

LIA FÁIL: FACT AND FICTION IN THE TRADITION

AREA OF CONTRADICTIONS

We are agreed generally that the Lia Fáil was a stone monument at Tara which showed approval of the king, or king-to-be, by uttering a cry when he made contact with it. Beyond this there is nothing like unanimity about the nature of the phenomenon, or the meaning of the word *fál*. Just a few of the many etymologies for *fál* will give us an idea of the confusion in which we find ourselves. Christian J. Guyonvarc'h calls the stone *Pierre de Souveraineté*, and would derive *fál* from the root in Latin *valere* 'to prosper', Irish *flaith*.¹

Without going deeply into the matter one might say that it is hard to understand why the word *flaith* itself was not used, since that means 'sovereignty' exactly. R. A. S. Macalister says *fál* is a proper noun, the name either of a man or a god.² However, in the same volume, the author gives an instance where the stone is treated as a woman.³ Jan de Vries, in his *La religion des Celtes* sees in *fál* the radical of Latin *vagire* 'to scream', but the writer himself doesn't seem confident, and I can understand why: on the same page he says the Lia Fáil was phallic-morphic. However, I must say his etymology is well worth considering: the aspect of the stone that obtrudes itself is the 'scream'.⁴

Etymologies, as well as analogies in Indo-European ideology, must remain conjectural until we have fairly exact knowledge of the nature and function of the Lia Fáil. We lack this: we have not succeeded in fitting the Lia Fáil into an Irish setting and, until we do so, we cannot extend the field of operation. Jan de Vries illustrates well this flaw in methodology. He sees Tara as the centre of Ireland, or perhaps sharing the honour with Uisneach. This leads him to equating the Lia Fáil with the *omphalos* at Delphi and, with a slight extension of evidence, with the *yupa*, the sacrificial stake in India.⁵ His premise, however, is more than doubtful. F. J. Byrne, in his history, has made a close study of early Tara, and he says: 'It is true that Uisneach rather than Tara was the umbilical centre of Ireland'.⁶ Even if Tara were the centre of Ireland it would be an extremely weak foundation for forging Indo-European connections. Whether the analogy with the *omphalos*, and such, is right or wrong, it is an untimely introduction, something that should be considered only after thorough investigation on the home ground.

¹C. J. Guyonvarc'h, 'Irlandais *Lia Fáil* "Pierre de Souveraineté"', *Ogam* 16 (1964) 436-40, p. 437.

²R. A. S. Macalister, *Tara, a pagan sanctuary of ancient Ireland* (London 1931) 134-5.

³*ibid.*, 146.

⁴J. de Vries, *La religion des Celtes* (Paris 1963) 247 n.

⁵*ibid.*, 249.

⁶F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 58.

A GENERAL CONSPECTUS

By the 'home ground' I mean textual references in Irish to the Lia Fáil and I start by setting down ten examples of the contexts of Lia Fáil, taken from the *DIL*.⁷ They should help to give a general impression of our area of investigation, to indicate what is frequent, what seems emphasised. Above all, they should point out the way to be followed. They are:

- (i) (in lia fáil) . . . in tan ticedh rí Eirenn fuirre, do ghéised in lecc fáil.
- (ii) rogēsi Fāl fad chossaibsiu: al-līn ngēmīnd rogēisi is é lín rígh bisa ditt sīl-su for Hērinn.
- (iii) is iat Tuatha D[é] D[anann] tucsat leo in fál mór .i. in lia fis baí i Temraig.
- (iv) Fál i tóeb dumai na ngiall atuid .i. cloch in sin no géisedd fonti no gebad rígi nHerend . . . Fál ainm na clochi sin .i. fó ail .i. ail fo rí.
- (v) in cloch nogeissed fo chossaib cach rígh nogeibedh hErinn, Fal ainm na clochi sin.
- (vi) an Lia Fail bui a Temraig nogesed fo cech rig nogebad Erinn.
- (vii) cec[h]aing dar fal faen Temrach.
- (viii) téit dochum Fail. . . ; gloedith in Fal. 'Arraet Fal' forsint slua[i]g.
- (ix) lengait Temraig tren titacht tuath Galeoin, golaid lia Fail fri falgud fairni faireoin.
- (x) bai Fal and, Ferp cluche . . . intī arfemath flaith Temrach, gloedad in Fal fri fonnad in charpait.

