between the fires to be purified.

The fire-cult is usually described as an Aryan custom, but its Aryan origin is doubtful. It is intimately associated, as Dr. Peisker shows, with the Shamanism of the Ural-Altai peoples. Describing the beliefs of the wild tribes east of the Caucasian Range, he writes : “ Fire purifies everything, wards off evil, and makes every enchantment ineffective. Hence the sick man, and the strange arrival, and everything which he brings with him, *must pass between two fires*” [7] (the italics are mine). Here we have a root-idea substantially the same as that embodied in Cormac's description of Beltane in the ninth century, and no less the same as that which induced the Hebridean crofters and the Sutherland and Perthshire farmers in the nine-teenth century to drive their cattle through the forced fires, to cure them of murrain, and protect them against the power of enchantment during the coming year. For it is clear from a consideration of the subject of witchcraft and its various forms of expression, that cattle diseases and the spells of wizardry were intimately associated in the minds of those who practised such rites : purification and protection were equally their object.

It is not easy to dissociate these rites from sun-worship as being the primitive impulse from which they were derived. From the sacrifices offered to Bel there was only a further step to the rites of purification which, as we have seen, are the common possession of Aryan and non-Aryan peoples, though it appears more probable that the Aryans derived the cult from the Turanians rather than the contrary process. It would seem likely, therefore, that the two ideas, sacrificial and purificative, gradually coalesced, thus explaining the application of the name Beltine to a rite that was mainly designed for a purifying purpose. Although the survival of Baal or Bel worship in these islands is at the present day generally scouted as an exploded notion, it is difficult to evade the force of the reasoning that detects traces of that cult in such customs as that described (for example) by the minister of Callander. And it is fair to ask for an alternative and satisfying etymology of the root “ Bel” in Beltine, if its identification with the Phœnician sun-god is rejected. The same root is found in the “ Bell-trees” of ancient Ireland, which were apparently sacred groves. [8] The evidences of sun-worship, more particularly in the Hebrides, [9] where ancient customs, extinct elsewhere, have persisted until modern times, are altogether too strong to be ignored. A single archæological argument from Ireland may be cited ; and it seems conclusive. The solar discs which have been found in that island must necessarily have been associated with the solar cult.

Among the ethnic Irish, a certain god (Crom Cruaich) stands out with peculiar distinctness as pre-eminently the object of special veneration. I suggest that in the several descriptions of this idol which are scattered throughout the most ancient bardic literature, the lineaments are traceable of Baal Melkarth (Moloch) the Tyrian diety that combined the beneficent and maleficent attributes of the Phœnician Sun-god.

It is common ground that the May-day bonfires with their attendant customs, are survivals of pagan rites ; and their symbolism, which survived to the nineteenth century, is found as symbolism as early as the ninth. The reality behind that symbolism may be seen probably in the fifth century, when St. Patrick entered upon his crusade against paganism in Ireland. The chief representative of this paganism was the idol named Crom Cruaich, situated in a plain named Magh Slecht. The idol's name has given rise to a good deal of etymological guessing. It means, literally, either “ Curved Mound,” if *Crom* is an adjective, or “ Mound Serpent,” if a substantive.

Sir John Rhys, whose opinions are entitled to respect, suggests that the idol Crom Cruaich was in a state of decay at the time of St. Patrick, and had consequently assumed a stooping posture ; an

explanation which Dr. Douglas Hyde appears to regard as satisfactory. By this reading, *Crom* is interpreted as the “Stooper”; but *Cruaich* is literally translated by Sir John Rhys as “Mound.” A Mound-stooper is a conception that calls for an effort of the imagination. M. D’Arbois de Jubainville connects *Cruaich* with *cruor*, blood, and translates Crom Cruaich as the “Bloody Crom,” an interpretation that leaves things pretty much as they were.

