

## GEIS, PROPHECY, OMEN, AND OATH

RUDOLF Thurneysen criticised the story of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* on the grounds that the prophecies of Fer Rogain so precisely anticipate the final battle that nothing remains to be said.<sup>1</sup> All the details are already known before the first blow is struck; and the proper culmination of the tale is, therefore, only an anti-climax. Eleanor Knott repeated this criticism in the introduction to her edition, but with the following qualification: 'Yet even this serves to emphasize the basic idea of the tale, the story of a young king foredoomed to a tragic death to which he is relentlessly urged on by fate, his kindest deeds entangling him most inextricably in the mesh'.<sup>2</sup> This qualification, however, may be pursued a little further, and so come to undermine the entire force of the original criticism.

A number of other early Irish sagas contain prophecies which reveal in some precision the way in which the story will develop. At the beginning of *Longes mac nUislen* Cathbad's prophecy contains the essence of the story.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of *Táin Bó Cuailgne* the prophecies of Fedelm and Dubthach predict what will happen to the army of Ailill and Medb.<sup>4</sup> Apparently the Irish *scélaige* was not concerned to leave the outcome in suspense until the last moment. Moreover, prophecy is not the sole defendant to Thurneysen's charge: prohibitions, including *gessa* or *geisi*,<sup>5</sup> omens and even oaths often leave the audience in little doubt as to what will happen. This is not true of all early Irish sagas: *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó*, for example, does not contain these devices by which the future is determined. The outcome of the plan suggested to Mac Da Thó by his wife is neither prophesied nor revealed by omen. Of many sagas, however, including some of the finest, it is true that the course of events is pre-ordained.

There is perhaps, an assumption implicit in Thurneysen's criticism, the assumption that, because future events are contingent upon human decisions, the proper scope of the narrative tale is to exploit this contingency, to maintain the uncertainty of the outcome and to follow the often fortuitous combinations of human choices to the end. It is an assumption about the nature of man which seems to lie behind the criticism, and it may gravely misrepresent the beliefs and expectations of an early Irish audience. On the face of it, the story-teller could assume in his audience an interest in the unavoidable connexions between events and the impotence of men to escape their fates. It can, I suggest, be shown, not only that the assumptions of many early Irish sagas are, to this extent, determinist, but also why such assumptions seemed plausible.

<sup>1</sup> R. Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle 1921), p. 627 (chap. 81 provides an analysis and summary of the tale).

<sup>2</sup> E. Knott (ed.), *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, (Dublin 1936) [henceforth *TBDD*], p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> V. Hull (ed.), *Longes mac nUislen* (New York 1949), §§4–5.

<sup>4</sup> C. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cuailgne: recension I* (Dublin 1976) [henceforth *TBC I*], pp. 2–4.

<sup>5</sup> What I have to say on *geis* is little more than a demonstration of the truth of the succinct remarks on the subject made by James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin 1955), pp. 192–3. The main discussions are: E. Hull, 'Old Irish Tabus or *Geasa*', *Folklore* 12 (1901) 41–66; J. R. Reinhard, *The survival of geis in Medieval Romance* (Halle 1933); D. Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', in H. Bekker-Nielsen et al. (ed.), *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium* (Odense 1979), pp. 9–19; P. O'Leary, 'Honour-bound: the Social Context of Early Irish Heroic *Geis*', *Celtica* 20 (1988) 85–107.

Although this may be true of many sagas, it is *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* which is most obviously determinist. The structure of the saga is straightforward: its essence is given by the two parallel sentences, one from a related tale, *De Shil Chonairi Móir*, and the other from *TBDD*.<sup>6</sup>

(i) Is é in Conaire sin íarum bertatar síabrai hi rríge, ‘Conaire is the one whom elves raised to the kingship’.<sup>7</sup>

(ii) Is é rí insin loingsite síabrai din bith, ‘He is the king whom elves exiled from the world’.<sup>8</sup>

The link between Conaire’s elevation to the kingship and his death is the list of *geissi*, ‘prohibited acts’; these were put upon him by the king of the bird-people to which his father belonged, when he told him how he might become king of Tara.<sup>9</sup> Conaire’s kingship was begun and ended by the intervention of this other-world people. The saga is thus preoccupied with the origins and with the end of his reign. We may take the origins first. Conaire’s ancestry is variously given in different texts.<sup>10</sup>

The variation is confusing but it is possible to detect certain broad agreements. All versions agree that his great-grandfather, Eochaid, married a woman called Étaín. For some she is the daughter of an Ulsterman, for others a woman of the people of the *síd*. But if she was human, she had previously been married to Midir, the god to whom belonged *Síd Breg Léith*, near Ardagh, Co. Longford; and if she herself came originally from the *síd*, Brí Léith was her home. According to some texts, though not *TBDD*, either Conaire or his mother was the offspring of an incestuous union.<sup>11</sup> According to one text, Conaire’s mother, Mess Buachalla,

<sup>6</sup> The importance of the connexion between these two sentences was seen by Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 621, n. 4.

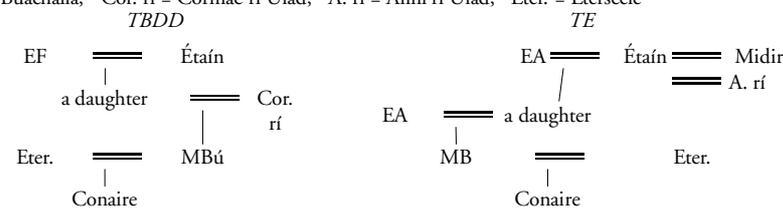
<sup>7</sup> L. Gwynn (ed.), ‘*De Shil Chonairi Móir*’, *Ériu* 6 (1911–12), p. 136, ll. 73–4.

<sup>8</sup> *TBDD*, §26, line 250, as emended by Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 621, n. 4, following Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, ms Stowe D iv 2.

<sup>9</sup> *TBDD*, §16, ll. 168–81. On the list see D. Greene, ‘Tabu in Early Irish Narrative’, pp. 12–13.