LIA FÁIL AS FLAGSTONE

From the list we get hints of certain features of the Lia Fáil which become more apparent as we move along, and are a great aid in determining the function of the stone. In example (i) the Lia Fáil is called *lecc* (flagstone). It is usually contended that this is a mistake on the part of the author,⁸ but we shall see that there is ample evidence otherwise to support *lecc* (flagstone). Indeed, example (vii) says *fáen* 'prone, stretched out', and the meaning of that is clear. Also we find the Lia Fáil called *lecc Luighdhech*, *lecc Laoghair*, *lecc na Ríogh*,⁹ the proper nouns being the names of prominent kings. The evidence could be greatly extended. I understand *lia* to mean any kind of big stone, but *lecc* is definitely limited in meaning: it has to be flat – think of contexts like *lecc oighridh* 'ice', *lecc ega* 'ice-floe'.¹⁰ There is, therefore, a good *prima facie* case for not accepting that Lia Fáil is a conical or cylindrical stone.

⁷ *Dictionary of the Irish language* (Dublin 1913–74), no. (i) s.v. *fo* I (a), (ii) s.v. *géisid*, others s.v. 5 *fál*.

⁸ Byrne, *Irish kings*, 57.

⁹ *DIL* s.v. *lecc* (g).

¹⁰ *DIL* s.v. *lecc* (f).

FEET ON STONE

In the quotations above, where there is a reference to the king, he is described as putting his feet on the stone – I shall deal with the exception later. This can scarcely be an ‘ordeal’, as we are sometimes led to think, for the king does nothing difficult or dangerous. Indeed, it is scarcely a ‘test’ either; I see no instances of a king being rejected. The choice of kings has been settled beforehand, and the cry is merely the seal of approval; the king is being inaugurated.

There is great emphasis, however, on the contact of feet with stone – the king is on the stone; the stone is under him or, more significantly, under his feet. Stepping on the stone has all the appearance of a rite; certainly it is no casual or brief encounter. We get confirmation of this from a quatrain attributed to the poet Cinaed (Ua hArtacáin). The situation of Cinaed is a little different from the usual for he, the poet, and not a king, is the suppliant, but we collect some more information about the nature of the Lia Fáil – a brief but useful account. In the first couplet Cinaed says:

In cloch for stait mo dī šáil
hūaidhi ráiter Inis Fáil. . . .¹¹

Here putting feet on stone takes on a clearer appearance of ritual, for the position seems necessary for an announcement. Moreover, Cinaed remains standing on the Lia Fáil while he delivers his quatrain. I conclude that the poet gets help and approval from some supernatural being through the stone; he derives authority from it. From this it would appear that the king also is in communion with some otherworld spirit when he stands on the Lia Fáil; he too gets authority conferred on him. It is a bit of a surprise to find a poet on the Lia Fáil, but not incredible, if we admit that primitive poetry is oracular.

GODDESS CHARACTER OF THE LIA FÁIL

There is a diversity of opinion as to whether the Lia Fáil is some kind of magic stone, god or goddess. To those well acquainted with Irish literature demonstrating the goddess character of the Lia Fáil may seem a superfluous task, for the cry of the Lia Fáil sounds familiar. It is a cry we encounter in Irish poetry down to the eighteenth century. Sometimes it comes from a fairy woman, sometimes from a wave like Tonn Tóime, or from a river. Of course, we know this is the Earth Goddess, Mother Ireland, sending a message. However, it is possible to give a more formal demonstration.

There are two episodes in *Baile in Scáil*.¹² In the first Conn Céadchathach treads on the Lia Fáil, and it utters a number of cries, which

¹¹R. A. S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* IV (Ir. Texts Soc. XLI, Dublin 1941 for 1939) 244.

¹²K. Meyer, ‘Der Anfang von Baile in Scáil’, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 13 (1921) 371–82.

the *file* interprets as the number of kings of Conn's seed who will succeed him. In the second episode Conn encounters Flaithius Érenn, the Earth Goddess. Through an otherworld interpreter Flaithius Érenn supplies the actual names of the kings of his seed who will succeed Conn. The stone and the lady deliver almost the same prophetic message, and it is difficult not to see them as one, both goddesses. Indeed, the story seems largely designed for this purpose.

A second anecdote leaves little doubt. 'Nuadu Finn Fáil . . . used often visit the Lia Fáil, playing with it, and courting; for the prophets had foretold to him that he would be king of Ireland, wherefore he was called Fair Nuadu of Fál thereafter.'¹³ This short narrative is very illuminating. Nuadu is an ancestor deity, probably the same as Nuadu, king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, appearing also as the god of the source of the Boand, and spouse of the river goddess, Boand.¹⁴ At least the Lia Fáil is female. Moreover, since Nuadu belongs to the deity class, and his consorts, like Boand, are goddesses this should make the Lia Fáil a goddess also. We must be witnessing the actual foundation of kingly inauguration at Tara, something begun when Nuadu courted the Lia Fáil. If so the Lia Fáil is the Tara king's otherworld spouse.