The literal translations given above are easily explicable, if we assume that Crom Cruaich was one of those peculiarly-shaped eminences known as serpent-mounds. The best example of a serpent-mound, in Scotland at any rate, is one near Oban, which was discovered by Mr. Phené in 1871. [10] The serpent-mound of Crom Cruaich, assuming its existence, may have escaped detection to the present day. Irish antiquaries are not agreed whether Crom Cruaich was situated in Leitrim or Cavan. It may not have been in either county, but I am convinced that when it is ultimately identified, it will be found to take the form of a serpent-mound.

The artificial mound near Oban is stone-ridged ; it curves like the letter “S”; and it is three hundred feet in length. It faces, looking eastwards, the triple peaks of Ben Cruachan (a name, by the way, that has the same derivation as *Cruaich*), and abuts on Loch Nell. Its situation is suggestive of sun-worship, but it is here impossible to enlarge upon that suggestion. On the head of the serpent is a circle of stones, corresponding with the solar disc on the heads of the mystic serpents of Phœnicia. In the centre of the circle, Mr. Phené found the remains of an altar which have since disappeared. Also, the circle has been proved to contain a grave, which reveals the double purpose of this draconine structure. [11]

The *Dinnsenchus*, an Irish topographical tract of uncertain but admittedly ancient date, [12] describes Crom Cruaich (who is called Cenn Cruaich in the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*) [13] in the following words : “The king idol of Ireland, namely Crom Cruaich, and around him twelve idols made of stone, but he was of gold. Until Patrick’s advent, he was the god of every folk that colonised Ireland. To him they used to offer the firstlings of every house, and the chief scions of every clan.”

According to this description, the idol was covered with gold, and was surrounded by twelve lesser deities made of stone. If, now, we replace the idol (which, let it be assumed, was once there) on the altar of the Oban serpent-mound, we have a representation of Crom Cruaich that agrees in every particular with the description in the *Dinnsenchus*, not excepting even the sacrificial feature ; for there is a tradition that, in remote ages, the Oban structure was the scene of public executions.

Crom Cruaich was in Magh Slecht, which may mean the “slaying plain.” This interpretation appears to be more correct etymologically than the “plain of adoration,” which is the usual translation. It connects the plain directly with the sacrificial rites that are mentioned in the Irish texts.

By the Phœnicians, the sacrifice of first-born children was a recognised rite in the exercise of public worship. The offering of first-fruits was a Semitic custom, originally derived, it is believed, from the Akkadians, a Turanian people. It was practised exclusively by Semitic peoples among the Caucasian races. In the sacrifices to Crom Cruaich, we seem to be witnessing the performance of rites appertaining to Baal Melkarth. A description by the late Dean Stanley of an inner temple on the Hill of Samaria, dedicated to Baal, bears some resemblance to the sanctuary of Crom Cruaich. “In the centre,” says Stanley, “was Baal the Sun-god ; around him were the inferior deities.” [14] These are described by the author as Phœnician deities.

In Phœnicia, the Sun-god was sometimes represented in serpentine form. [15] It has already been suggested that Crom Cruaich was draconine, and the conjunction of Bel and the Dragon in early Irish texts can hardly be lacking in significance, particularly when we find the same connexion in the bardic literature of Wales. In the *Leabhar Breac*, one of the ancient Irish books, a lake on the top of a certain mountain is called Loch Bel Dracon, of which it is prophesied, in Adamnan’s Vision,

