LIA FÀIL: FACT AND FICTION IN THE TRADITION

AREA OF CONTRADICTIONS

We are agreed generally that the Lia Fàil 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 fàil. Just a few of the many etymologies for fàil will give us an idea of the confusion in which we find ourselves. Christian J. Guénonvârč’h calls the stone Pierre de Souveraineté, and would derive fàil from the root in Latin salère ‘to prosper’, Irish fíath.¹

Without going deeply into the matter one might say that it is hard to understand why the word fíath itself was not used, since that means ‘sovereignty’ exactly. R. A. S. Macalister says fàil 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 fàil the radical of Latin vagère ‘to scream’, but the writer himself doesn’t seem confident, and I can understand why: on the same page he says the Lia Fàil 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 Fàil. We lack this: we have not succeeded in fitting the Lia Fàil 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 Fàil 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.

³ ibid., 146.
⁴ J. de Vries, La religion des Celtes (Paris 1963) 247 n.
⁵ ibid., 249.
⁶ F. J. Byrne, Irish kings and high-kings (London 1973) 58.

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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. 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 ticeth ri Eirenn fuirre, do gheised in lecc fáil.
(ii) rogsa Fáil fad chosaibsiú: al-lín ngémind rogsa is é lin righ bís ditt súl-su for Írinn.
(iii) is iat Tuatha D[é] Déanann] tucat leo in fáil mór i. in lia fáraí i Temraigh.
(iv) Fáil i tóch dumai na ngiáll atuaid .i. cloch in sin no gheissa fíonti no gbead ríg i rHerend . . . Fál aimn na cloch sin .i. fó súl .i. súl fó ríg.
(v) in cloch nogeissa fo chosaib eac'h rig nogei beth hEirinn, Fál aimn na cloch sin.
(vi) an Lia Fáil búa a Temraig nogeted fo eac'h rig nogead Erinn.
(vii) cec[ha]ing dar fal faen Temrach.
(viii) tét dochum Fáil . . . ; gloedith in Fál. 'Arraet Fál' forsint súla][i]g.
(ix) lengait Temraigh tren tilacht tuath Galeoin, golaid lia Fáil fri fálgu[d fáirn] faireoin.
(x) bai Fáil and, Ferp cluche . . . int arfemath flaith Temrach, gloedad in Fál fri fonnad in charpaít.

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, 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 Laoghaire, lecc na Ríogá, 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'. 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. gésid, 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 Fál – a brief but useful account. In the first couplet Cinaed says:

In cloch for stait mo dí sáil
húaidhí räiter Inís 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 Fál 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 Fál; he too gets authority conferred on him. It is a bit of a surprise to find a poet on the Lia Fál, 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 Fál is some kind of magic stone, god or goddess. To those well acquainted with Irish literature demonstrating the goddess character of the Lia Fál may seem a superfluous task, for the cry of the Lia Fál 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 Céad-chathach treads on the Lia Fál, and it utters a number of cries, which

11 R. A. S. Macalister, Lebor Gabáil Érenn IV (Ir. Texts Soc. XLI, Dublin 1941 for 1939) 244.
the file interprets as the number of kings of Conn's seed who will succeed him. In the second episode Conn encounters Fhiathius Ó Bróna, the Earth Goddess. Through an otherworld interpreter Fhiathius Ó Bróna 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 Fáil thereafter.' 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. 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, ceremony and, further back, so has John O'Donovan. 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. 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 Aghallamh na Senórach, but there is a gap in the text which probably accounts for the missing name. In reference to

14 Byrne, Irish kings, 55.
15bid., 15–22.
17 Byrne, Irish kings, 20.
18 W. Stokes (ed.), 'Aghallamh 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?' Oisin'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. 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. 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?' 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 assumédha. 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 Morrigan which took place at Samhain, the time of regal inauguration. We have no complete record of a union with the goddess in stone form, but I think we have the disiecta 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

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19 O'Donovan, O'Conner, 130; Byrne, Irish kings, 17 n.
20 Byrne, Irish kings, 16-17.
21 de Vries, Religion des Celtes, 249.
22 Byrne, Irish kings, 17.
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’.

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 Básle in Scéil 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 (leac) 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.

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 Chlóidna, Tonn Tuaithe and Tonn Rudhraighe. Among the poems of Aodhagán Ó Rathaille there is an elegy on Donnchadh Ó Ceallaí, a man of princely family. There the Lia Fáil gives a roar of sorrow; so do the principal waves. Clóidna, in something like human form, recites a list of the nobleman’s ancestors, reminding us of Flaithius Érenn in Básle in Scéil, naming the descendants of Conn in the kingship. In another poem, on a dispossessed leader (taoiseach) Eoghan Mac Carthaigh, the Lia Fáil (called also an leac) mourns. So do numerous fairy women, the woods, rivers such as the Ruachtach (called caobhhasan).

We get examples of a rock as goddess (or a goddess in a rock). Though Clóidna calls once from her usual abode, Tonn Chlóidna,
is described twice as calling from a rock, ó fhionn-чmig ómraigh, and ón gсarrsгg mбain ngruaidhгhil. Mentioned also is Acibheall of Lбithchaig: this fairy seems to reside in a rock, for ‘Lбithchaig’ usually forms her cognomen. She is the goddess attached to the kingship of Dбl gCais, and appeared in vision to Brian Bбramha. Most interesting of all is the statement: ‘there wasn’t a fairy woman in a rock (bбilic = bбal + leac) from Dunquin to Erne who didn’t weep’. ‘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.’

**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 Fбil a stone phallus. The author uses the word ferp, a borrowing of the Latin terps, seemingly a solitary attestation of this borrowing, something that may be significant in itself. The statement is part of a tract called *De Sйl Chonairi Mйir*, and the part of the narrative involving the Lia Fйil sounds fanciful and freakish.

In this account, the Lia Fйil 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 Fйil 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, and L. Bieler has noted a ‘sounding’ chariot in Irish hagiography. 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 Fйil 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
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 Riogh 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 Riogh as a memorial to the men who fell in the rebellion of 1798. 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. 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 Riogh is the Lia Fáil. He says also that the stone, when it was at Dumha na nGiall, was known locally as Bod Fhearghais, i.e. Penis Fergusii. The maximum result we can get from all that is a possibility that the stone on Ráth na Riogh 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. 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 Agállamh 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 great effect Oengus the Céle Dé (AD 800) exulting over the triumph of the Church and the fall of Tara. 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 1914) 121.
44Petrie, Tara Hill, 161.
45ibid., 159.
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 phallomorphic is in direct conflict with goddess identification and the etymology. If I have succeeded in establishing a new stance – the removal of phallomorphism – the way lies clear. The etymology, and its problems, demand separate treatment and a further article.

Tomás Ó Broin

Galway