<sup>10</sup> *TBDD*, §§1–8, is unclear but (accepting the emendation of *TBDD*, §5, line 71, proposed by Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 628, n. 3) seems to envisage the descent given below, alongside that presupposed by O. Bergin and R. I. Best (ed.), *Tochmarc Éataine*, *Ériu* 12 (1934–), p. 188 (III, §20):

Legend: EF = Eochaid Feidlech; EA = Eochaid Airem; MB = Mess Buachalla; MBú = Mess Búachalla; Cor. rí = Cormac rí Ulad; A. rí = Ailill rí Ulad; Eter. = Eterscéle



<sup>11</sup> According to *Tochmarc Éataine*, III, §20, Eochaid Airem slept with his own daughter by Étaín; the offspring of this union was Conaire’s mother. This line is followed in the expanded version, found in *Lebor na hUidre*, of the summary of the tale in *Cin Dromma Snechta*, R. I. Best and O. Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin 1929), p. 244 (ll. 8010–13). In L. Gwynn (ed.), *De Shil Chonairi Móir*, (a) p. 133, Conaire’s mother was Mess Buachalla, but the father was Mess Buachalla’s foster-father, Eterscéle moccu lair; but later (pp. 135–6) we are given two further versions, (b) Mess Buachalla was the daughter of Eterscéle’s wife, but her father was one of the people of Brí Leith, who were later to bring Conaire to the kingship of Tara (ll. 65–7), (c) Mess Buachalla was the daughter of Eterscéle, but was quickened in

was secretly fathered by one of the people of Brí Léith;<sup>12</sup> but according to *TBDD* the secret union was between one of the bird-people, *énlaith*, and Mess Buachalla herself, and its offspring was Conaire. Yet, because Mess Buachalla was by this time married to Eterscéle, she is said to have borne Conaire ‘to the king’.<sup>13</sup> The details, therefore, vary from text to text, but Conaire’s connexion with the people of Brí Léith is generally upheld. In *TBDD*, the *énlaith* are not identified with the people of Brí Léith, and it is not clear that the identification was assumed; yet their other-worldly character is plain enough. As far as the text of *TBDD* goes, therefore, there were two separate connexions with the other-world in Conaire’s ancestry: the first with the people of Brí Léith through his great-grandmother, Étaín; the second, through his father, with the bird-people.

In *TBDD* it is the latter who enable Conaire to succeed his supposed father as king of Tara. Though his true father was one of the bird-people, Conaire was believed by all to be the son of Eterscéle, king of the Érainn and king of Tara, to whom his mother was married on the day of his conception. When Eterscéle died, so the story implies, Conaire was not considered a plausible successor because of his youth.<sup>14</sup> The successor was to be chosen by a *tarbshéis*, ‘bull-sleep’, by which a man would eat the flesh of a bull and drink the broth from its cooking. He would then lie down and a prayer or spell would be chanted over him to secure the truth and threaten him with the ‘death of his mouth’ if he should utter falsehood. In his sleep he would see a vision of the true and just successor.<sup>15</sup> When ‘the man of the bull-sleep’ (*fear na tarbshéis*) is eating the flesh and drinking the broth, Conaire is many miles from Tara at Dublin. There he pursues strange birds which go before him towards the sea. When he overtakes them they abandon their disguise as birds and turn on him with spears and swords. He is saved, however, by one of them who gives his name as Nemglan, king of the bird-people of Conaire’s father. Nemglan then says to Conaire: ‘you have been forbidden to shoot at birds, for there is no one here who is not related to you either through his father or mother’.<sup>16</sup> Conaire declares that he was ignorant of this. Nemglan then tells him to go to Tara, and that he must go naked in the morning along the road to Tara with a sling and a stone.

There are some interesting features of this passage of *TBDD*. First, Nemglan both tells him, in effect, that he is not the true son of Eterscéle, and yet he instructs him to seek the succession to Eterscéle as king of Tara and tells him how to do it. When Conaire does so, he replies to those who doubt his fitness that the binding of the hostages of Tara is his hereditary right through his father and grandfather.<sup>17</sup>

the womb while her mother was in *síd Breg Leith*; her own father, Eterscél, subsequently had intercourse with her, and the son by that incestuous union was Conaire.

<sup>12</sup> *De Shíl Chonairi Máir*, ll. 65–67 (see n.11, above).

<sup>13</sup> *TBDD*, §7, ll. 91–97, and §8, ll. 103–04. Conaire’s birth is placed within the context of the heroic life-cycle by T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin 1977), pp. 30–1, and by A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic heritage: ancient tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London 1961), pp. 220–21.

<sup>14</sup> *TBDD*, §15, ll. 160–61.

<sup>15</sup> *TBDD*, §11, ll. 122–26. Cf. M. Dillon, ‘The Hindu Act of Truth in Celtic Tradition’, *Modern Philology* 44 (1946/7) 137–40.

<sup>16</sup> *TBDD*, §13, ll. 145–47.

<sup>17</sup> *TBDD*, §15, ll. 163–64.

He thus appeals to an argument which he has just discovered to be false. This difficulty is not present in the other versions of Conaire's pedigree, according to which Conaire is indeed the son of Eterscéle.<sup>18</sup> For them, the connexion with the other-world occurs only at an earlier stage. Secondly, Nemglan knows already what 'the man of the bull-feast' is seeing in his sleep at the very time when he is talking to Conaire.<sup>19</sup> Thirdly, the force of the prohibition on the hunting of birds is reinforced by two circumstances: Nemglan has just saved Conaire from the danger of death, and he speaks, in effect, on behalf of Conaire's father.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the name, Nemglan, is remarkable. He is responsible for initiating Conaire's reign as king of Tara. Nemglan himself calls this reign the *énfhlaith* 'bird-reign' (a play on words with *énlaith* 'bird-people', but the description seems to be seriously intended).<sup>21</sup> As we are later told, it is a reign of unparalleled prosperity, the reign of an exemplary *firfhlaith* 'just-ruler'.<sup>22</sup> Yet the name Nemglan probably means 'unclean' (rather than 'pure radiance' as suggested by *DIL* s.v. *ném*). In the text *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* the sinister aspect of Conaire's support in his bid for the kingship of Tara is not hinted at but clearly brought out. There it is the people of Brí Léith who put him on the throne, urged on by his mother, Mess Buachalla: Conaire comes with the power of *druidecht* behind him.<sup>23</sup>

