

WATER IMAGERY IN EARLY IRISH

Fégaíd úaib / sair fo thúaid / in muir múaid / mílach; / adba rón /
rebach, rán, / ro-gab lán / línad.

[Look you out / northeastwards / over mighty ocean, / teeming with
sea-life; / home of seals, / sporting, splendid, / its tide has reached
/ fullness.]¹

THIS verse has been often quoted by scholars, as an example of the justifiably prized genre of nature poetry in Early Irish, but little else is known of its background. There are no internal references to its context. It was included in two of the Middle Irish collections of metrical examples, once ascribed to one ‘Finan’² and once said to represent *imbas for osnai* ‘knowledge which enlightens’, a type of incantation proper to the poets of pre-Christian times. Since the language of the poem is not archaic, and this collection is later than the other,³ this notion is probably fanciful,⁴ and all our understanding of the meaning of the poem has to come from the words themselves, an ocean worth looking at, in flood tide, full of life. The prose setting for another poem, of ten verses, describing the sea, says that the subject was set by the Vikings, to test whether the poet Rumann mac Colmáin, who lived in the 8th century had the basic gift of poetry, *dán bunaid*.⁵ This poem, in a different metre (*laid luascach* ‘rocking metre’) is also quoted in the metrical tracts,⁶ though the language cannot be as early as Rumann. As Jackson says,⁷ it also shows ‘genuine delight’ in the sea:

Is lán ler, is lomnán muir, / is álaind inn ethar-bruig, / ro-lá curu
in gaeth ganmech / im Inber na dá Ainmech, / is luath luí re
lethanmuir.

[The ocean is in flood, the sea is full, / delightful is the home of ships,
/ the sandy wind has made whirls / around the River-mouth of the
Two Showers / swift the rudder against the broad sea (§7).]

In the famous poem usually called ‘The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare’, the sea forms a recurrent theme throughout its 35 quatrains, the old age of the speaker compared to the constantly renewed life of the sea. James Carney called it ‘Ebbing’, from the word with which it begins and ends:

¹ J. Carney, *Medieval Irish lyrics* (Dublin 1967) 40 no. 16; discussed by D. Ó Corráin, ‘Early Irish Hermit Poetry?’ in L. Breatnach, K. McCone and D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth 1989) 250–267 especially pp. 254, 256.

² R. Thurneysen, ‘Mittelirische Verslehren’ in W. Stokes and E. Windisch (ed.), *Irische Texte* 1 (Leipzig 1891) 38 §24, 102 §187.

³ For probable dates see Ó Corráin in L. Breatnach et al. *Sages, saints and storytellers* 254–5.

⁴ G. Murphy *Early Irish metrics* (Dublin 1961) 73 §83.

⁵ K. Meyer, ‘Rumann’, *Otia Merseiana* 2 (1900–1) 76–83) dated to the 11th century; K. Jackson, *Early Celtic nature poetry* (Cambridge 1935) 30–31 no. 32.

⁶ Thurneysen, *Mittelirische Verslehren* 55 §102, 87 §100.

⁷ Jackson, *Early Celtic nature poetry* 91.

Aithbe damsá bés mara . . .

Céin-mair ailén mara máir: / dos·n·ic tuile íarna tráig; / is mé, ní
frescu dom·í / tuile tar éisi aithbi.

[Ebb-tide to me as to the sea . . .

Happy the island of the great sea: / flood comes to it after ebb; / as
for me, I expect no flood / after ebb to come to me.]⁸

The Caillech Bérré, ancestress of tribes in the prologue,⁹ lover of kings in the poem, and a supernatural personage known till recent times in folklore in Ireland and Scotland, is ending her days according to this poem in pious austerity. Occasionally the sea imagery reflects this, its inhospitable aspect corresponding to the speaker's old age:

Is labar tonn mara máir, / ros·gab in gaim comgabáil;
[The wave of the great sea is noisy, / winter has begun to raise it (§15);]

but far more often the sea is symbolic of wider opportunities:

Is mó láu / nát muir n·oítéd ima·ráu;
[It is many a day / since I sailed on the sea of youth (§17);]

and the recurring metaphor of *tuile* 'flood(-tide)' for 'abundance', appearing for example of the horses and chariots of long ago in verse 6, seems to be what has attracted into the poem a verse out of the *dindsenchas* poem on *Ard Ruide* (v. 27 and note) describing: 'a flood of warriors, a flood of steeds, a flood of the greyhounds of Lugaid's sons'. Similar images appear in other texts: *dramm de muir* 'abundance from a sea', a kenning for a poet, glossed *is dírim in muir-se na becsi* 'multitudinous is this sea of knowledge'¹⁰; *Rop muir mothach mórthonnach* 'May he be a fruitful great-waved sea' of a future king.¹¹ *Muir mothach* 'fruitful sea' is also used of a sacred tree.¹²

A sacred tree and another supernatural woman appear in the little elegy on the drowning of Conaing son of Aedán mac Gabráin of Scottish Dál Ríata, quoted in the annals for AD 622 and attributed to the seventh-century poet Niníne Éices:

Tonna mara mórglana / grian roda-toigsetar / fri curach fleščach fand
/ for Conaing con·coirsetar.

In ben ro·lá a mong find / ina churach fri Conaing / is cas ro·tibi a
gen / indiu fri Bili Tortan.

[The great clear waves of the sea / and the sand have covered them,
/ into [his] frail wicker coracle / they flung themselves over
Conaing.]

⁸ First and penultimate verses of G. Murphy, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 55 C (1953) 83–109; now re-edited by Donnchadh Ó hAodha in L. Breatnach et al. *Sages, saints and storytellers* 308–331, see particularly 311 st. 8 and 313 st. 23; J. Carney *Medieval Irish lyrics* 28 st. 15.

⁹ L. Breatnach et al. *Sages, saints and storytellers* 309 st. 8, 23.

¹⁰ W. Stokes, 'Immacallam in dá Thuarad', *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905) 20 §53.

¹¹ M. Dillon (ed.), *Lebor na Cert* (Dublin 1962) 152.

¹² W. Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895) 277–8 §160.

[The woman has cast her white tresses / into his coracle upon
Conaing / hatefully she has smiled her smile / today upon the
tree of Tortu.]¹³

As Jackson notes, the ‘woman’ must represent the sea, and the metaphor used here of the sea’s ‘hair’ has wide currency in later Irish poetry, for example the line *ghúaster mong mná Manannán* ‘the hair of the wife of Mannanán is tossed about’, occurring in verse 8 of the poem attributed to Rumann mac Colmáin.¹⁴ Manannán mac Lir ‘son of the sea’ is explained in Cormac’s Glossary as the Irish god of the sea,¹⁵ and appears frequently as a character in Irish tales.¹⁶ Another recurring image makes the waves Manannán’s horses.¹⁷ However, how can a sea-goddess affect the Tree of Tortu, one of the five ancient trees of Ireland? Jackson says the connection ‘is not clear’. Pokorny explained it from the Leinster connections of Aedán mac Gabráin, supposing Bile Tortan, in Meath, to represent Leinster, but these connections seem to be a matter of legend rather than history.¹⁸ The second verse, with a different second line which does not mention Conaing or the curragh, also appears in the *dindsenchas* poem on *Bile Tortan*,¹⁹ where a woman brought down the tree under which the Fir Tortan and Conaille used to meet.²⁰ The Morrígán or battle goddess also shakes her mane on the battlefield,²¹ and it seems that one goddess can be

¹³ W. Stokes, ‘Annals of Tigernach’ *Revue Celtique* 17 (1896) 175, where the editor Stokes has read *grian* ‘sun’; st. 2 not in *Annals of Ulster*; J. Pokorny (ed.), *A historical reader of Old Irish* (Halle 1923) 4–5, K. H. Jackson *Early Celtic nature poetry* 32 sts. 1, 34, notes 48, following Pokorny, and dating the poem to the early 8th century. See also E. G. Quin et al. (ed.), (*Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* (Dublin 1913–76) (*DIL*) s.vv. *tuigithir*, *con-cuirethar*; also D. Greene and F. O’Connor (ed.), *A Golden treasury of Irish poetry* (London 1967) 108 st. 3, who translate ‘the waves . . . have covered the strand’.