that it would kill, in the form of a pestilence, three-fourths of the people of the world. [16] It is quite conceivable that this loch may have had a serpentine mound on its borders like that of Loch Nell. [17] Traces of the draconine form are still found in some place-names of Ireland, e.g., *Cor-na-bpiast* (English “beasts”), which Dr. Joyce translates as “the round hill of the worms or enchanted serpents.” The familiar legend that St. Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland, probably originated from the well-grounded assumption that the saint destroyed the ophiolatry which he seems to have found in the island. From the *Tripartite Life*, we find that Cenn Cruaich’s satellites were swallowed up miraculously by the earth when the saint shook his staff at them, and the chief idol himself bore the mark of the staff. This statement seems to imply an attack by Patrick on the rites of the ethnic Irish. Curiously enough, Fionn, no less than Patrick, figures as a serpent-destroyer in Irish legend. He is said to have slain “all the savage reptiles of Erin, the two dragons of Loch Inny and the dragon of Loch Cuan, which is Strangford, the piasta of the Shannon, and the great serpent of Ben Edar, which is Howth.” [18] These reptiles and dragons may be represented in modern times by the “wurrums” feared by the Irish peasants, which infest lakes and carry off human beings. The origin of this superstition may be traceable to the impression produced in the distant past on the minds of the peasantry, by mounds shaped like serpents on the margin of lakes. The serpents covered with grass, but alive, which figured in North African myths, must assuredly mean draconine mounds. The great sea-serpent which appears periodically to the eye of faith, may be the marine counterpart of the land dragon, or it may be the land dragon in another element, for the “beast” was apparently amphibious. The maps of early geographers are frequently decorated with fearsome monsters playfully disporting themselves in the sea. These sea-dragons illustrate the beliefs of the time: they are probably identified with such place-names as Great Orme’s (Worm’s) Head. The dragon-myth on sea and land gripped the imagination of our forefathers, Celts and Teutons alike, as their legends amply testify; and not of those races alone, for in one form or another, the belief is world-wide in extent.

It is noticeable that, in the Irish texts, the word *Crom* is associated with pestilence, e.g., *Crom Chonnaill*, the pestilence that appeared in the form of a beast, and was miraculously killed by Saint MacCreiché; also *Crom Dubh* of Connaught, by which is apparently meant the Black Death; it is translated as “the Black Maggot or Serpent.” [19] The sacrifices to Crom Cruaich were made with the object of averting pestilence or famine. The reverence that would be paid to a god capable of causing or averting a plague is easily conceivable.

It has been objected that some of the rites of the Crom Cruaich cult, may have been added to the original tradition by Christian monks who were conversant with the Scriptural accounts of the worship of Moloch. That objection seems to be met by the consistency with which the whole story, as it now appears, hangs together. It cannot well be doubted that we have here a genuinely historical picture of paganism as it existed in Ireland at the coming of St. Patrick, by whose influence the external forms of heathendom were abolished, though, in substance, some of its features were grafted on the Christian faith.

On the archaeological side, there is something to be said in support of the Phœnician theory. Cromlechs in Ireland are ascribed by tradition to the Fomorians, [20] whom I am seeking to identify with the Phœnicians. It is not a little remarkable that this class of tombs, from North Africa westwards, should preponderate along the line of the Phœnician colonies and trading centres, though, of course, they are found in other parts of the world. [21]

I have thus tried, by evidence which, cumulatively, may carry weight, to show that the Fomorians, a Semitic people who exacted a tribute of first-fruits from the men of Erin, were, in fact, a Phœnician colony, or a body of Phœnician sea-rovers, who imposed alike their rule and their religion upon Ireland. [22] They were followed in their domination of that country by the Firbolgs and the Tuatha de Danann, whose identification will be attempted in the following chapters.

II.

The Firbolgs—The traditional story of their origin—The etymology of the name—A theory to explain the name—The “long-heads” of Ireland—Huxley’s pregnant suggestion—The Firbolgs identified by tradition with the “Mediterraneans”—Moytura, the “heap plain”—Giants and gods—The overthrow of the Firbolgs by the Tuatha de Danann.

THAT the Firbolgs were a race of real men and women is common ground alike for Euhemerists and mythologists. But not for all mythologists. One of the most curious theories which have been advanced is that which makes the Firbolgs “men of the bag or womb,” i.e., men “born in the ten lunar-months of gestation.” [23] The association of *bolg* with “bag” lies at the root of nearly all the guesses which have been made to explain who the Firbolgs were, and to give a satisfactory derivation of their name. The prefix *fir* (men) is beyond dispute; the difficulty is with *bolg*, to which various meanings have been attached.