If we were dealing with *TBDD* by itself, we might be tempted to dismiss the darker elements in Conaire's rise to kingship. After all, a child born to a man's wife, even if begotten by someone else, remains his until the biological father has purchased his child from the mother's husband.<sup>24</sup> The other evidence, however, shows that such a dismissal would be too easy: even if Conaire's claim to the kingship of Tara on the grounds of descent is not automatically voided by the discovery that he is not Eterscéle's son, it remains questionable, above all because he is obliged to put so much stress on it himself.<sup>25</sup> It was because, in spite of his youth, he was supposed to be both son and grandson of a king of Tara, that he could claim the kingship. Yet he was himself to be destroyed by a parallel hereditary claim: 'his foster-brothers complained because the profession of their father and their grandfather had been taken from them, that is, stealing and plundering and homicide and reaving (*díberg*)'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the prohibitions, the violation of which were to destroy his royal authority and bring him to his death, derived from his biological

<sup>18</sup> As in *Tochmarc Éatne*, III, §20, or in the (a)-version in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* (see n.11 above). In version (c) there is a different problem: Eterscéle was Conaire's father, but the mother was his own daughter, Mess Buachalla, and incest is a bar to any right to inherit kingship.

<sup>19</sup> *TBDD*, §13, ll. 149–52, and note also §12, ll. 130–32.

<sup>20</sup> 'It is I, Nemglan, the king of the bird-people of your father': *TBDD*, §13, line 145.

<sup>21</sup> *TBDD*, §16, line 171.

<sup>22</sup> *TBDD*, §17, ll. 182–91; §102, ll. 1069–78.

<sup>23</sup> *De Shíl Chonairi Móir*, ll. 40–46.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the maxim *Cach fuích a mac co ndergelhar de*, 'Every cuckold retains his son until he be purchased from him': D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin 1978), i. 294.13; ii. 662.26; 663.36; 667.22; iv. 1505.26 (*CIH*); M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, I (Dublin 1962), p. 140 (141a15).

<sup>25</sup> Compare *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, i. 372: at LL 324a42–3 Conaire is 'm. Eterscéli', but at 324b30 he is 'm. Messi-Buachalla'.

<sup>26</sup> *TBDD*, §18, ll. 192–94. Cf. n.42 below.

paternity, not from Eterscéle. So too, probably, were his special gifts, his *buada*.<sup>27</sup> His reign was itself a 'bird-reign' (*énfhlaith*).<sup>28</sup> If Cormac mac Airt instructed his son at the inauguration of his reign that he should be *sogeis*,<sup>29</sup> neither Eterscéle (by then dead) nor any intermediary between Eterscéle and his supposed son delivered any such injunction.

The ambiguous nature of Conaire's accession to the kingship of Tara may perhaps be due to two distinct influences on the tradition. First, Conaire was of the Érainn, in as much as he was, or was generally believed to be, the son of Eterscéle moccu Iair. The Leinster genealogies imply, for this period of the legendary past, a conflict between the Érainn and the Leinstermen. Nuadu Necht, king of the Leinstermen, is said to have slain Eterscéle, refusing to acknowledge his wrongful lordship (*anfhlaithe*).<sup>30</sup> Conaire is likewise said to have slain Nuadu Necht, and he in turn was slain by Ingcél the Briton and the three red-heads of the Leinstermen, the sons of Donn Désa: Fer Gel, Fer Rogain, and Lomna Drúth.<sup>31</sup> *TBDD* is distinctly sympathetic to the Érainn, since it does not even allow that Nuadu Necht was king of Tara between Eterscéle and Conaire. Yet there seems also to have been a version favourable to Conaire's Leinster enemies, surfacing most clearly in the Leinster genealogies. This was far less friendly to Eterscéle and his son Conaire. For this version, the Laigin had the just claim to the kingship of Tara, and the Érainn were mere interlopers. If a full account from a Leinster standpoint had survived, it is easy to see how it would have explained Conaire's acquisition of the kingship of Tara. It would presumably have stressed the monstrous, sinister, and druidic character of his supporters, and their success by sorcery. This picture is largely adopted in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir*,<sup>32</sup> and it may also have influenced, though to a far lesser degree, *TBDD* itself. Conaire's relationship to Leinster, as it is portrayed in *TBDD*, is difficult to define. When the *turbfheis* was organised in order to find an heir to Eterscéle moccu Iair, Conaire and his foster-brothers (the latter themselves Leinstermen) were in Mag Lifi,<sup>33</sup> the centre of the power of the Uí Dúnlainge kings of Leinster at the time when the A and B versions of *TBDD* were written – the ninth century according to Thurneysen.<sup>34</sup> Nemglan and the *énlaith* surround Conaire after he has entered the sea at Dublin, on the northern border of Cualu and at the place where the *dibergaig* would land.<sup>35</sup> When, therefore, Conaire returned along 'the Cualu road' (*Slige Chualann*), he was journeying *via* Dublin

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 'Cormac fear na tri mbuad', *TBDD*, §4, ll. 64–65, with the 'teora buada for Conaire' of §10.

<sup>28</sup> *TBDD*, §16, line 171.

<sup>29</sup> K. Meyer (ed.), *The instructions of King Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin 1909) p. 12, §6. Cf. F. Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin 1976), p. 70, §52: *Dia nderna inso uile. . . bid sogessi*, 'If he does all these things. . . he will be of good geiss'.

<sup>30</sup> O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* I, p. 1 (115 a 20) = K. Meyer, 'Die älteste irische Dichtung. I. Rhythmische allitierende Reimstrophen', *Abhandlungen der Königliche Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1913), no. 6, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* p. 120 (136 a 27–32).

<sup>32</sup> For that reason, although *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* is an account of the origin of the Múscraige (a branch of the Érainn), it cannot be seen as propaganda in their favour.

<sup>33</sup> *Life* in *TBDD*, §12, line 127, is probably synonymous with Mag Lifi (cf. E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goidelicum* [Dublin 1910], p. 489, under *Lifé*) since Conaire travels from there to Dublin.

<sup>34</sup> *Heldensage*, p. 627.

<sup>35</sup> *TBDD*, §53, ll. 476–78; §58, ll. 522–23; §67, ll. 620–21.

to his death at the hostel of ‘Da Derga of the Leinstermen’.<sup>36</sup> He entered upon his reign from Leinster and left it by returning to Leinster, travelling along the same route. The *siabrai*, therefore, initiate Conaire’s reign and end both his reign and his life when he is in Leinster.