¹⁴ Jackson, *Early Celtic nature poetry* 48, 91 and no. 32 p. 30 st. 8. *Mong* ‘long hair, mane’ has many citations in *DIL* referring to the sea, e.g. *airet maives mong for muir* ‘as long as spray on sea remains’. Other words for hair were also used for sea-spray in Early Irish, *fairrge findfolt* ‘the ocean’s white hair’ in a quatrain on the Vikings (J. Strachan and W. Stokes (ed.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* 2 vols (repr. Dublin 1975) ii 290; Jackson *Early Celtic nature poetry* 32 no. 33; Carney *Medieval Irish lyrics* 22 no. 10, 9th century; also *DIL* s.v. *folt*; *DIL* s.v. *trilis* and W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London 1905) 82 §15 *lir úas trilis* ‘over the sea’s hair’, *dar trilis lir* glossed *dar muir* in a poem on St Senán, Stokes *Féilire Óengusso* 90 8n.

¹⁵ K. Meyer ‘*Sanas Cormaic, an Old-Irish glossary*’ in (O. J. Bergin, R. I. Best, K. Meyer and J. G. O’Keefe (ed.), *Anecdota from Irish MSS* 5 vols (Halle 1907–13) iv 78 §896.

¹⁶ For example, the references in B. Ó Cuív, ‘Poem in praise of Raghall, King of Man’, *Éigse* (1957) 298.

¹⁷ “*groigh meic Lir la maurainfin*” ‘the horses of the son of Ler on a day of great storm’, in E. Gray (ed.), *Cath Maige Tuired*, (Dublin 1982) 66 §148, see *DIL* s.v. ‘*grai*g’; also *groig mic Lir, Oidedh Con Colainn*, in A. G. Van Hamel (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn* (Dublin 1933) 81 §13.

¹⁸ Pokorny, *A historical reader*, 4–5; John Bannerman ‘*Senchus Fer nAlban*’, *Celtica* 9 (1971) 237.

¹⁹ E. Gwynn (ed.), *Metrical Dindsenchus* 5 vols (Dublin 1903–35), vol. iv, 240–247 st. 12.

²⁰ The Tree of Tortu was inland somewhere in Co. Meath, but not at Ardraccon, see Eoin mac Néill on topography in ‘The *Vita Tripartita* of St. Patrick’, *Ériu* (1930) 32.

²¹ K. Meyer (ed.), *Fíanaigeacht* (Dublin 1910) 10–21 sts. 42–3 “*Ro’ lá a moing dar a h-ais*” ‘She has thrown her mane over her back’. Another strand in the imagery in this poem is the idea that the tree is akin to the trees of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2: 8–17; Ezek. 31), from which humankind were separated by Eve. The story of Eve seems to be also recalled in the legends of Boyne and Shannon, see below p. 200; and D. Mac Giolla Easpaig ‘Lough Neagh and Tynagh’ *Ainm* 2 (1986) 35.

imagined as working destruction on both land and sea, or 'a conception of the world in its totality'.²²

Another aspect of water is the rivers, which were also often envisaged as supernatural beings in Early Ireland. Thus the river Cronn in Cuailnge 'rose in flood as high as the tree tops' to protect Ulster at Cú Chulainn's plea, and the Modarn flooded in response to the poet Athairne, while all the rivers and lakes of Ireland hid themselves when the doomed king Conaire needed a drink.²³ *Boann*, the Boyne, appears frequently in the early Irish mythological cycle of tales as a woman, married to Nuadu or Nechtan, who have been considered as native deities who shared 'the proprietorship of the waters of knowledge'.²⁴ In stories about poets the source of the river, or its bank, were regarded as particular places of inspiration: *ar ba baile falsigthe éicsi dogrés lasna filedu for brú usci* 'for the poets deemed that on the brink of water was always a place of revelation of science'.²⁵ The well where seven or nine hazel trees drop nuts containing knowledge (*immas*, often translated as 'poetic inspiration') into the water, where they are eaten by waiting salmon, or carried down the rivers to be garnered by the poets, is regularly described in both legal-poetic theory and in narrative texts.²⁶ Metaphors for knowledge often include water-words: *sruth fáil*, *sruth buais* 'stream of science', *indber n-ecnai* 'estuary of wisdom'.²⁷ In the *dindsenchas* legends of both the Boyne and the Shannon,²⁸ each river is said to rise in the same mysterious well of Segais, described only in the case of the Shannon. In the *dindsenchas* of the Shannon the well is called *Tipra Connla* 'Connla's well', recalling the ostensibly pagan hero of an Otherworld adventure over sea,²⁹ and is said paradoxically to be 'under the sea' *fo muir*, rather than at the actual source of either river.

Watery approaches to the Otherworld are common in the early literature, down wells or under lakes or under or across the sea. I cannot agree with Carney or Carey³⁰ who say that the last of these is more foreign to the tradition than the others; either well or sea can represent 'the hazardous water through which the hero must pass to reach his Otherworld destination'.³¹ Different manifestations

²² J. Carey 'Notes on the Irish War Goddess', *Éigse* (1983) 275.

²³ C. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cuailnge Recension I* (Dublin 1976) ll. 198, 1160; E. J. Gwynn, 'Privileges of Poets', *Ériu* 13 (1940) 13, 57; E. Knott (ed.), *Tógail Bruidne Dá Derga* (Dublin 1963) 44 §§154–6.

²⁴ J. Carey, 'Nodons in Britain and Ireland', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 40 (1984) 8–10.

²⁵ W. Stokes, 'Immacallam in dá Thuarad' *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905) 8 §2, 18 §§33–35; K. Meyer, 'Macgnimhartha Finn', *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881–3) 201 §§17, 18, (translation K. Meyer, 'The Boyish Exploits of Finn', *Ériu* 1 (1904) 185.

²⁶ Stokes, *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* 18 §24n; Gwynn 'Privileges of Poets' *Ériu* 13 (1940) 26; L. Breatnach, 'The Caldron of Poesy', *Ériu* 32 (1981) 66 §11.

²⁷ Stokes, *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* 22 §67, 24 §80; Breatnach, 'The Caldron of Poesy' 68 §13.

²⁸ W. Stokes, 'The Rennes Dindsenchas', *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894) 315–316 and 456–457; Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas* iii 26–33 and 286–297.

²⁹ H. Oskamp, 'Echtra Condla', *Études Celtiques* 14 (1974) 207–228; but see J. Carney 'The Deeper Level of Early Irish Literature', *Capuchin Annual*, (1969) 163–165, who saw the story as 'an exemplification of the conflict in early Ireland between the monastic and the native way of life'.

³⁰ J. Carney, review of C. Selmer, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* (Notre Dame 1959), *Medium Aevum* 32 (1963) 40 n.9: the evidence is conveniently summarised in John Carey's article 'The "Otherworld" in Irish Tradition', *Éigse* 19 (1982) 36–43.