The Irish story about these people, as preserved by Keating (a familiar name in the discussion of Irish history), is obviously a late concoction, being composed mainly of etymological elements, but based perhaps on a slender foundation of genuine tradition. Keating states that there were three correlated peoples the Firbolgs, the Firdhomhnoin, and the Fergailians [24] comprehensively the Firbolgic tribes who were oppressed by the “Greeks.” These Firbolgs, preferring exile to slavery, emigrated to Erin. They had been forced by their Greek masters to dig up clay, and carry it to barren places to form soil for crops. The Firbolgs carried the clay in bags, hence their name, for *bolg* means a “bag.” The Firdhomhnoin did the digging, hence their name, for *dhomhnoin* means “deep.” The Fergailians guarded the workers from the attacks of enemies, hence their name, for *gailian* means a “spear.”

From the time of Keating to the present day, the Firbolga have been called “men of the bag,” or “bag men,” for the same reason as Keating’s, namely that *bolg*, among other things, means a “bag.” That undisputed fact does not however, carry us very far; not further, indeed, than the threshold of enquiry. For, if the Gaelic *bolg* (and the Cymric *bolgan*) signifies “bag” or “sack,” it means the same thing in Mæso-Gothic, and is found with a cognate signification in all Teutonic languages. It is the source from which are derived a number of English words, e.g., “bag,” “big,” “bulk,” “bulge,” “bilge,” “billion,” “belly,” “boll,” and perhaps “ball.” We find it in place-names, e.g., the “Bogie” (anciently “Bolgie”) “River,” “Cairnbulg,” and “Dunbolg,” all in Scotland, and “Moybolgue” (anciently “Maghbolg”) in Ireland, with others that could be named. The essential idea at the root of all these words is “swelling,” and it will be found that every word derived from *bulg* or *bolg* possesses that characteristic.

Applying this test to “Firbolg,” the idea that first suggests itself is that of a nation of “paunch-bellies,” an aggregation of individuals distinguished by fatness. That idea, inherently improbable as a national name, receives no countenance of any sort from tradition. Nor are we justified on etymological or other grounds in connecting the name with the Belgæ of England; and still less, perhaps, with the Volcae, the Celtic people from whom some philologists derive the name *Walh*, applied by the Teutons to the Celts, and afterwards to the Romance people of France and Italy. The word Firbolg has its nearest congener among European national names in that of the Bulgars of Bolgary, a race of Ugro-Finnish origin on the Volga, whose ancestors between the fifth and seventh centuries conquered and gave their name to Bulgaria, afterwards adopting the language of the Slavonic people whom they sub-dued. But it is impossible to establish even a remote connexion between them and the Irish Firbolgs; the former are not found as European settlers until the fifth century.

Orosius mentions a country called by him “Bulgaria,” which he places near Istria on the Adriatic, [24] and by the same author a Bulgarian people (“Illyrians whom we call Bulgarians”) [25] are placed in Thessaly. It is evident, therefore, that the ancient Illyrian people were called Bulgar-

ians ; and these Illyrians are believed to be one of the most ancient of the Mediterranean nations. [26] They may be the “ Bulgares” mentioned by Jordanes as a people oppressed by the Goths.

Here, therefore, we may find the link we require between the Firbolgs and the Greeks of the legend who oppressed them. For wars between the Greeks and the Illyrians were frequent ; and it is by no means improbable that the latter were enslaved by their formidable neighbours. They were certainly conquered by the Macedonians. Orosius relates that Philip of Macedon slew many thousands of the Bulgarians in Thessaly, and captured Larissa, their largest city. The Illyrians had a good military reputation, and “ they of all people could fight the best on horses.” [27] They were, therefore, a valuable asset for the Macedonian army.

It is not necessary, of course, to treat seriously the fiction related by Keating to account for the name *Firbolg*, for that can be explained on more rational grounds. The root *bolg* enters into combination with *muir* (the sea) in some early place-names to denote an inlet or a “ sack” bay like the Frisian *Jâde*. [28] It is found in the name “ Muirbolc” (Port na Murloch, Lismore), used by Adamnan with that meaning, and in “ Muirbolg” (now Murlough) in Ulster. Thus *bolg* is in these names the equivalent of “ lough” or “ loch.” The idea conveyed seems to be that of the sea “ bulging” into the land. So, too, the *Gae-bolg*, wielded by Cuchullin in his famous fight at the Ford, was a spear, which, on entering the body, made only one wound, but afterwards expanded into thirty barbs. And Spring was named *Imbulc*, perhaps because it is the time of the swelling of the buds.