Secondly, the way in which Conaire acquired the kingship of Tara can only have emphasised to the Irish *literati* of the early christian period the pagan character of the kingship of Tara. It was *druidecht* and the support of the *áes síde* or the *siabrai* which enabled even the great and just Conaire to bind the hostages of Tara. It would have been easy to play upon the sinister aspect of his support, to portray the *siabrai* as if they were no different from the Fomoiri, for they do undeniably become sinister when Conaire is brought to his death.<sup>37</sup>

If we allow for some slight interference from a tradition influenced by a Leinster standpoint and possibly even by christian suspicion of the pagan glories of Tara,<sup>38</sup> it becomes clear that Conaire’s death is not portrayed in *TBDD* as wholly unjust. Admittedly creatures which are openly monstrous participate in his downfall,<sup>39</sup> but that does not show that the audience of *TBDD* was intended to believe that Conaire’s opponents were merely evil.

It is also true that, in part, Conaire brought his fate upon his own head. His foster-fathers, *in da Maine Milsothacha*, brought his foster-brothers (and thus their foster-sons<sup>40</sup>), caught in *diberg*, to Tara for judgment. Conaire then delivered an unjust judgment; admittedly he retracted it, saying ‘The judgment which I have given is not an extension of life for me’, yet his second judgment, by which his foster-brothers were sent to prosecute their *diberg* in Britain, led directly to his death.<sup>41</sup>

Only a small portion of the saga recounts how Conaire came to be king of Tara: the main preoccupation is with his downfall and death. Yet the early part (§§1–17) is essential, for Conaire’s journey to destruction has been pre-ordained by the way in which he rose to the kingship. The *siabrai* have brought him to Tara; and his kinship to them, together with his release from the danger of death by Nemglan, entitles them to make certain demands. These are the *geissi* listed in §16. The second part of the saga tells how the *geissi* were violated (§§18–69; ll. 192–628). By the end of this part Conaire is already doomed and the manner of his death is clear in outline. It will come through the alliance of Ingcél Cáech, the Briton, and the sons (or descendants) of Donn Désa. The details of his destruction are foretold in the third part: the description in turn of each *imdae*, ‘apartment’, in the hostel of Da Derga and its occupants (§§70–140; ll. 629–1394). Ingcél has gone ahead to reconnoitre and on his return describes what he has seen. One of the sons of Donn

<sup>36</sup> *TBDD*, §30, ll. 287–88; §38, ll. 344–45; §48, ll. 429–30.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Conaire’s exclamation in his sleep, *TBDD*, §101, line 1064: *imed siabra*, ‘a multitude of *siabrai*’.

<sup>38</sup> Best expressed in the well known lines from W. Stokes (ed.), *Félire Óengusso Céili Dé: the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, Henry Bradshaw Society [London 1905], Prologue, 165–76 p. 24).

<sup>39</sup> Notably Fer Cailli and his wife, *TBDD*, §§38–40, and Cailb, *TBDD*, §§61–63.

<sup>40</sup> The complexity of these relationships may explain the mistake of *mo daltai* for *mo chomaltai* in §20, line 214.

<sup>41</sup> *TBDD*, §§20–1. On Conaire’s unjust judgment, see T. Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Semantics of ‘Síd’’, *Éigse* 17 (1977–9), 145–6, and D. Greene, ‘Tabu in Early Irish Narrative’, pp. 13–14.

Déasa, Fer Rogain, identifies the persons described by Ingcél and prophesies their feats in the battle. Another of the sons, Lomna Drúth, then counsels the *díbergaig*, ‘plunderers’, to abandon the *orgun*, but Ingcél Caéach defeats him by appealing to the honour of Fer Rogain who has been given as surety to him.<sup>42</sup> He has given rich plunder to the sons of Donn Déasa in Britain and has suffered the deaths of his own family; they are now bound to join with him in whatever *orgun* he may choose in Ireland. In the fourth part the battle is soon over (§§141–176 of which 149–153, 160–161, 163–164 are interpolations confined to *Lebor na hUidre*). Even here the tale is quite uninterested in the battle itself; its concern is with the way the druids defeat Conaire by thirst and with Mac Cécht’s vain search for water from all the great rivers and lakes of Ireland.

The predetermining of Conaire’s death is, then, accomplished in two stages: in part 2 of the saga the violation of the *geissi* determines his fate in outline; in part 3 the prophecies of Fer Rogain reveal his fate in detail. The focus of attention is, however, different in the two parts. In part 2 the sons of Donn Déasa initiate the violation of Conaire’s *geissi*, but the main interest is in Conaire’s inability to avoid the violation of his *geissi*, the inevitable collapse of his authority, and the withdrawal of the support given to his reign by the *siabrai*. In part 3, on the other hand, the main interest is in the plight of the sons of Donn Déasa, caught between their obligation to their foster-brother, Conaire, and their obligation to their ally, Ingcél. Their dilemma is one of honour, and Ingcél is ruthless in emphasizing the debt which they owe to him. When the *díbergaig* ask, ‘who shall go to look at the house?’, Ingcél replies, ‘Who should go but myself, for it is I to whom debts are owing?’<sup>43</sup> When Lomna Drúth counsels retreat, Ingcél’s incantatory appeal to the honour of the sureties triumphs over all opposition.

The difference between part 2 and part 3 reappears in two summaries of the tale. Neither summary is of a surviving version of the story but the difference between them is closely related to the difference between the central parts of the surviving compilation. The summary which derives from *Cín Dromma Snechta*, a lost manuscript of c. AD 700, concentrates on the dilemma of Ingcél’s Irish allies.<sup>44</sup> The names are different but the issue is the same. This summary never mentions *siabrai* or *énlaith*. There may be a reference to one *geiss*, but that depends upon the translation of an obscure passage.<sup>45</sup> This summary was later re-edited and expanded; there is a copy of the later version in *Lebor na hUidre*.<sup>46</sup> Here the people of Brí Léith take the centre of the stage. We are told that they brought

<sup>42</sup> On the plunderers, see R. Sharpe, ‘Hiberno-Latin *Laicus*, Irish *Láech* and the Devil’s Men’, *Ériu* 30 (1979) 80–87, and K. R. McCone, ‘Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga*, and *Fianna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986) 3–6.

<sup>43</sup> *TBDD*, §70, ll. 638–39.