³¹ D. Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', *Ériu* 27 (1976) 87. 'Across the sea' has certainly been reinforced by Biblical parallels and exegesis, see below pp. 197–198.

of water are functionally connected. A triad groups a well, the sea, and new ale as 'three cold things that seethe'.³² The young poet Néde in '*Immacallam in dá Thuarad*' finds his revelation on the brink of the sea,³³ and *murbrath* 'sea-doom' is used of the eruption of the well that became Lough Neagh.³⁴ A well on the side of Sliabh Gamh was thought to ebb and flow with the sea,³⁵ and *Síd Nenta* 'the Otherworld dwelling of Nenta' has an epithet which varies between *fo uisce* and *iar n-uisce* 'under' or 'beyond the water'.³⁶

Deliberate ambiguity of Otherworld locations is part of the tradition.³⁷ Paradox is a regular feature of Otherworld descriptions, known versus unknown,³⁸ dead versus alive, summer versus winter, and water described as if it were land.³⁹ A sense of 'otherness' could hardly have been exploited without a strong sense of 'the natural order of the cosmos' and an oath that depends for its force on the elements of land, sea and sky remaining in their proper places was recorded in the fourth century BC of the Celts on the continent, as well as appearing in Early Irish narrative texts.⁴⁰ Part of one Irish example is *céin bias muir im Éirind* 'while the sea shall be around Ireland'.⁴¹

So far an attempt has been made to illustrate a characteristically Irish perspective on water, but there is nothing about it that can be uniquely so, as the very art of writing which preserved it for us was learnt and adopted along with Christianity and access to Latin literature, especially the Bible. Much of Early Irish literature shows the same concerns as the early books of the Bible, the explanations of the way the world is, the origins of different tribes, and the stories of ancient kings, warriors and learned men. Exposure to foreign influences cannot have created the vernacular literature, which assumes the existence of native men of learning with their own literary traditions, but cross-fertilisation could occur because people recognised the similarity or equivalence of Biblical and indigenous traditions, and could write and recreate them from their 'total literary experience'.⁴² In the Latin Bible, however, early Irish litterati were faced with the mythology of a continental people. According to one modern commentary,⁴³ 'The Hebrews betrayed

³² K. Meyer (ed.), *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin 1906) §45.

³³ Stokes, *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* 8 §2 and note, quoted above as an example of 'beside water'; also *ar ler laoidhe léirigther* 'for a lay made clear at the sea', Gwynn, 'Privileges of Poets', 25; H. Wagner, 'Water and Wisdom', *Ériu* 26 (1975) 2.

³⁴ K. Meyer, 'The Laud Genealogies', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 8 (1912) 308.

³⁵ J. H. Todd (ed.), *The Irish version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin 1848) 196–7.

³⁶ E. Windisch, 'De Chophur in dá Muccida', *Irische Texte* 3/1 l. 90; O. Bergin and R. I. Best, '*Tochmarc Étaíne*' *Ériu* 12 (1938) 190 §23; see Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas* ii 8, iii 298n.

³⁷ T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin 1977) 19, 32.

³⁸ P. Mac Cana, 'On the "Prehistory" of Immram Brain', *Ériu* 26 (1975) 38–40.

³⁹ H. Oskamp, '*Echtra Condla*', *Études Celtiques* 14, 221 §1; K. Meyer and A. Nutt (ed.), *The voyage of Bran son of Febal to the Land of Living* (London 1895) i §44; K. Meyer, '*Echtra Nerai*', *Revue Celtique* 10 (1889) 220 §10; Meyer and Nutt, *Voyage of Bran* i 13 §§33–5.

⁴⁰ W. Sayers, 'A Cosmic Motif', *Ériu* 37 (1986) 99–117.

⁴¹ T. Ó Raithbheartaigh, '*Bruiden Meic Dá Reo*', *Genealogical Tracts* (1932) 127 §7.

⁴² J. Carney, 'The Ecclesiastical Background to Irish Saga', *Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia* 11 (1956) 221.

⁴³ J. D. Douglas et al. (ed.), *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester 1980) iii, 1406. This rather crude analysis goes on to say that their fear of the ocean was because 'the deep personified the power that fought against the deity'. For a fuller interpretative account of God as king over the mythological

little interest in or enthusiasm for the sea', not just because they had little to do with it but because in the Near East generally the sea was regarded as hostile to humanity. Springs and rivers, which are regular feature in the descriptions of an ideal 'paradise',⁴⁴ had a high practical value in Biblical society, but the Mediterranean Sea formed only one edge of their world. The general attitude is shown in the Book of Revelation, when the new Jerusalem appears and there is no longer any sea, although God has a well and a river of life.⁴⁵ Among the many different texts in the Bible, the Irish seem to have felt most sympathy with the rural tribal society depicted in the opening books of the Old Testament, from Genesis to Kings, and with the language of the proverbs and psalms, 'of David', which were used in Ireland in everyday devotions. The view of water phenomena in the Bible will be illustrated from Genesis, the book intended to explain how the world came to be as it is, and the psalms, the words of which must have been familiar from constant recitation in the early Irish monasteries.

The opening of Genesis establishes the place of water in the Biblical theory of cosmogony, where God separated the waters into those above and below and placed the land between them:

. . . tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi, et Spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas . . . Dixit quoque Deus: Fiat fundamentum in medio aquarum, et dividat aquas ab aquis. Et fecit Deus fundamentum divisitque aquas qui erant sub fundamento ab aquis qui erant super firmamentum. Et factum est ita.⁴⁶

The foundation of earth on the waters is repeated in the psalms.⁴⁷ However, when people became evil and God wished to renew the world by destroying all living things, he allowed the primeval waters to break through again, saving only Noah and his entourage of family and animals in the ark:

rupti sunt omnes fontes abyssi magnae, et cataractae caeli apertae sunt, et facta est pluvia super terram.⁴⁸

Large expanses of water were thus a reminder of chaos, the primeval state which but for the sustaining promise of God might engulf creation again. Rivers and wells were life-sustaining, so that in Genesis a stream waters the Garden of Eden, and flows out of it in four great rivers, Phison, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates,⁴⁹ and in the Psalms a river 'makes glad the city of God'⁵⁰ and God provides his people with springs of water.⁵¹ In general the fertile and the dangerous waters are contrasted rather than connected in the Biblical texts.⁵²

cosmic sea, viewed as the source of the rain and the rivers as well as being the symbol of chaos, see Aubrey Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* 2nd ed. (Cardiff 1967), 92–3, 117–9.

⁴⁴ Gen. 2:10–15; Ezek. 47: 1–11; Rev. 2: 1–2.

⁴⁵ Rev. 21: 1, 6; 22: 1–2.

⁴⁶ Gen. 1: 2, 6–7.

⁴⁷ In Vulgate/Authorised Version numbering: Pss. 23/24: 2; 28/29: 3; 32/33: 7; 103/104: 2, 5–9.

⁴⁸ Gen. 7: 11–12.

⁴⁹ Gen. 2: 10–14.

⁵⁰ Ps. 45/46: 5; cf. Ezek. 47: 1–12.

⁵¹ Pss. 35/36: 10; 103/4: 10; 106/7: 33, 35.

⁵² Ps. 103/4: 6–13; Isa. 8: 6–7.