A COMPARISON OF INAUGURATIONS

We usually speak of the pagan inauguration at Tara and the Christian one elsewhere, as if Tara were unique, but there can be little difference: they are both products of the same pagan ideology. A comparison should give us more knowledge, and a better understanding of the Lia Fáil ceremony. F. J. Byrne has a good summary account of the Christian, or ordinary, ceremony¹⁵ and, further back, so has John O'Donovan.¹⁶ According to them the ordinary inauguration took place on an ancient coronation flagstone, at a traditional religious site, frequently on a mound. The slab held the imprint of two feet, believed to have been formed by the first ruler of the kingdom. The king stood on these footmarks throughout almost the entire ceremony. This was the general pattern, we get it even in Gaelic Scotland.¹⁷ We can see that the overall picture is the same in the so-called pagan and ordinary inaugurations, and this clarifies details. We can be sure, for instance, that the king did not merely touch the slab at Tara; he stood on it for the duration of the event, as the poet Cinaed did. The founder – probably the aforementioned Nuadu – was remembered also at Tara. We know this from a passage in *Agallamh na Senórach*, but there is a gap in the text which probably accounts for the missing name.¹⁸ In reference to

¹³W. Stokes (ed.), 'Cóir Anmann', *Irische Texte* III/2 (Leipzig 1897) 285–444, p. 326 § 83.

¹⁴Byrne, *Irish kings*, 55.

¹⁵ibid., 15–22.

¹⁶J. O'Donovan, *The O'Connors of Connaught* (Dublin 1891) 129–30.

¹⁷Byrne, *Irish kings*, 20.

¹⁸W. Stokes (ed.), 'Acallamh na Senórach', *Irische Texte* IV/1 (Leipzig 1900) 224.

the Lia Fáil, the question is asked: 'Who raised that slab (*leac*) or, who took it out of Ireland?' Oisín's unfinished answer is: 'A high-spirited warrior who took the kingship. . .'. Since there was a memory of a founder, and remembering how carefully Cinaed put his two heels on the stone, there is a great likelihood that there were two footprints on the Lia Fáil.

Though it doesn't much concern us at the moment, there is one other detail of interest. At the conclusion of the ordinary coronation rite the *file*, or sub-king, put a shoe on the king.¹⁹ The shoe may be part of the royal insignia but, in any case, we can possibly infer that the king was barefoot while on the flagstone. If that was so it magnifies greatly the religious nature of the 'feet on stone'.

The Lia Fáil ceremony must be largely in line with the run of inaugurations; the only difference is the cry. It is more reasonable to conclude that other sites abandoned the cry than that Tara was unique in that respect. The well-known stubborn loyalty of Tara to tradition preserved the goddess a little longer.

THE LIA FÁIL IN SACRED MARRIAGE

We should get a still clearer picture of the Lia Fáil by viewing it in the light of the Sacred Marriage: the inauguration is an espousal.²⁰ In a marriage the groom and bride must be present, and must make some gesture of assent, or simulated union. This can be seen in the Lia Fáil ceremony. The groom is the king; the bride is the Earth Goddess, here taking one of her numerous forms, a flagstone in the earth. In a modern marriage, the groom might hold the bride's hand while they exchanged vows. At Tara the king puts his feet on the flagstone, a marital gesture directed towards rock and earth. The cry is the bride's response. Jan de Vries recognizes almost all of this. He says: 'Quant au cri de la pierre, ne pourrait-il pas être la voix de la déesse Terre, qui donne par là son assentiment?'²¹ He fails, however, to come to the logical conclusion, that the stone is the bride, not a phallus. At a remote period the sexual gestures must have been much more primitive and explicit, as in the gross *asvamedha*.²² Tara retained a relatively decent type of union, or a decent part of one.

We probably have the prototype of the sacred marriage in the union of the Dagda and the Morrígan which took place at Samhain, the time of regal inauguration.²³ We have no complete record of a union with the goddess in stone form, but I think we have the *dissecta membra*. The Dagda also pursued another goddess, the daughter of the Fomorian leader, Indech. She said: 'I will be a stone at the mouth of every ford

¹⁹O'Donovan, *O'Connors*, 130; Byrne, *Irish kings*, 17 n.

²⁰Byrne, *Irish kings*, 16-17.

²¹de Vries, *Religion des Celtes*, 249.

²²Byrne, *Irish kings*, 17.