<sup>44</sup> R. Thurneysen, ‘Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern’, I, *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, Phil.-hist. Klasse, Neue Folge 14, no. 2 (1912), pp. 27–8; Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 16; G. Murphy, ‘On the Dates of Two Sources used in Thurneysen’s *Heldensage*’, *Ériu* 16 (1952), pp. 145–51; T. Ó Cathasaigh, ‘On the *Cín Dromma Snechta* version of *Togail Brudne Uí Dergae*’, *Ériu* 41 (1990), pp. 103–14.

<sup>45</sup> Thurneysen, ‘Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern’, I, p. 27: ‘is e do-feith trogain 7 ba he bert troghain tar Bregħæ’ (on the interpretation of this passage see Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 622, n. 4).

<sup>46</sup> Bergin anad Best, *Lebor na hUidre*, pp. 244–5, ll. 8005–37.

about the destruction of Da Derga's hostel and the death of Conaire in revenge for an attack on them by Conaire's great-grandfather Eochaid. He had dug up the mound of Brí Léith in pursuit of Étaín his wife who had been carried off by Midir. Midir's people appeared in the guise of human armies and laid waste Mag mBreg. This corresponds to §§25 and 26 of *TBDD*, with the notable difference that in *TBDD* there is no mention of any revenge for an attack by Eochaid on Brí Léith. On the contrary, the *siabrai* are only responding to the violation of the first of Conaire's *geissi*. As Lucius Gwynn saw, the summary in *Lebor na hUidre* is indebted to *Tochmarc Étaíne* in making revenge for the digging up of Brí Leith by Eochaid Airem the reason for the destruction of Conaire.<sup>47</sup> But however complicated the criss-crossings of textual and oral influences, the different interests of the two summaries throw into sharper light the contrast between part 2 and part 3 of *TBDD*. Both the *geissi* of part 2 and the prophecies of part 3 repay closer examination.

The *geissi* are stated in §16. Conaire has just been accepted as king and he is said to repeat the prohibitions as Nemglan uttered them, although in §13 only one prohibition is given—that Conaire should not shoot at birds. Of this list four simple questions may be asked. First, who is entitled to impose such prohibitions? Secondly, what is the form of such a prohibition and how is it described? Thirdly, what is, or can be, the content of such a prohibition? And, fourthly, what is the sanction which gives force to such a prohibition? The material in *TBDD* will not provide a full solution to these problems, but it will suggest possible answers. These will then provide a starting-point for examination of other material.

The first question asks who is entitled to impose prohibitions of this type. In *TBDD* the prohibitions are uttered first by Nemglan, king of the bird-people to which Conaire's father belonged. He gives as the reason for the prohibition stated in §13 that Conaire is related to all the bird-people present.<sup>48</sup> It is not immediately clear whether this is only a justification of the content of the prohibition—that Conaire should not shoot at birds—or also a reason why the author of the prohibition has authority over Conaire. Closer scrutiny suggests that it explains Nemglan's authority as well as the content. Nemglan uses the passive preterite of the verb *ar-gair*, 'forbids': 'shooting at birds was forbidden you' (*ar-garad dít dibrugud én*). Conaire excuses himself on the grounds that he did not know that until then; and here he may be saying not only that he did not know of his kinship to the bird-people, but also that he did not know of the prohibition. The natural explanation of this passage is that Nemglan is reporting the prohibition uttered by Conaire's father at Conaire's conception and at the moment when he gave a name to his son.<sup>49</sup> If this is the correct explanation, the prohibition was laid by a father upon his son. The authority behind it was thus paternal. From *TBDD* we may, then, derive the hypothesis that a prohibition of this type is authoritative in virtue of some relationship between the two parties, such as paternity. Nemglan is not the true source of Conaire's *geissi* for he reports a previous prohibition (*ar-garad*,

<sup>47</sup> L. Gwynn, 'The Recensions of the Saga *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 10 (1915), p. 214 (but he was working before the discovery of the rest of *Tochmarc Étaíne*).

<sup>48</sup> *TBDD*, §13, ll. 145–47.

<sup>49</sup> *TBDD*, §7, line 96.

line 145, is preterite passive) and instructs Conaire as to what the prohibitions are (*ro-mmúin*, line 168). It is difficult to see how Nemglan might have such privileged knowledge of Conaire's *geissi* other than through his own relationship to Conaire's father. Hence Conaire's father must be the true source of the *geissi*, and Nemglan's authority is that of a privileged intermediary. Although the full list of prohibitions is reserved until §16, it is clear that they derive from an earlier stage in the tale. Conaire recites them in §16 as 'the man on the wave', namely Nemglan, 'had instructed him' (ll. 168–169).

The second question is about the form of the prohibitions and how they are described. The form is one used widely in texts which purport to give the instructions of ancient sages to kings, or the instructions of a king to his son, notably *Audacht Morainn* and *Tecosca Cormaic*. When it is a question of an action which must not be performed, by Conaire the 2 sg. jussive subjunctive is used; if it is an action which should not be performed by others, the 3 sg. or pl. is employed. The only peculiarity of form which marks it off from the generality of similar injunctions in the laws or in the *speculum principis* literature is that all the injunctions are negative. It is worth noting at this point the interesting suggestion, stemming originally from a remark by Geoffrey Keating, that a *tecosc rí*g was recited at the inauguration of a king.<sup>50</sup> Here too, the prohibitions on Conaire are a parallel, for they are proclaimed at the inauguration of Conaire's reign.<sup>51</sup> The recitation of the prohibitions is preceded by the following sentences.<sup>52</sup>

Sáidit ríge nÉrenn imbi. Ocus as-bertsom: 'Im-cóemrusa do gáethaib corba gáeth fadeisin'.

They fix the kingship of Ireland about him. And he said: 'I shall enquire of wise men so that I may be wise myself'.

This is likely to be a reference to the type of instruction given by a *tecosc rí*g.<sup>53</sup> In the version represented by the summary in *Lebor na hUidre*, the resemblance to an inauguration ceremony is even closer.<sup>54</sup>

Ar gabaisom flaith i ndáid a athar 7 asbert Ninión druif bátar n-é airchoilte a flatha etc.

For he took the kingship in succession to his father and Ninión the druid said that the following were the prohibitions on his reign. . .