The Irish seem to have searched the Bible for both practical and spiritual or symbolic information. There is much evidence for interest in the working of water phenomena.⁵³ A connection between the oceans and rain appears in the Latin hymn *Altus Prosator* attributed to Colum Cille, which was criticised by the Pope, according to Irish tradition, for being more about creation than the Creator.⁵⁴ The Genesis account of the dividing of the waters into those over and under the earth is quoted in Latin in the 9th-century Irish-Latin apocryphon *The Evernew Tongue*,⁵⁵ and rendered into Irish in the 10th-century *Saltair na Rann* 'Psalter of Verses' or versified Bible stories.⁵⁶ Both of these also add further seas. In *Saltair na Rann* Hell is surrounded by hostile seas, dark, fiery, stinking, cloudy and poisonous, and the epithet *tethrach* is applied to paradise, from *Tethra*, the name of a mythological king also used of the sea. In *Saltair na Rann* the rivers of paradise twist and turn,⁵⁷ and Brian Murdoch notes apocryphal parallels: a verse in the 'Secrets of Enoch' where the rivers 'go along the earth and have a revolution in their circle', and a river beside Hell in the 'Apocalypse of Paul', actually 'a great river of water' which is 'the ocean that compasseth the earth about'.⁵⁸ However, Murdoch seems to see the multiple seas as an Irish development. The *Evernew Tongue* begins with three seas, one near Hell, one flamy, and one fruitful and green. Then there are more: red, white, and one black and waveless, from which one boat only has escaped. After this follows a sea which takes six months to ebb and flow; when it floods all the springs of the world increase. Thus the waters of ocean and on land are shown to be connected, and a section on springs follows.⁵⁹

It has been mentioned already that in early Ireland rivers were associated with supernatural revelation, and that the Boyne and Shannon, although their actual sources were well known, were both also traced to one spring not in this world. There are two *dindshenchas* poems extant on each river, with in each case one attributed to the poet Cuan Ó Lothchán (d. 1024), although all the poems have a similar theme.⁶⁰ His poem on the Boyne (I) lists fifteen names borne by the river, beginning at 'Segais', its Irish Otherworld source, but eventually arriving at 'the

⁵³ For example, in the section on tides in the *De Mirabilis Sacrae Scripturae* of the 7th-century Irish Augustine see J. Kenney *Sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical* (Dublin [1929] 1979) 275–276n; and the 9th-century glosses to Beda, Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* ii 10–30.

⁵⁴ J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (ed.), *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* 2 vols (London 1898) i 62–83, ii 141–169, especially the stanzas beginning ll. 50, 62.

⁵⁵ W. Stokes, 'The Evernew Tongue', *Ériu* 2 (1905) 108 §24.

⁵⁶ W. Stokes (ed.), *Saltair na Rann* (Oxford 1883) l. 285f. p. 5.

⁵⁷ D. Greene and F. Kelly, *The Irish Adam and Eve story from Saltair na Rann* i (text and translation) (Dublin 1976); B. Murdoch ii (commentary) (Dublin 1976), i 14 ll. 905–916 (seas), 20–22 ll. 978, 993–1016 (paradise and its rivers); ii p. 50, 57–8.

⁵⁸ Murdoch, *The Irish Adam and Eve story* ii 50 (Apocalypse of St Paul), 59 (Secrets of Enoch); full translation in M. R. James *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1924) 542.

⁵⁹ Stokes, 'The Evernew Tongue', seas: 110–2 §§32–35; springs: 112–4 §§37–39.

⁶⁰ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchus* iii 26, 'Sid Nechtain sund forsín tsléib'; 'Boand I' iii 34; 'Sinann I' iii 286 'Saer-ainm Sinna saigid dúni'; 'Sinann II' iii 292 'Sinann, cá hadbar diatá' (attributed to Cuan Ua Leochán, K. Mulchrone (ed.), *Book of Lecan: Leabhar Mór Leacáin* (facsimile Dublin 1937) 240; (traces of name visible in R. Atkinson (ed.), *LL: Book of Leinster* (facsimile Dublin 1880); accepted by J. Carney 'The dating of Early Irish verse texts', *Éigse* 19 (1983) 180 §12); Gwynn has added 'Cuan Ó Lochán (Lec.)' in a footnote to 'Sinann I', and in his textual notes to 'Sinann II'.

paradise of Adam'. The third name, *Ríg mná Nuadat* 'the arm of Nuadu's wife' (l.15), also appears in *Immacallam in dá thuarad* (§35) as a kenning for the Boyne. The sixth name brings the river to the sea, at which point it becomes *Trethnach Tond* 'ocean wave'; then it reaches Lough Neagh and becomes the Bann: *Sruth Findchoill* 'Stream of White Hazel'. The river then becomes *Drumchla Dílenn* 'Roof of the Flood' on the way to Scotland, *Lunnand* there, 'Severn' in England, 'Tiber' in Rome, 'Jordan' in the east, 'Euphrates' and finally 'Tigris' in Paradise, 'wandering long in the East' before returning 'to the streams of this *síd*'. Thus the sea, and the holy rivers of Ireland and the world, are linked together in one circular motion. A derivative version of the story in the secular tale *Tochmarc Emire*⁶⁴ lists only names for the Boyne within Ireland, and does not include the mystical cosmogony. The other poem on the Boyne (II), after more naturalistic treatment of the river's two actual tributaries, likens these to two tributaries of the Jordan, and says that Christ blessed the Boyne, so that 'she is the Jordan of Ireland'. According to Christian tradition, Christ's baptism in the river Jordan was the first of the Epiphany miracles revealing him as God.

The poems on the Shannon describe its source as being under the sea, with seven streams flowing from the well,⁶⁵ which is surrounded by hazel trees, and both poems say that a woman called Sinann came seeking the knowledge *immas* to be found in the nuts. The setting seems to liken Sinann, who is drowned for her presumption, to Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge before her expulsion from Eden, except that in Irish the wisdom contained in the nuts is also associated with the water into which they fall. Thus in Christian times Sinann's place as tutelary deity of a holy Irish river seems to have been taken over by a male saint, Senán, whose monastery was on *Inis Cathaigh*, Scatterry Island in the Shannon estuary. In mediaeval and modern tradition Senán has continued to be a woman-hater. The once-female spirit of the river Shannon was perhaps represented by the female saint Canair who walked out to him on the sea and asked to be buried on the island. Because she was a woman Senán attempted to refuse, but Canair countered his arguments and demonstrated her holiness by standing on the water throughout their conversation. When she achieved her request God granted 'that whoso visits her church before going on the sea shall not be drowned between going and returning'.⁶⁶ Canair's power against drowning was remembered in recent folklore.

Water imagery is also significant in the Irish development of other Biblical themes. In the New Testament the passing of Noah over the flood, or of Moses through the Red Sea, were celebrated not only as examples of God's power to

⁶⁴ In van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn* 37 §41 (not R. I. Best and O. Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin 1929), see l.10248); G. O'Nolan, 'Zu Tochmarc Emire', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 8 (1912) 516.

⁶⁵ The well is '*fo'n aibéis*' and the seven streams return to it in Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* iii 'Sinann II', and the well is located in *Tír Tarngire* in 'Sinann I'. There are seven great rivers of the world in I Enoch §77, see H. D. F. Sparks *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford 1985) 266.

⁶⁶ W. Stokes (ed.), *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford 1890): l. 2185 p. 65, l. 2399f. l. 2422f. p. 72.

deliver his people from hostile forces, but also as forefiguring the Christian sacrament of baptism. St Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians explains the crossing of the Red Sea:

You should understand my brothers that our ancestors were all under the pillar of cloud, and all of them passed through the Red Sea, and so they all received baptism into the fellowship of Moses in cloud and in sea. They all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink, I mean they all drank from the supernatural rock that accompanied their travels and that rock was Christ.⁶⁴

St Peter's first Letter explains the story of the Flood:

God waited patiently in the days of Noah and the building of the ark, and in the ark a few persons, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. This water prefigured the water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety.⁶⁵

Both stories were illustrated in the decoration of 5th century churches.⁶⁶ St Augustine compared Noah's Ark to the church,⁶⁷ while a Latin note to a diagram of the ark in the eleventh-century Codex Palatino-Vaticanus⁶⁸ says that 'the ark on the waters of the flood is like the church on the waves of this world'. In Irish saints' lives Brénainn mac Findloga was compared to Noah, Senán of *Inis Cathaigh* was described as 'the ever-victorious bark that beareth the hosts of the righteous over the storm of the world to the shore of the heavenly church', and Ciarán of Clonmacnoise and his eight travelling companions finally settled at Clonmacnoise 'after they had come from the waves of the water, even as Noah son of Lamech took the world with his octad after coming from the waves of the Deluge'.⁶⁹

Various examples of deliverance were cited in the Latin *Commendatio Animae* prayer known in Ireland, and often illustrated (including some arks) on the High Crosses⁷⁰ but, significantly, in the first prayer of the Order of the Mass in the Stowe Missal,⁷¹ it is three deliverances from water that are mentioned: Noah, Jonah and the drowning St Peter. Like Christ's ability to walk on the water without sinking, these demonstrate God's power over chaos, and also revelation coming by means of water.