Applying the theory of an inlet, or bay, or loch, to explain the name of the Bulgarians (Illyrians), it is barely conceivable that it may relate to the Adriatic, or, in an extended sense, even to the Mediterranean Sea. But that is a venture-some hypothesis, and it seems far more probable that the Irish Firbolgs derived their name from the fact that their later location was mainly in Connaught. The numerous inlets by which the coast of Connaught is characterised, offer a plausible explanation of the name “ Firbolgs,” viz.:— “ Bay-men,” the latter being thus the equivalent of the Scandinavian name, “ Vikings.” [29] Tradition asserts that Erris in Mayo was the chief landing-place of the Firbolgs, and Mayo is peculiarly indented by bays. Corroboration of the view just stated may be found in one of the Irish texts, which informs us that the Firbolgs came to Erin “ out of the East (of Ireland) beyond Slieve Alpa (which is in Mayo), and the country of the Franks and the Lochlannah.” [30] The allusion to the Franks and the Lochlannah seems to imply the existence of Norman and Scandinavian settlements in Ireland at the time the text was written, thus dating it from post-Norman times.

In Eddi’s *Life of St. Wilfrid*, there is an allusion to the tribes (apparently a servile people) who were gathered together by the Picts of Scotland *de utribus et folliculis Aquilonis*. [31] Not improbably these tribes were located along the northern lochs on the coast. *Uter* and *folliculus*, in a figurative sense, may well mean a “ sack” bay and a “ sack” inlet.

The population of Ireland is now, and so far as has been ascertained, always has been, almost wholly dolichocephalic. The ancient skulls which have been observed belong either to the middle form represented by the long-barrow and river-bed elements of the population of England, or the elongated crania represented by the Scandinavian skull. The former belong to what Huxley has classified as *Melanochroi*, the short, dark longheads, and the latter to his *Xanthochroi*, the tall, fair longheads. The first is the Mediterranean or Iberian type : the other is the type associated with the Scandinavians. Retzius alludes to the likeness between the Scandinavian and what he calls the “ Celtic” skull ; and he states that, having on one occasion exchanged with Sir W. Wilde a typical Scandinavian for a typical Irish skull, both observers agreed that “ it would be difficult to find any important difference between the two.” [32] Commenting upon the tall, fair, red-haired, and blue-eyed dolichocephali who are (and appear always to have been) so numerous in Ireland and Scotland, Huxley suggests that “ long before the well-known Norse and Danish invasions, a stream of Scandinavians had set in to Scotland and Ireland, and formed a large part of our primitive

population.” [33] I am convinced that this suggestion explains a good deal in Irish and Scottish ethnology that has presented a baffling problem to students.

The descendants of the “Mediterraneans” abound in the west of Ireland at the present day. They are a dark, long-headed, and rather short people; and their progenitors are believed to be the Firbolgs of Irish tradition. Duaid MacFirbis, a celebrated Irish antiquary of the seventeenth century, distinguishing between the descendants of the Firbolgs, the Tuatha de Danann, and the Milesian Scots, gives the following characteristics of the first-named:—

“Everyone who is black-haired, who is a tattler, guileful, tale-telling, noisy, contemptible; every wretched, mean, strolling, unsteady, harsh, and inhospitable person; every slave, every mean thief, every churl, every one who loves not to listen to music and entertainment; the disturbers of every council and every assembly, and the promoters of discord among people; these are the descendants of the Firbolgs, of the Gailiuns of Liofarné, and of the Fir Domhnanns in Erin. But, however, the descendants of the Firbolgs are the most numerous of all these.” [34]

MacFirbis states that he took this “from an old book,” and gives no further information about his authority. But the unflattering character which he ascribes to the descendants of the Firbolgs fits in with some allusions in the ancient texts to “a base Firbolgic clan, a tribute-paying people, scorn of the warrior-tribes of Erin.” [35] On the other hand, the same texts elsewhere describe the Firbolgs as being “mighty of bone and thigh,” but “not so comely to look upon as the warriors of the race of Milith.” [36] And Fardia, the chief of the Firbolgs, who fought with Cuchullin at the Ford, is delineated as a proud, independent warrior, of stately mien and with flowing golden hair.