<sup>50</sup> Kelly, *Audacht Morainn*, p. xiv. On inaugurations see M. Dillon, 'The Consecration of Irish Kings', *Celtica* 10 (1973), pp. 1–8; F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973), pp. 15–22, 188; K. Simms, *From kings to warlords: the changing structure of Gaelic Ireland in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge 1987), chap. 3.

<sup>51</sup> The association of *geissi* and the injunctions of a *tecosc* is suggested by the A-recension of Kelly, *Audacht Morainn*, p. 70, §52: 'If he does all these things. . . he will be of good *geiss*'.

<sup>52</sup> *TBDD*, §15, ll. 165–67, normalised.

<sup>53</sup> The literary genre, the *tecosc rí*g, was evidently already detached from any connexion with royal inauguration in the Old Irish period, yet even in the most elaborate *Tecosca Cormaic* (ed., K. Meyer, *The Instructions of King Cormac mac Airt*), the framework remains a dialogue between a sage (in this case the former king, who has abdicated, Cormac) and the new king, his son Cairpre Lifechair, to whom he imparts wisdom, *gáes*, including, as the first of the *téchna flatha*, the injunction 'rop sogeis'; for which cf. §52 of the A-recension of *Audacht Morainn* (n.51 above).

<sup>54</sup> Bergin and Best, *Lebor na hUidre*, ll. 8019–20.

Here, as, we may presume, in the normal royal inauguration, it was a sacred figure who publicly recited the injunctions.<sup>55</sup> In *TBDD*, however, Conaire himself recited the prohibitions, even though he has just said that he will seek wisdom from the wise.<sup>56</sup> This may be an intentional divergence from the norm, another indication that Conaire's reign is not quite what it seems.

It is also interesting to see how the prohibitions are described in *TBDD*. First, *geiss* is probably never used in this text for the prohibitions themselves, but rather for the actions prohibited or the person on whom prohibitions lie. The word *geiss* appears in three constructions in *TBDD*.

1. (*Is*) *geiss dó / dosom* + noun or pronoun denoting an action:  
*geiss dosom teacht d'á n-eiteirgleód.* (*TBDD*, §24, line 232)  
*gess dosom didiu in nísín 7 ba ges didiu dó díberg do gabáil i nHérinn ina flait.* (*TBDD*, §40, ll. 372–73)
2. Rom-gabsat mo gessi uili innocht. (*TBDD*, §36, line 339 emended in accordance with *Lebor na hUidre*, line 6814)
3. A person as *geiss*:  
*Is di gesaib ém do Chonaire Fer Cailli cona muicc.* (*TBDD*, §36, ll. 1357–58)  
*Gabais cách a suidi is tig iter ges 7 nemgeis.* (*TBDD*, §59, line 525)

The first type of construction is by far the commonest (eleven examples in *TBDD*), whereas, for the other two, the above are the only examples in the text. In the first type, *geiss* means a prohibited action; in the third, *geiss* means a person whose presence is prohibited, as opposed to *nemgeiss*. In the second construction it is not so clear, but it may, as in the first, refer to the prohibited actions rather than to the prohibitions themselves. The prohibitions themselves have had a hold of Conaire since his meeting with Nemglan: it is the committing of the prohibited actions which now hems him in. It is therefore unlikely that, in *TBDD*, *geiss* ever simply means 'tabu' if one adopts the definition quoted by David Greene from Margaret Mead, 'a prohibition whose infringement results in automatic penalty without human or superhuman intervention'.<sup>57</sup> In *TBDD*, *geiss* is not the prohibition itself, and there is much intervention, both human and superhuman, in the death of Conaire. In particular not all these actions are committed by Conaire himself, as one of the examples given under (1) shows: it was *geis* for him that the *díbergaig* were active in Ireland.

The term used of the prohibitions themselves appears to be *airmit*, if we may emend *do airmitiu*, literally 'thy reverence', in line 171 (§16) (*airmitniu*, MS. Stowe

<sup>55</sup> Cf. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (ed.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* [2nd edn., Oxford 1991] 188–90) III 5, where Columba ordains (that is, confers elevated, in this instance royal, status on) Áedán mac Gabráin, at the same time (*inter ordinationis uerba*) prophesying about Áedán's sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons. The prophecy did not confine itself to mere description of the future but included, according to the earlier *Life* by Cumméne the White, a *commendatio*, a term which probably translates Irish *timnae* or *audacht*. This *commendatio* was to be passed on from father to son. If violated, it would bring disaster on kingdom and dynasty.

<sup>56</sup> Eleanor Knott took *in so* in line 168 to refer back to the words uttered by Conaire in §15 (n. *ad loc.*); it is, however, unnecessary to suppose that *in so* refers back rather than, as normal, forwards, and her theory is made the more unlikely since *in so* is immediately followed by *huile* and so must embrace all the prohibitions of §16.

<sup>57</sup> Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', p. 9.

D iv 2), to *do airmit-siu*. *Airmit* is the word used in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* for the prohibition on Conaire there stated as ‘that the sun should not set nor rise upon him in Tara’.<sup>58</sup> The etymology of this rare word is uncertain, but it is probably to be analysed as *air* + *mit* parallel to *ar-gair* (*airgart*, *urgart*) and *ar-cuilli* (compare *airchuillte* used instead of *geiss* in the summary in *Lebor na hUidre*, 8020). In each case *air-* means ‘from’ and emphasises the negative aspect of the prohibition.