⁶⁴ I Cor. 10: 1–4.

⁶⁵ I Pet. 3: 20–21.

⁶⁶ Noah's Ark at Mopsuestia, crossing the Red Sea at St Maria Maggiore in Rome, in a series of mosaics dated to AD 431, many of which bring out a Christian sacramental understanding of their theme: discussed in M. Gough, *The Origins of Christian Art* (London 1973) 73 illustration 63, 88–91 illustration 76, 77.

⁶⁷ D. Knowles, *City of God* (London 1972) Book 15 §26 643.

⁶⁸ B. MacCarthy (ed.), *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus No. 830* Todd Lecture Series iii (Dublin 1892) 14.

⁶⁹ Stokes, *Lismore Lives* Brénainn l. 3326 p. 99, Senán l. 2462 p. 73 ('not later than 10th century' J. Kenney *Sources* 365), Ciarán l. 4376 p. 130.

⁷⁰ R. Flower, 'Irish High Crosses', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 17 (1954) 87–97.

⁷¹ G. F. Warner (ed.), *The Stowe Missal* ii (London 1915) 3.

The example of Moses' crossing of the Red Sea⁷² is frequently referred to in Irish religious literature: instances have been collected by Hennig who says 'It would be interesting to know whether a similar series of references to one particular incident in the career of Moses could be marshalled from the hagiographical literature of any other country'.⁷³ Moses' journey, which included the symbols of baptism and the Eucharist, was to reach the Promised Land, interpreted in Christian exegesis as heaven, the goal of all Christians. Thus, in a passage in the apocryphon ascribed to Enoch, the Garden of Righteousness with its vine-fruited Tree of Wisdom is reached over the Red Sea.⁷⁴ An Irish gloss to St Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians quoted above refers to the saints travelling through the desert of life seeking *tír tairngire inna mbéo* 'the promised land of the living', a phrase which seems to have combined Christian with pre-Christian terms for the Otherworld.⁷⁵ Just as in the same passage (n.64) St Paul had used the story of the escape from Egypt to prefigure the Christian sacrament of baptism *et omnes in Moysse baptizati sunt, in nube et in mari*, St Patrick, compared to Moses, was said to have saved the Irish *per lavacrum baptismatis quasi per Mare Rubrum* 'by the bath of baptism as through the Red Sea'.⁷⁶ Patrick also acquired from God that the sea would cover Ireland seven years before Judgement, and this is referred to in *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* by the supposedly pagan poets: *mebais trethan dar cach tír la áittreib Tíri Tarngere* 'the sea will break over every country at inhabiting the Land of Promise'. Water rather than fire is to be the final trial.⁷⁷

Water as a symbol of spiritual trials appears in many of the psalms:⁷⁸

Salvum me fac, Deus, quoniam intraverunt aquae usque ad animam meam . . .
Veni in altitudinem maris, et tempestas dimersit me . . . Libera me ab iis qui
oderunt me et de profundis aquarum; Non me demergat tempestas aquae,
neque absorbeat me profundum . . .⁷⁹

Cum irasceretur furor eorum in nos, forsitan aqua absorbuisset nos; Tor-
rentem pertransivit anima nostra; forsitan pertransivit anima nostra aquam
intolerabilem . . .⁸⁰

Abyssus abyssum invocat, in voce cataractarum tuarum: omnia excelsa tua
et fluctus tui super me transierunt.⁸¹

⁷² Exod. 14, recounted in several of the psalms: Pss. 77/78: 13–14; 105/106: 9–11; generally Pss. 65/66: 6; 104/105: 39; 135/136: 13–14.

⁷³ J. Hennig, 'The Literary Tradition of Moses in Ireland', *Traditio* 7 (1949–51) 233–261 especially 248–9.

⁷⁴ I Enoch 32, in Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* 219.

⁷⁵ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i 566; D. Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', *Ériu* 27 (1976) 81.

⁷⁶ M. Esposito, 'Notes on Latin learning and literature in Mediaeval Ireland, V', *Hermathena* 40 (1937) 81f; quoted by Hennig, 'The literary tradition of Moses in Ireland', 248.

⁷⁷ W. Stokes (ed.), *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (London 1887) i 116–7; Stokes, *Immacallam in dá Thuarad* 48 §251. The many water images in this latter text are a deliberate mixture from both native pagan and Christian traditions.

⁷⁸ Pss. 17/18: 5, 16; 41/42: 7; 68/69: 1–2, 14–15; 123/124: 4–5; 143/144: 7.

⁷⁹ Ps. 68/69: 1–2, 14–15.

⁸⁰ Ps. 123/124: 3–5.

⁸¹ Ps. 41/42: 7.

Although one exegetical tradition interpreted these as referring to human enemies,⁸² the words seem to have been understood more literally in Ireland as referring to the weather at sea.⁸³

God who *follnathar triathtrethnaig* 'rules the sea-tempest'⁸⁴ is appealed to in other Irish texts: *ar threthan torbas* 'against the tumult of the ocean', *ar uscib luathaib* 'from swift waters'.⁸⁵ In the last verse of the Rumann mac Colmáin sea-poem the storm becomes symbolic of Hell and the poet prays: 'save me . . . from Hell with high tempest'.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, the use of the sea in comparisons in Irish religious literature is often positive, reflecting not chaos and desolation but vastness and depth.⁸⁷ *Ní domnu ní muir* 'Nothing is deeper than the sea'; *Atomriug . . . Fudomnae maro* 'I gird myself with . . . the depth of the sea'; God is *domnu murib* 'deeper than seas'.⁸⁸ Philip the apostle is *aidbliu cech trethan* 'vaster than any sea', the thousands of saints are *ammuir mbrigach mbuansin* 'that mighty eternal sea', and what Óengus has recounted of them in his calendar is only a 'sip from the ocean' *loimm de romuir*.⁸⁹ In the poems of Blathmac Christ is *rian robartae rigi* 'a sea in a springtide of kingship', and the poet's account of the escape from Egypt is no more than *loim de lir lán* 'a draught from a full sea'.⁹⁰ There are also river comparisons: Tigernach 'out of whom burst a stream of knowledge' *asa mbrúcht srúaim sois*; Sechnall 'a stream of wisdom with splendour' *srúaim necnai co náni*.⁹¹

The same imagery is found in the Irish litanies collected by Plummer: *Ateoch frit do desherc / is doimne inna ind fairgi* 'I entreat thee by thy great love which is deeper than the ocean'. God is appealed to as *A Dee na nusqui nexamail . . . A Dé na tonn a thec imdomhain inn aiceoin* 'O God of the excellent waters . . . O God of the waves from the bottomless house of the ocean' and invoked as:

⁸² For example, the Assyrians in the Milan glosses on the Psalms, Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i 169; cf. Ezek. 31: 3–4.

⁸³ The following almost throw-away remarks of James Carney in *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955), have intrigued me for some time: 'For some reason which is perhaps not quite clear the wise man in Irish tradition tends to be begotten by the God of the sea.' (p. 290). Indeed, it is not clear, and the further whimsical reference to ' . . . some primitive association between wisdom and the sea' (p. 292) indicates that Carney was aware that a conundrum was as yet unaddressed. I hope I have here made some contribution to the efforts to understand this connection.

⁸⁴ L. Breatnach, 'Amra Senáin' in Breatnach, McCone and Ó Corráin, *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* 7–31, §16.