There is a seeming contradiction here, but unless the text has been redacted, the explanation may be that these big, raw-boned Firbolgs were of another race, superimposed upon the smaller, darker, and less warlike Mediterraneans. They are described as “champions,” and among the ancient Irish, as among the ancient Scandinavians, that word implied mercenary professional fighters, who were employed to guard the boundaries of those whose service they entered. These “fighting Firbolgs” may have thus become attached to the Mediterraneans, and in time have become their masters.

Sir W. Wylde speaks of a long-headed, dark people west of the Shannon, and of a more globular-headed, light-haired stock north-east of that river, [37] by which description Huxley assumed that he meant that the latter people have broader heads than the others—“not that there was any really, brachycephalic stock in Ireland.” This combination of physical characteristics in what is believed to have been a Firbolgic district, offers a curious parallel to the distinction we have been considering, and seems to support the suggestion I have made. It is conceivable that the fair, globular-headed people may represent, with modifications caused by racial admixture, an outlying fraction of the fair, broad-headed people of the Bronze Age, who, according to the school of Thurnam and Huxley, “intruded upon a pre-existing, dolichocephalic, Iberian population in England.”

That the Firbolgs belonged to the Stone Age there is some evidence to show. The allusion in the texts to the “sons of Tooran,” who slew the father of Lu Lamfada, not with “the bright clear bronze,” but with “stones and rugged rocks,” seems to denote contact between a stone-using and bronze-using people. The Firbolgs had their centre at Moytura “the heap plain” [38] where characteristics of the Stone Age, such as cromlechs, are found. These people, and their kinsfolk in Scotland, are associated with the cyclopean style of architecture expressed in archaic buildings, the later examples of which are commonly known as “bee-hive” houses. Structures with the cyclopean arch are found both above-ground and under-ground, while some are semi-subterranean. There need be little hesitation, I think, in identifying the Firbolgs with the men of the Stone Age, the “old black breed” of Ripley, who are largely represented in the west of Ireland, and the west and extreme, north-east of Scotland.

The difficulty of reconciling the various statements in the traditional accounts of the Firbolgs has suggested to Dr. Standish O’Grady that they were “giants,” who, in their struggle with the “gods,”

represented by the Tuatha de-Danann, were eventually worsted ; and he thinks that the people whom the Gael found in Ireland and placed under tribute were believed to be descended from these giants. That is not a satisfying explanation, but if it were correct, it would appear to suggest that the traditions of the struggle for domination between the gods and the giants were of Scandinavian origin, for they are a counterpart of the Eddie stories of the state of perpetual enmity that existed between the *Asar* and the *Jotnar*. The Fomorians, who also figure in these Irish contests for supremacy, might, with greater reason than the Firbolgs, be regarded as “giants,” for some isolated traditions concerning them (e.g., the huge form of Balor of the Evil Eye, who led the Fomorians at the battle of Moytura) clearly belong to the gigantic category. But even the Fomorians are, on the whole, so much like ordinary pirates, that it is easier to believe that they were men occasionally magnified by tradition into giants, than giants frequently minified by tradition into men. As for the Firbolgs, I can see nothing in the traditions to justify the belief that, even occasionally, they are represented as giants. The traditions relating to the overthrow of the Firbolgs by the Tuatha de Danann are quite definite ; and without doing complete violence to the texts, it is not easy to see how a non-human origin can be postulated for either people. The Firbolgs retained the supremacy of Ireland, until they were defeated and dispersed by the Tuatha de Danann in a great battle at Moytura. The reverse they suffered was of so severe a character that they never made another stand against their conquerors. Keating states that those of them who escaped the slaughter at Moytura fled to the Hebrides, where they remained until driven out by the Picts. Other accounts say that they were dispersed throughout Ireland. There is nothing mutually inconsistent in these versions, and both may be correct. There is (or was) a *Dun Fhirbolg*, an ancient stronghold in St. Kilda (of old Hirt) which would seem to corroborate Keating’s statement. His account goes on to say that some of the Firbolgs who fled to the Hebrides found their way back to Ireland, where they were apportioned land, first in Leinster and afterwards in Connaught.