The third question was what is, or can be, the content of such a prohibition. The list in *TBDD* is undoubtedly heterogeneous in character. In part the prohibitions derive from Conaire’s own history, in part they are the normal prohibitions laid on any king of Tara. The prohibition on shooting at birds stated by Conaire’s father in §7, and by Nemglan in §13, is straightforward: the *énlaith* are, or include, Conaire’s kin, and the prohibition is thus against *finéal* ‘kin-slaying’. The prohibition in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* upon letting the sun set or rise upon him in Tara does not pertain to Conaire as an individual but is reminiscent of one of the *urgarta rígh Temruch* in the text edited by Myles Dillon under the title *The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland*: ‘that the sun should rise while he is in bed in the plain of Tara’.<sup>59</sup>

In this way the eight prohibitions in the list in §16 (of which four appear among the five prohibitions in the *Lebor na hUidre* summary) can be divided into two classes, although not all the prohibitions can be confidently assigned to one rather than to the other. The first class is that of general prohibitions, applicable to any king of Tara rather than to Conaire in particular; the second class, on the other hand, is of prohibitions applicable only to Conaire in virtue of his history and that of his family. The first prohibition, ‘you shall not go right-hand round Tara and left-hand round Brega’, is probably a general prohibition comparable to one of the *aurgarta rígh Laighen* in the text edited by Dillon: ‘to go widdershins around the *Fortuatha Laigen*’.<sup>60</sup> Similarly the third, ‘you shall not venture out each ninth night outside Tara’, is comparable with a prohibition on the king of Leinster that he should not camp for nine days in Cualu and on the king of Munster that he should not camp for nine days by the River Suir.<sup>61</sup>

Those prohibitions applicable to Conaire in particular are easier to understand. The second, ‘let not the crooked beasts of Cernae be hunted by you’, is probably only a special case of the general prohibition on shooting at birds.<sup>62</sup> The fifth, ‘let not the three Reds go before you to the house of Red’, is clarified by the evidence of the genealogies that the three Reds were Leinstermen, usually identified with the sons of Donn Désa.<sup>63</sup> Conaire’s father was slain by the king of Leinster, a death

<sup>58</sup> Gwynn, ll. 61–2.

<sup>59</sup> M. Dillon, ‘The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 54 C (1951), pp. 8, 27, 35, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Dillon, ‘The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland’, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Dillon, ‘The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland’, pp. 12, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (Dublin 1963) ll. 148–71, where the *géisi Cernai* are also the *éoin Maic Dé bí*.

<sup>63</sup> O’Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* I, p. 120 (136 a 29–32). This supports the idea that ‘the three Red Hounds of the men of Cualu’, said to be of the Uí Bríuin Chualann (*TBDD* §43) are a doublet of ‘the three Reds’ of §§30–6. The Uí Bríuin Chualann were, by the twelfth century, settled around Bray and Powerscourt (L. Price, *The Place-Names of Co. Wicklow* [Dublin 1945–67] pp. 337–38, 395). At an earlier period, they were probably farther north and west, in the area immediately south of Dublin later taken over by Uí Dúinchada, within whose territory Bruiden Da Derga was then

which Conaire himself subsequently revenged.<sup>64</sup> This prohibition may therefore be an allusion to a feud between the kings of the Érainn and the kings of the Laigin. The eighth and last prohibition, ‘you shall not restrain the quarrel of your two bondmen’, probably refers back to the fostering of Conaire’s mother by two bondmen.<sup>65</sup> Subsequently the two *mogai* were freed and they fostered Conaire himself. The importance of this element in his history is clear because it gave names to both Conaire’s mother, Mess Buachalla, ‘the foster-child of the cow-herd’, and to Conaire himself, ‘dog-watch’, for Mess Buachalla was first thrown into a kennel occupied by a bitch and her pups. One may perhaps suggest that the difference of status is an essential element here: that for a king it would in any case be demeaning to intervene in the quarrel of two bondmen and that the risk might be particularly acute in virtue of Conaire’s mother’s childhood when she was brought up by bondmen. The connexion of this prohibition with Conaire is again shown by the story of its violation in §24. By this time the two bondmen have been transformed into the two foster-brothers, the two Cairpres of Thomond. The prohibition is rather different as well, ‘it was a *geiss* for him to go to make peace between them before they had sought him’.<sup>66</sup> It is still a question of rank, but instead of the gulf between king and bondman it is now the question of who takes the first step. The fourth, sixth, and seventh in the list are less clear, but at least we can see that the content of the prohibitions is not irremediably arbitrary. Although some refer to any king of Tara and cannot be explained from within *TBDD* and associated texts, others refer specially to dangers or obligations arising from Conaire’s past.

The fourth question asked what was the sanction which gave force to such prohibitions. Here again *TBDD* shows two distinct sanctions: the first is the collapse of Conaire’s authority as king and the second is his death. Conaire’s reign was one of outstanding prosperity: Fer Rogain himself praised *febus na cána*, ‘the excellence of the authority’, which Conaire exercised.<sup>67</sup> We are told that he had in his household seven wolves as hostages that their people would respect his *recht*.<sup>68</sup>

placed (*Féilire Óengusso*<sup>2</sup>, Notes, 130, May 11): Cell ingen leir Leinin, was in the territory of Uí Briúin Chualann according to Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso*, p. 90 (note on March 6), but a Latin marginal note added to the W. Stokes (ed.), *Féilire Huí Gormáin. The Martyrology of Gorman* (London 1895), p. 48, says that ‘the daughters of Lenini were in Tallaght’; and hence Hogan’s identification (*Onomasticon*, p. 195) of their church with Killinenny, a townland in the parish of Tallaght rather than with Killiney. The emergence of Uí Briúin to power in Cualu may be dated to the second half of the eighth century: compare Annals of Ulster, s.a. 770.10, where Uí Théig fight Ciannachta Breg at Dublin, and Annals of Ulster, s.a. 778.7, where an Uí Théig ruler is designated king of Cualu, with Annals of Ulster, s.a. 788.7, the first mention of a king of Uí Briúin Chualann. This provides a *terminus post quem* and so helps to date §43, and therefore Thurneysen’s ‘Version B’, to the late eighth or the ninth century. It may be significant that the ancestor of Uí Briúin, Brión, received the *fonáim* ‘lethderg’, ‘half-red’, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, I, ed. O’Brien, p. 73 (t24b16: addition in LL and BB). On the location of Bruiden Da Derga see K. Nicholls’s review of A. P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster, Peritia* 3 (1984), p. 538, n. 2, L. Price, ‘The Manor of Bothercolyn’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 74 (1944) 107–18.

<sup>64</sup> See above, p. 48.

<sup>65</sup> *TBDD*, §5.

<sup>66</sup> *TBDD*, §24, ll. 232–33.

<sup>67</sup> *TBDD*, §66, line 607.

<sup>68</sup> *TBDD*, §66, ll. 603–04.