²³E. A. Gray (ed.), *Cath Maige Tuired* (Ir. Texts Soc. LII, [London] 1982) 45.

you will cross'. He said: 'I will tread heavily on every stone, and the trace of my heel will remain on every stone for ever'.²⁴

LIA FÁIL AS FULL-BLOWN GODDESS

Though I consider that I have given formal proof of the goddess status of the Lia Fáil, I still feel a need to enlarge the picture of her, to exhibit her in a wider range of activity, also to show her in her usual multiple forms, at one moment the Lia Fáil, immediately after Tonn Tuaithe. There are numerous references to the Lia Fáil in later poems. I use just a few of those out of a score of possibles, as well as earlier texts.

Being at Tara, the Lia Fáil is bound to be concerned chiefly with maintaining the rightful kingship, but she has other interests and duties. In example (ix) above we witness her weep at the downfall of her favourite warriors, just as the *bean sí* has done down through the ages. In *Baile in Scáil* she is prophesying, a suitable employment for a goddess. As we have seen, she inspires the poet Cinaed. In *Agallamh na Senórach* she displays two important interests, justice and fertility. If a man suspected of crime is put on the flagstone (*lecc*) he will show white and red spots if innocent, black if guilty. A woman can be tested for barrenness by standing on the Lia Fáil.²⁵

The goddess, in other forms, joins with the Lia Fáil in showing concern or grief: she may take the guise of some fairy woman, or some element in Nature: the life-giving water is her favourite medium. In *Agallamh na Senórach* when the king of Ireland is on the Lia Fáil it cries out, and is 'answered' by the principal waves of Ireland, Tonn Chlíodna, Tonn Tuaithe and Tonn Rudhraighe.²⁶ Among the poems of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille there is an elegy on Donnchadh Ó Ceallacháin, a man of princely family. There the Lia Fáil gives a roar of sorrow;²⁷ so do the principal waves.²⁸ Clíodna, in something like human form, recites a list of the nobleman's ancestors, reminding us of Flaithius Érenn in *Baile in Scáil*, naming the descendants of Conn in the kingship.²⁹ In another poem, on a dispossessed leader (*taoiseach*) Eoghan Mac Cárthaigh, the Lia Fáil (called also *an leac*) mourns.³⁰ So do numerous fairy women, the woods, rivers such as the Ruachtach (called *caolbhean*).³¹

We get examples of a rock as goddess (or a goddess in a rock). Though Clíodna calls once from her usual abode, Tonn Chlíodna,³² she

²⁴ibid., 49.

²⁵Stokes, 'Acallamh', *Irische Texte* IV/1, 224.

²⁶ibid.

²⁷P. S. Dinneen and T. O'Donoghue (ed.), *Dánta Aodhagáin Uí Rathaille* (Ir. Texts Soc. III, 2nd ed., London 1911) 78.

²⁸ibid., 72.

²⁹ibid., 84.

³⁰ibid., 224.

³¹ibid.

³²ibid., 72.

is described twice as calling from a rock, *ó fhionn-chraig ómraigh*,³³ and *ón gcarraig mbáin ngruaidhghil*.³⁴ Mentioned also is Aoibheall of Léithchraig:³⁵ this fairy seems to reside in a rock, for 'Léithchraig' usually forms her cognomen. She is the goddess attached to the kingship of Dál gCais, and appeared in vision to Brian Bóramha.³⁶ Most interesting of all is the statement: 'there wasn't a fairy woman in a rock (béillic = béal + leac) from Dunquin to Erne who didn't weep'.³⁷ 'Undressed stone indicated the divine presence far more effectively to the primitive religious mind than did any statue of Praxiteles to the sculptor's own contemporaries.'³⁸

THE FICTION

One item in our source material conflicts directly with my thesis and, as far as I can judge, with all other source items. Example (x) above calls the Lia Fáil a stone phallus. The author uses the word *ferp*, a borrowing of the Latin *verpa*, seemingly a solitary attestation of this borrowing, something that may be significant in itself. The statement is part of a tract called *De Síil Chonairi Móir*,³⁹ and the part of the narrative involving the Lia Fáil sounds fanciful and freakish.

In this account, the Lia Fáil is at the end of a chariot course on Tara Hill. There are two pillars set very close together and the candidate, riding in a chariot, has to pass between them. The pillars move apart for the worthy candidate. Then, as he concludes the run, the charioteer has to tip the Lia Fáil with the wheel, or the hub, of the chariot to evoke a favourable response.

Passing between moving pillars is an international initiation myth; we can call it the Symplegades motif. Jack Lindsay has produced a volume on the subject,⁴⁰ and L. Bieler has noted a 'sounding' chariot in Irish hagiography.⁴¹ In this account the author appears to have taken a well-worn myth, combined it with the wonder of Tara, and made some adjustments. Anyhow, the narrative is too fantastic to have any bearing on real events; we have to reject obvious fiction.