This brings us back to the short, dark, long-headed people of the west of Ireland who are popularly believed to be the descendants of the Firbolgs. [39] And the popular view is probably correct. By whatever name they are called, whether Iberians, Firbolgs, or Mediterraneans, the physical characteristics of these dwellers on the western seaboard are substantially the same as those that belonged to the Firbolgic tribes, who were scattered on the plain of Mayo by a race of superior skill in warfare.

[1] Cormac’s *Glossary* (Stokes), p. 19.

[2] Keating says : “ It is from that fire made in honour of Bel that the 1st of May is called Biltaini or Bealtaine ; for Beltainni is the same as Beil-teine, i.e., tein Shell or Bel’s fire.

[3] *The Golden Bough*, ii., pp. 195-26.5.

[4] In the Scandinavian temples there was a hallowed fire “ which must never go out” (Eyrbyggia Saga).

[5] *Description of the Western Islands*, circa 1695, p. 113 (1884).

[6] *Carmina Gadelica*, ii., p. 340.

[7] *The Cambridge Medieval History*, i., p. 346.

[8] It will not do to assert that Beltine is simple “ Bale-fire” (A.-S. *Bæl*, a burning), or a warning fire kindled on an eminence, because that derivation entirely fails to explain the rites associated with Beltine. The same objection applies to Cym. *Beili*, an eminence.

[9] See Martin’s *Western Islands*.

[10] A description of this mound is given in Miss Gordon Cumming’s *From the Hebrides to the Himalayas*, i., pp. 37-9.

[11] The serpent-mound at Oban is not the only one in Scotland. There is one at Glenelg, and another in Lorn (Henderson’s *Survivals of Beliefs among the Celts*, p. 169). The author remarks (pp. 167-8) that one finds the serpent associated with a knoll in Scottish myth. The serpents figured on some of the sculptured stones may have a religious significance.

[12] Attributed to the sixth century.

[13] *Cenn* is here to be equated, perhaps, with “ King,” a meaning which seems to be borne out by

the succeeding words quoted from the *Dinnsenchus*. If it means “ head” or “ chief,” it suggests the presence of other and inferior mounds of the same character.

[14] *Lectures on the Jewish Church*, Part ii., pp. 288-9.

[15] The serpent was considered to be symbolical of the solar deity. See Deane on *Serpent Worship*, p. 85, who calls Ophion the serpent-god of Phœnicia (p. 186). Deane (p. 94) says that the Phœnician mariners introduced to Western Europe the worship of a deity named Ogham. The name irresistibly suggests the mysterious Ogam script.

[16] O’Curry’s *Lectures on the MS. Materials of Ancient Irish History*, p. 427.

[17] Water-spirits, however, usually take the form of serpents or dragons (see Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, ii., p. 155).

[18] O’Grady, *History of Ireland*, i., p. 33.

[19] O’Curry, *Lectures*, pp. 631-9.

[20] O’Grady, *History of Ireland*, i., p. 141.

[21] Whether the dolmens came to Ireland with the Phœnicians, or a race akin to the Berbers, it seems to be tolerably certain that their centre of dispersion was North Africa.

One of the meanings of *Cat* is tumulus. It is properly applied to dolmens (*cf.* Keith (or Cat) Coity House at Aylesford in Kent), which adds force to the contention that the latter were originally covered by mounds.