⁸⁵ Sanctán's Hymn in Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* ii 352–3, 'Ar threthan' is glossed 'ar thréthond . . . conid bí in tress tond bades naues' 'that is, against three-waves . . . for it is the third wave that sinks ships' 352 n.8.

⁸⁶ ' . . . acht romain romanside / ar blffirn co n-ardanfod', K. Meyer, 'Rumann', *Otia Merseiana* 2 (1900–1), 83 v. 10.

⁸⁷ A similar word apparently 'múr' appears in glossaries glossed '*i. immed*', i.e. 'abundance'. Without metrical examples to support [-ú-] it seems to me more likely that the meaning '*immed*' is a figurative use of 'muir' 'sea', e.g. 'rigain / Phelait a múr chluime' 'Pilate's queen out of abundance of down', W. Stokes, *Félire Óengusso* 125.

⁸⁸ St Gall incantation against a thorn, invoking Christ and Goibniu, Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* ii 248; 'St Patrick's Breastplate', ii 356; Broccán's hymn to Brigit, ii 331 (9th-century) p. xxxix.

⁸⁹ W. Stokes, *Félire Óengusso* 108 §22; 265 ll. 30, 42.

⁹⁰ J. Carney (ed.), *The Poems of Blathmac* (Dublin 1964) 10 st. 29, 32 st. 93.

⁹¹ W. Stokes, *Félire Óengusso* 104 §4; 237 §27.

A muir toirtig tonnmaraigh teindtigi . . .
 A toparaig trom-dercaigh toethanaig tidhnaicid toirbertaig
 torannda . . . / Dilaig;
 ['O fruitful, billowy, fiery sea . . .
 O overflowing, loving, silent, liberal, bestowing, thunderous one . . .
 Forgive'.]⁹²

Similar imagery is also found in Christian law-texts: *ro suidter sruth / n-imbath n-ard* 'a torrent of mighty oceans can be established', a metaphor for the law of God, where the editor compares it to *Is muir tar glasa at eculsa* 'The law of the church is a sea obliterating small streams', which occurs later in the text.⁹³

Biblical sea imagery is not totally negative: grandeur also can be inferred, as in *judicia tua abyssus multa*.⁹⁴ Some of the psalms, while emphasising the destructive power of the sea, also indicate that here the might of God is most evident. As in Genesis, where the Spirit of God was borne on the waters, (n. 46) the ocean can be seen as a place where, as *in extremis*, God can be found:

Si . . . habitavero in extremis maris; etenim illuc manus tua deducet me.
 Qui descendunt mare in navibus, facientes operationem in aquis multis:
 Ipsi viderunt opera domini, et mirabilia eius in profundo.⁹⁵
 Viderunt te aquae, Deus;
 viderunt te aquae et timuerunt, et turbata sunt abyssi;
 Multitudo sonitus aquarum, vocem dederunt nubes
 In mari via tua, et semitae tuae in aquis multis,
 et vestigia tua non cognoscentur.
 Deduxisti sicut oves populum tuum
 in manu Moysi et Aaron.

An Irish gloss interprets these verses: 'the mystery of thy nature O God was seen i.e. through guiding the people through the Red Sea'.⁹⁶

In combination with native traditions of revelation by water, the psalmists' attitude to the sea as fearsome but yet inhabited by God, and their use of water as a symbol for spiritual trials, appears to have led the Irish to think of the sea as their *desertum* or wilderness, to be traversed as Noah had crossed the flood, or Moses' people had crossed the Red Sea. Symbolically this journey through water might refer to baptism, as already noted from Saints Peter and Paul (cf. nn.64, 65). There are also many instances of those who took pilgrimage over sea literally, as part of their commitment to God, for example those mentioned in the seventh century in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, and in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 891 AD.⁹⁷ The theme:

⁹² C. Plummer (ed.), *Irish Litanies* (London 1925) 104, 78–79, 6–7.

⁹³ L. Breatnach, 'Bretha Nemed Toísech, the first third', *Ériu* 40 (1989) 1–40, 18–19 §23, notes p. 39.

⁹⁴ Ps. 35/36: 7.

⁹⁵ Pss. 138/139: 9; 106/107: 23–25.

⁹⁶ Ps. 76/77: 16–20 in Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i 328.

⁹⁷ D. Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immram', *Ériu* 27, 76–77; A. MacDonald 'Aspects of the monastery and monastic life in Adomnán's Life of Columba', *Peritia* 3 (1984) 298.

. . . ascnamh amail ailither / tar tuinn múaidh mara medhraigh
 ['to advance as a pilgrim / over the great wave of the joyous sea']⁹⁸

was seized on with enthusiasm in literature, including the narrative genre of *Immrama* 'Rowings-around', only referred to in passing here. St Columba, as one of the most famous seekers of the holy life across the sea, became the inspiration for many poems, beginning in the century which followed his death in 597 AD:

Do-ell Éirinn, indel cor
 cechuing noib nemed bled;
 brisis tola, tindis for
 fairrge al druim dánae fer.

['He turned away from Ireland, having made covenants (?), he traversed in ships the whales' sanctuary, he broke desires, he was illuminated (?), a brave man over the ridge of the sea']⁹⁹

For muir gáirech / gairt in ruirich . . .
 Cechaing tonnaig / tresraig magain / mongaig rónaig
 roluind mbedcaig / mbruichrich mbarrfind / failid mbrónaig.

['On the clamorous sea he called to the Great King . . .
 He traversed the wavey tumultuous place, foaming, full of seals,
 very rough, leaping, turbulent (?), white-topped, joyful, sorrowful'.]

Later on this poem adds: *Ba muir n-eccnai* 'he was a sea of knowledge',¹⁰⁰ and the theme of Colum Cille's affinity with the sea continued in later poetry.¹⁰¹

The rich vocabulary of sea and water-words in Irish¹⁰² was itself extended by biblical examples. *Muir* 'sea' could with an adjective be enlarged to 'ocean': *muir mór* literally 'great sea', but there was also a compound with intensive *ro-*, *romuir*, genitive *romra*, with similar meaning. There seems also to have been another native term *robor* gen. *robuir* 'flood', related to *robarta* 'flood-tide'. However the Latin term *Mare Rubrum* 'Red Sea' was borrowed into Irish as *Muir Robur*, which by confusion of lenited *-b-* and *-m-* could be spelt *romur* or even *romuir*. In later texts *Muir Robur* was succeeded by *Muir Ruadh*, but even the Irish adjective *ruadh* has two meanings, 'red' and 'mighty' (*DIL*). The confusion in form is well illustrated during the telling of the story of Moses in *Saltair na Rann*, where the quality of the line-endings is confirmed by the metre:

In muir mór co mílib scél / triastuc Dia claind nIsrahél . . .

⁹⁸ P. L. Henry, *The Early English and Celtic Lyric* (London 1966) 64 where the tenth century (?) poem '*Mithidh damhsa tairired*' is quoted.

⁹⁹ F. Kelly, '*Fo réir Cholaimb*' *Ériu* 24 (1973) 1–34, 15 §12; Greene and O'Connor, *Golden Treasury* 20. Another line (15 §13) is '*sruith tar fairgi, flaith a lóg*' 'a sage over the sea, Heaven his reward', glossed 'the journey which the wise man made over the sea, heaven is his reward for it'.

¹⁰⁰ F. Kelly, '*Tuighnaid Bhécáin*', *Ériu* 26 (1975) 82 st. 8, 81 st. 5, 83 st. 13.

¹⁰¹ For example, T. F. O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta* (Cork 1927) ii, 120 '*Meallach liom bheith in-ucht oiléin*' and K. H. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* (London 1951) 307.