As for the phallic stone, I said at the beginning that the Lia Fáil can be only a flagstone type. What sense would there be in standing on a phallic stone, not to say tipping it with a chariot? The mention of a phallic stone, however, is interesting. Such things are common: very probably there was one at Tara. It would be consistent with the

³³ibid., 78.

³⁴ibid., 94.

³⁵ibid., 224.

³⁶J. H. Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (London 1867) 62.

³⁷Dinneen and O'Donoghue, *Aodhagán Ó Rathaille*, 222.

³⁸M. Eliade, *Patterns in comparative religion* (London 1983) 235.

³⁹L. Gwynn (ed.), 'De Síil Chonairi Móir', *Ériu* 6 (1912) 130-53, pp. 139-42.

⁴⁰J. Lindsay, *The clashing rocks* (London 1969).

⁴¹'Mediaeval hagiography and romance', *Medievalia et Humanistica* new series 6 (1975) 13-24, pp. 16-17.

modus operandi of the author to gather in the tradition of the phallic monument, and collate it with the inauguration stone.

A DISPUTED MONUMENT

It is commonly believed that a conical stone over 5 ft high on Ráth na Ríogh is the Lia Fáil. The history of the monument depends on very vague reports. The stone was allegedly taken from beside Dumha na nGiall, and re-erected on Ráth na Ríogh as a memorial to the men who fell in the rebellion of 1798.⁴² It was considered to be the Lia Fáil on account of a statement in the tract *Dindgnai Temrach* which says the Lia Fáil was located on the side of Dumha na nGiall.⁴³ This statement probably gives the position centuries before the time of writing: if it has any authenticity it must come from a much older source. Many things could have happened between the early centuries of Christianity and the end of the eighteenth century, even taking it for granted that *Dindgnai Temrach* is reliable. George Petrie (in the middle of the nineteenth century) has only slight doubts that the stone on Ráth na Ríogh is the Lia Fáil.⁴⁴ He says also that the stone, when it was at Dumha na nGiall, was known locally as Bod Fhearghais, i.e. Penis Fergusii.⁴⁵ The maximum result we can get from all that is a possibility that the stone on Ráth na Ríogh is a phallic one. For reasons already given, this conical stone can not reasonably be the Lia Fáil.

There is another very good reason for rejecting the claim that the stone in dispute is the Lia Fáil. Geoffrey Keating believes it was taken to Scotland.⁴⁶ Very probably it was not taken to Scotland, but it must have been missing in Keating's day, and missing a long time before that. A little way back we encountered in *Agallamh na Senórach* (c.1200) an unanswered question: 'Who raised that slab, or who took it out of Ireland?'

Of all the monuments at Tara, the Lia Fáil had the least chance of surviving struggles and depredations. Early writers bear testimony to the bitter contest between Christianity and paganism. F. J. Byrne quotes to great effect Oengus the Céle Dé (AD 800) exulting over the triumph of the Church and the fall of Tara.⁴⁷ Zealous Christians could scarcely be expected to tolerate anything so explicitly wicked as a vocal pagan demon. I feel sure the Lia Fáil was removed or destroyed early on.

⁴²G. Petrie, *On the history and antiquities of Tara Hill* (Dublin 1839) 159.

⁴³R. I. Best, O. Bergin, M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *The Book of Leinster* I (Dublin 1954) 121.

⁴⁴Petrie, *Tara Hill*, 161.

⁴⁵*ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁶D. Comyn (ed.), *The history of Ireland by Geoffrey Keating* I (Ir. Texts Soc. IV, London 1902 for 1901) 206-8.

⁴⁷Byrne, *Irish kings*, 53.

THE NEW STANCE

The identification of the Lia Fáil as the epiphany of the Earth Goddess is in accord with native Irish ideology, indeed, just a facet of an old phenomenon. Not only is the attestation for this overwhelming, but there is no acceptable evidence to the contrary. The entanglement produced by adherence to male sexuality, or doubtful sexuality, is in itself an argument for recognising a completely female deity. The findings of Jan de Vries exemplify this. He would like to think that the voice of the stone is the voice of the *déesse Terre*, and his etymology, which characterizes the Lia Fáil as the 'screaming stone', is an attractive one. However, his belief that the stone is phallic is in direct conflict with goddess identification and the etymology. If I have succeeded in establishing a new stance – the removal of phallicism – the way lies clear. The etymology, and its problems, demand separate treatment and a further article.

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