Of the cup-markings on cromlechs in Scandinavia, Montelius says (*Woods*, p. 36) :—
“ These were certainly used for offerings either to or for the dead.” They are called “ elf-mills” (compare the old custom in the North of Scotland of offering oblations of ale and milk to “ Brownie” on stones with cup-receptacles for the liquid). Montelius adds : “ Even at the present day, they are in many places regarded as holy, and offerings secretly made in them.” Are these cup-marked cromlechs the work of the colonies of Semitic people who, according to Nilsson, introduced both bronze and Baal-worship to the south and west of Scandinavia ?

The name “ giants’ graves” applied in the south-east of Ireland to cromlechs, finds its counterpart in Denmark, where they are called “ giants’ chambers.” Probably their gigantic properties relate to the massive size of the stones, which were doubtless believed to have been raised by a race of giants. The stone circles in Scandinavia (see Worsaae) are found in conjunction with tombs of the Stone period, mounds of earth being the distinguishing characteristics of the Bronze Age.

[22] The Irish “ keeners,” who were hired to howl at funerals, perpetuated a heathen custom derived apparently from a Phœnician ancestry (see Stainer and Barrett).

[23] *Primitive Traditional History*, by J. F. Hewitt, vol. i., pp. 32 and 336.

[24] Gailion and Domhnann were names for Leinster (*Silea Gadelica*, Eng. text, p. 500).

[25] *King Alfred’s Orosius* (Thorpe), p. 257.

[26] The modern Albanians are thought to be their nearest descendants, and it is a curious fact that the modern Albanians claim a common ancestry with the modern Scots.

[27] *King Alfred’s Orosius*, p. 339.

[28] See a discussion on “ sack-inlets” in Nansen’s *In Northern Mists*, i., p. 93. An exact parallel is found in Mid. High German *Slûch*, which means both a “ leather bag” (*bolg*), and a “ gulf” (*bolg*). Apparently, in both instances, there has been an evolution in meaning.

[29] *Bolg* would seem to convey the idea equally of convexity and concavity (*cf.* *sinus*, a bay or bosom).

[30] O’Grady, i., pp. 210-211. Lochlyn (Cym. *Llychlyn*) means a gulf. The Lochlannah or Scandinavians may have derived their name from the Gulf of Bothnia, or perhaps, in a wider sense, from the Baltic.

[31] Cited by Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, i., p. 261. Skene offered no opinion on the meaning of the words.

[32] *Prehistoric Remains of Caithness*, p. 129.

[33] *Prehistoric Remains of Caithness*, p. 134.

- [34] O'Curry's *Lectures on M.S. Materials*, p. 223 (cf. another version, p. 580).
- [35] O'Grady's *History of Ireland*, i., p. 183.
- [36] *Ibid.*, i., p. 21-2. The Irish bards have given us a curious assortment of racial characteristics, e.g., the creeping Saxon ; the fierce Spaniard ; the covetous French ; the angry Britons ; the gluttonous Danes ; the high-spirited Cruithne ; and the beautiful and amorous Gaedhil (O'Curry's *Lectures*, p. .581).
- [37] Cited in *Prehistoric Remains of Caithness*, p. 127.
- [38] The name Moy or Magh Tura suggests a plain strewn with *tumuli*, similar to plains in Etruria where structures like cromlechs have also been found. The " sons of Tooran" of the Irish texts may be intended for the Tyrhenni, one of the races comprised in the mixed people known as Etruscans.
- [39] Keating, p. 4-1 (1733), gives the names of three tribes who, according to the Irish antiquaries, were the lineal descendants of the Firbolgs. They are placed on the east as well as the west coast.

Dr. Beddoe (*The Races of Britain*, p. 267) states that the people about the battlefield of the northern Moytura (between Sligo and Roscommon) were the swarthiest people he had ever seen. They reminded him more of the south Welsh than any other people in Ireland.

It is a curious fact that the *Grecraighe*, the so-called " Greek tribes" (whence possibly the Scots names " Greig," " Gregory," and " Gregor") mentioned by the Annals of Ulster (152), were situated between Sligo and Roscommon. There is room for the conjecture that *Grecraighe* really means " heath" tribes (Cym. *Gryg*, heath) ; perhaps another name for the *Cathraige*, who were Firbolgs.

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