¹⁰² *Muir, ler, lán, aithbe, tuile, tonn, mong/trilis/folt (mná Mannannán), groigh mic Lir, sruth, fairrge, Tethra(ch), tipra, trethan, dile, aibhéis, aicén, rian, robarta, imbath* in texts quoted so far.

... iar ternam do Muir Romor . . .
 ... coluid Moisi Muir Romuir . . .
 ... tria muincinn Mara Romuir . . .
 ... i mMuir romra Ruad . . .
 ... Ri tarlaic Muir Romuir Ruad . . .¹⁰³

The 'pilgrim' speaker of a tenth-century poem is made to ask:

In toicéb mo churchán cíar / os oicén uchtlethan án? . . .
 Indom tairbér fo Chríst cuing / ria techt tar tuinn Mara Ruaid?

['Shall I take my little black curragh over the broadbreasted glorious ocean? Shall I offer myself under Christ's yoke before I cross the waters of the Red Sea?']¹⁰⁴

P. L. Henry also edited this poem, and thought that the translation 'Red Sea' was not appropriate here,¹⁰⁵ but in fact it fits perfectly with the baptism *plus* spiritual journey to the Promised Land *plus* sea-pilgrimage complex of ideas discussed above. The themes found in secular literature of an Otherworld reached through water, and revelation by water, also appear in Christian texts: for example the pilgrimage to the underwater city inhabited by Pope Clement after his drowning, and the story of St Barre meeting Scothíne, one thinking he was on land and the other on the sea. St Brigit ruled 'the anger of the sea', and her special liturgy was learnt from the monastery of Plea, which was under the sea.¹⁰⁶ A gloss on the phrase *tar romuir* seems to combine symbolic and literal interpretations: *Elair tar romuir .i. dar in muir mór dó .i. dar Muir Ruad indeas .i. asin Egeipt dó* 'Hilary over the ocean, that is, over the great sea for him, that is, over the Red Sea from the south, that is, from Egypt for him'.¹⁰⁷ The same mixture of literal and symbolic appears in Christian Irish storytelling. In *Immram Brain* it is lamented that Nechtan after voyaging to the Otherworld oversea crumbles to death without being technically baptised, but in the stories of Muirgein and Clann Lir, whose supernatural extension of life as mermaid or migrant swans enables them to attain Christian baptism, their names, which can be translated 'sea-birth', 'children of the sea', seem to be used to foreshadow their future.¹⁰⁸

The understanding of the sacrament of baptism as a 'rite of passage' through water meant that any water could function as a symbol of the Christian's approach to God. *Saltair na Rann* shows the penitent Adam and Eve praying to God standing in rivers after the Fall, and like its source the *Vita Adae* puts Eve in the Tigris but Adam in the Jordan. The Jordan is not one of the Biblical rivers of paradise,

¹⁰³ Stokes, *Saltair na Rann* ll. 3989–90, 4050 pp. 58–9; l. 2310 p. 33; ll. 3987, 3982, 3989, 4021 p. 58.

¹⁰⁴ K. Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 10 (1915) 45–47, and translation in Greene and O'Connor *Golden Treasury* 152.

¹⁰⁵ Henry, *The Early English and Celtic Lyric* 59.

¹⁰⁶ Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* (Clement) 236 §23; (Barre) 40 2n; (Plea) 64–7 1n; Stokes, *Lismore Lives* l. 1704 p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* 240 3n.

¹⁰⁸ Meyer, *Immram Brain* 19 §65; Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* 52 27n; S. Ua Ceallaigh (ed.), *Oidheadh Chloinne Lir* (Dublin 1927).

and Brian Murdoch thinks this element is ‘a fairly clear Christianisation’, foreshadowing Christ’s baptism in the Jordan, which is mentioned elsewhere in the text.¹⁰⁹

It seems the details of this penance in water were closely paralleled in early Irish ascetic practice.¹¹⁰ Often the water was a natural pool, an aspect of the ‘closeness to nature’ attributed to early Irish saints, for example *feiss aidchi i linmaib* ‘spending the night in pools’ mentioned in Fíacc’s Hymn on St Patrick.¹¹¹ According to the next verse Patrick also sang a hundred psalms in the fountain at Slane near Boirche. A well of the same name in the west was a pagan holy place, known as *rex aquarum* ‘king of waters’ and honoured as a god. A druid was said to have thought Patrick himself worshipped water, because of his practice of baptism.¹¹² Holy wells became a feature of Irish Christianity. However, Colum Cille is said to have sung his psalms standing in the sea.¹¹³

Prayer in water became a stock motif for describing the heroic saint, for example Bishop Earc Sláine in *Fleadh Dúin na nGéadh*, who prayed all day in the Boyne, emerging at evening to eat goose egg and watercress.¹¹⁴ A very late saint’s life combines prayer in water and appreciative description of nature with a version of the ‘thirds of the day’ attributed in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to King Conchobar:

Is amlaidh sin ro thocaitheadh Farandán a bhetha ’san ionad sin an ccéin ro mair: an céd trian don oidche gonnicce a dí oscaill ’san dabhaigh fírlainn fhuaruisce; an dara trian don oidche ’na charcair cloch agus crábaidh, agus cercaill cloiche fona chionn, agus cercaill ele cloiche fona chosaibh taréis na dabcha; agus an trian ele ag éistecht le foghar na fairrge fíordomhne agus le tormán na ttonn re slesuibh carracc agus cruadhall, agus ag éistecht le riontach na rón agus le fogar na ffaoilenn, agus le coicedal na ccraobh ccnuastorthach agus le hallglór an essa ardcaintigh fionnfhuair ag siledh ’san dabhaigh dian-srothaigh. Ocus as mar sin ro chodladh an trian deighenach don oidche go madain.

[‘It is thus Farannán used to spend his life in that place while he lived: the first third of the night up to his two armpits in the very beautiful cauldron of cold water; the second third of the night in his cell of stones and devotion, with a pillow of stone under his head and another pillow of stone under his feet, after the cauldron; and the other third listening to the sound of the very-deep sea and to the booming of the waves on the sides of rocks and hard cliffs, and listening to the singing of the seals and the noise of the gulls and the chorus of the heavy-cropping trees and the great roar of the loud-voiced white-cold

¹⁰⁹ Murdoch, *The Irish Adam and Eve story* ii 108, 107.

¹¹⁰ Stokes *Saltair na Rann* cxvii; W. Reeves, *Life of St. Columba* (Dublin 1857) 219n.

¹¹¹ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* ii 315 l. 27.

¹¹² W. Stokes *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* i (London 1870) 122–123, 56, and, quoting from Tírechán’s Latin life, *Tripartite Life* ii 284.

¹¹³ Stokes, *Lismore Lives* 316, notes to l. 1097.

¹¹⁴ C. Marstrander (ed.), *Fleadh Dúin na nGéadh* (Christiania 1910) 6 l. 124.

waterfall dropping into the cauldron with its violent currents. And like that he would sleep the last third of the night until morning'.^{115]}

The positive water and sea imagery in Christian Irish literature may be partly derived from familiarity with the sea, and from the connection between water and revelation in pagan belief, but it also seems to have been closely associated with the two most important Christian sacraments, for, as St Paul said, the Israelites were all baptised in the cloud and the sea, so they all drank the same spiritual drink, water 'from the rock which was Christ' (cf. n.64). There are several instances in saints' lives of the saint's special well being that from which the water for mixing the chalice at communion was drawn.¹¹⁶ Wine for the eucharist would have been difficult to supply in early Ireland, and it may have been because of this that the chalice was mixed with water being put in first, *fin iarum arhuisque hicaelech* 'wine afterwards on water into the chalice'.¹¹⁷ The miracle of turning water to wine is frequent in Irish saints' lives. A special rite provided for the baptism of the unborn child of a sick mother by the mother drinking blessed water: the rite is given in the *Leabhar Breac*, and an instance is recounted in the Life of St Patrick where *aqua baptismae filii ipsa est aqua communionis matris* 'the water for baptising the son was the water for the communion of the mother'.¹¹⁸ After the description of the sea-storm the Rumann mac Colmáin poem ends with an appeal to God as *fiadu firén na fléide* 'the righteous Lord of the feast' to save the poet,¹¹⁹ as if crossing the sea also reminded him of the eucharist. When St Patrick crossed the sea to begin his mission, he put his stone altar (carrying a leper) into the water, and the sea brought it to Ireland.¹²⁰ St Senán on Inis Cathaigh lived between the river mouth and the sea, which was in danger of destroying the graveyard until Libern was buried in it and stabilised it. However, the water is not seen as totally hostile, for when a holy woman living beside the Shannon wished to send Senán alms and a request for communion (*sacarfaic* 'sacrifice'), she put them in a basket and entrusted it to the river, and Senán sent her back salt and a box containing the Sacrifice also in the little basket on the water.¹²¹

The final example is a line from *Amra Coluim Cille*, not so much for its original meaning as for the line of thought shown in the attempts of its glosses to explain it. The glosses have been criticised as 'worthless and silly . . . written at a time when the language of the *Amra* was no longer understood. These should be wholly set aside and an attempt be made to interpret the poem from our own knowledge'.¹²² The approach here will concentrate rather on 'the revelation of the diverse scholarly

¹¹⁵ C. Plummer (ed.), *Betha Favarannáin, Anecdota* iii 4 §7; C. O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúaitnge, Recension I* l. 4858.

¹¹⁶ C. Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1910) i pp. cxxvi–vii, referring to Moling §9, Molua §23; W. Stokes *Lismore Lives* Senán l. 2162.

¹¹⁷ Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* ii 252, the tract on the Mass in the Stowe Missal.

¹¹⁸ W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* i p. clxxxiii; where *Tripartite Life* i 134, has not understood Tírechán, ii p. 327. However L. Bieler *The Patrician documents in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 158 reads *commonis* i.e. 'the woman's liquid'.

¹¹⁹ Meyer, 'Rumann', 83 st. 10.

¹²⁰ Stokes, *Tripartite Life* ii 446 (*Lebor Breac* homily).

¹²¹ Stokes, *Lismore Lives* l. 2399f.

¹²² K. Meyer, 'Miscellanea Hibernica', *Illinois Studies* 2 (1916) 26–27.

cross-currents which governed their composition', appreciating the work done by eleventh-century scholarship on famous earlier texts.¹²³

This is the line: *Cét cell custóid tonn fo ógi oiffrinn*,¹²⁴ translated by Stokes, 'He protected a hundred churches, (a hundred) crowds at completeness of offering'.¹²⁵ Stokes would like to understand Irish *tonn* 'wave, surface' as imitating one of the possible senses of Latin *unda*, viz. 'a multitude'; according to his analysis there are many Latinisms in the poem. It is not clear where the line divides: neither the *Liber Hymnorum* manuscript nor *Lebor na hUidre* show any break or punctuation in it. The glosses in the *Liber Hymnorum* take *tonn* as genitive plural belonging with the first part, and continue: 'i.e. guardian of waves is he, over seas of a hundred churches; and this is a definite (number put) for an indefinite, i.e. Hí and Derry'; while the line is thus translated 'Hundred churches' guardian of waves; under completeness of offering'. One *Lebor na hUidre* gloss takes *tonn* with the second half: 'he protected a hundred churches under the fullness of the draught [of the chalice] of offering'. Vernam Hull reached a similar conclusion, translating the *Amra* line '(He was) a guardian of a hundred churches, a draught upon completion of the offering', despite maintaining that 'Since . . . (the) glosses are largely guesswork, they do not serve to elucidate the text. Hence, what has been needed for a long time is a scholarly attempt to interpret *Amra Coluim Cille* without having recourse to the glosses'.¹²⁶

As well as 'wave', *tonn* can mean a 'gush, outpouring' or 'draught': it is the word regularly used in stories of overflowing wells such as those that formed the Boyne and Shannon, and it is also used of the administration of baptism. Blathmac describes the baptism of Christ as *Fo thuinn do mulluch Crist glain* 'Under the wave went the head of pure Christ', and praises the Jordan for pouring over him *téora glantonna* 'three great pure waves'.¹²⁷ Since *offrind* is the eucharist, *tonn* may represent baptism, the other great sacrament maintained in the churches, or *tonn* may refer to a draught from the communion chalice, as in *tri tonna in chailidh aifrind*.¹²⁸ The other *Lebor na hUidre* gloss is *cét cell cosa taet tond mara* 'a hundred churches to which the wave of the sea goes'. The glosses in Rawlinson B 502 are similar to *Lebor na hUidre*, but add a quatrain in support of this interpretation, the third line being *abb cet cell cus-toit rothonn* 'an abbot of a hundred churches to which a billow comes'. The Edinburgh MS of the life of Columba¹²⁹ quotes the *Amra* line as *Cet ceal gusa taithigh tonn* 'A hundred churches which a wave frequents' and explains this as: 'This is the number of churches which he has on the shore of the sea, or also a hundred churches with the fullness of the

¹²³ M. Herbert 'The Preface to *Amra Coluim Cille*' in Breatnach et al., *Sages, Saints and Storytellers* 73.

¹²⁴ W. Stokes, 'The Bodleian *Amra Choluim Chille*', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899) 270–271 §93, and comment V. Hull, 'Amra Choluim Chille', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 28 (1960–1) 248; Bernard and Atkinson (ed.), *Liber Hymnorum* l. 495; also Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre* l. 994. Stokes, *Lismore Lives* 316–317.

¹²⁵ Stokes sees here a loan from Latin *custodem*, *DIL* s.v. *custoid* 'apparently from Latin *custodivit*', and the loan-word interpretation is supported by the *Liber Hymnorum* and one of the *Lebor na hUidre* glosses: *cométaid* l. 496, *i. ro-choemestar* l. 995.

¹²⁶ V. Hull, 'Amra Choluim Chille', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 28 (1960–1961) 242–251: 242, 248.

¹²⁷ Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac* 56 st. 168, 58 st. 171.

¹²⁸ D. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin 1978) iii 954 l. 32.

¹²⁹ edited by W. Stokes in *Lismore Lives* 316–317.

wave of the mass-chalice (*co comlantus tuinne cailig aifrinn*) in every church, as the poet testifies . . . Abbot of churches which a great wave reaches (*ab cell cusa roich rothonn*).¹³⁰

Whether the original meaning can be established or not, the image of the actual or symbolic sea juxtaposed with the spiritual fullness of the communion chalice is impressive, and draws as much from native tradition as from the Bible. In dating this notion one could point out that the example of Moses, the fiery sea round hell, and the interest in the physical sea are all clearly there in *Amra Coluim Cille*.¹³¹ The 'spiritual' possibilities of water imagery may also be found in such lines from *Féilire Oengusso* as *Íssu úas tuinn tuili* 'Jesus over a wave of flood' and *Rígféil Brénainn Biroir / fris mbruchta leir lébenn* 'the royal feast of Brénainn of Birr, against whom bursts the surface of the sea', *Ainle . . . fris mbruchta muir mílach* 'Ainle . . . against whom bursts the monsterful sea',¹³² which is glossed *for brú uisci ata a chell* 'on the brink of water is his church': the place claimed as appropriate for revelation in the traditions of native poets.

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¹³⁰ The variant readings for *custoid* are *custodi* Rawlinson / *custói* Liber Hymnorum / *cusatoit* Yellow Book of Leacan *custoit* Lebor Breac

¹³¹ Stokes, *Amra Cholúim Chille* §35, §4, §63.

¹³² Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso* 27 Prologue ll. 250, 141 §21, 237 §29.