Elsewhere it is said that Mac Cécht had challenged the Fomoiri to single combat; none of them, however, could be found to face him, so that he brought three hostages back to Conaire as a guarantee that the Fomoiri would not injure corn or milk in Ireland. They would not defy his rightful authority as long as his reign lasted (ll. 916–922).<sup>69</sup> The alliance with the bird-people, who, in *TBDD*, may be the same as the *siabrai*, gave distinction to his reign,<sup>70</sup> a distinction upheld by authority over the Fomoiri. The consequence of the violation of Conaire's prohibitions is the collapse of his *recht* or *cáin*, his authority as king of Tara. On his return from settling the quarrel of the two Cairpres, an action which was *geiss* to him, Conaire and his party are surrounded by marauding bands laying waste Mide. "What is this?" says Conaire. 'Not difficult', reply his company. 'It is not hard to see that the *cáin* has been broken apart now that they have taken to burning the land.'<sup>71</sup> In the summary in *Lebor na hUidre*, the marauders are the people of the *síd* of Brí Léith who have disguised themselves as human armies and are laying waste Mag mBreg.<sup>72</sup> In *TBDD* they are clearly identified as the *siabrai*, as in the summary in *Lebor na hUidre*, but the further identification with the people of Brí Léith is not made. One is left to assume, I think, that they are, or include, the *énlaith*, the bird-people: those who brought Conaire to the kingship are now destroying his authority. Their attacks then compel Conaire to violate other prohibitions and thus drive him on towards his fate.

The *siabrai* do not only destroy Conaire's authority as king; they are also instrumental in bringing about his death. It is they who exile him from the world (line 250). The three Reds who go before him to the house of Red are, in the A-version of *TBDD* postulated by Thurneysen and other scholars before him, people from the other-world. In the B Version they are the three 'red dogs' of the men of Cualu or, updated to late eighth- and ninth-century conditions, three champions of the Uí Briúin of Cualu. In the Leinster genealogies they are the three red-heads, Fer Gel, Fer Rogain, and Lomna Drúth, sons of Donn Désa. But the line between this world and the other-world is impossible to draw. If the three reds of Version A are both alive and dead and ride the horses of Dond Desscorach from the *síde*,<sup>73</sup> yet they can hardly be disassociated from the sons of Donn Désa; although Donn Désa appears in the legendary history of Leinster, he is unlikely to be entirely separate from the god of the dead, the lord of Tech Duinn, the house of the dead.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere we are told that Donn had a son Midir who may perhaps be the divine lord of Brí Léith and thus closely connected with Conaire's family.<sup>75</sup> Although *TBDD* contains both the theme of Conaire's relationship to his other-world kinsmen and the theme of his relationship, as king of the Érainn, to his foster-brothers, who are also Leinstermen and thus his hereditary opponents, it does not keep them apart: in the person of Donn they are linked together. The *siabrai*, therefore, have not

<sup>69</sup> *TBDD*, §94, ll. 916–22.

<sup>70</sup> *TBDD*, §16, ll. 170–71.

<sup>71</sup> *TBDD*, §26, ll. 242–44.

<sup>72</sup> Bergin and Best, *Lebor na hUidre*, ll. 8016–18.

<sup>73</sup> *TBDD*, §35, line 329.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. 'tech Duinn', *TBDD*, §79, line 717, and T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin 1946), pp. 119, 125.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

finished with Conaire when they destroy his *cáin* and *recht* in Mide and Brega: they go before him, three Reds to the house of Red.

The role of people of the other-world in destroying Conaire's reign and in taking his life is also made manifest elsewhere. In the second of the three prophetic *laídi* uttered by Conaire in the course of the night in Da Derga's hostel, he laments *coll etha galand*, 'destruction of corn by foes',<sup>76</sup> and the *orgain rig Hérenn*,<sup>77</sup> in the third he declares, 'calamity has been revealed to me, a multitude of *siabrai*'.<sup>78</sup> When Conaire's death comes it is accomplished, not by the victory of the *dibergaig*, for they are defeated, but by the magic of their druids.<sup>79</sup> They destroy Conaire's ardour by a magic thirst; and when Mac Cécht searches all Ireland for water in order to satisfy that thirst, the rivers, wells, and lakes of Ireland are concealed from him until it is too late. Among the *siabrai* who brought Conaire to his death was Bé Find, the 'fair woman', associated in *Táin Bó Fratch* with Boand.<sup>80</sup> Conaire's great-grandmother, Étaín, was addressed by Midir as Bé Find,<sup>81</sup> but the further association with the goddess of the Boyne, one of the rivers whose waters were concealed from Mac Cécht, is also plausible. The druids, then, depend upon the power of the *siabrai*, who may include some of the pagan gods.

Both contents and sanctions suggest that we should distinguish two categories among the prohibitions. If we borrow terms used, one in the *Lebor na hUidre* summary and the other in *Togail Bruidne da Choca*,<sup>82</sup> the two categories are, first, *erchuillti a fhlaitha*, 'the prohibitions attached to his reign', and, secondly, *erchuillti a sháegail*, 'the prohibitions attached to his life-span'. The first, the prohibitions attached to his reign, were not binding, and probably not imposed, until his inauguration as king of Tara. They are prohibitions comparable to those in *The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland*. They pertain to any king, not to a particular individual. Quite distinct are the prohibitions attached to his life-span. These were binding from the start for they were, it seems, imposed upon Conaire at his conception and at his name-giving. The two categories are linked together because Conaire's reign was an *énfhlaith*, 'bird-reign', instigated and ennobled by his other-world kinsmen. These kinsmen thus lent their authority to the prohibitions recited at his inauguration at Tara and also, at Dublin the day before, by Nemglan, king of the *énlaith*. The list recited at the inauguration included, as we have seen, both categories. Although in origin they were different, the two kinds of prohibition and the two kinds of sanction are brought together at the inauguration. Hence the sanction behind them was a double one: first the *maidm rechta / cána*, 'shattering of authority', and then Conaire's death.

Comparison with other texts confirms this distinction. The *airmit*, 'prohibition', imposed upon Conaire by the *siabrai* in *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* is proclaimed

<sup>76</sup> So read *TBDD*, §101, line 1056 (cf. MS Stowe, D. iv. 2 and Bergin and Best, *Lebor na hUidre*, line 7453).

<sup>77</sup> *TBDD*, §101, line 1057.

<sup>78</sup> *TBDD*, §101, line 1064.

<sup>79</sup> *TBDD*, §144.

<sup>80</sup> *TBDD*, §32, line 304; W. Meid (ed.), *Táin Bó Fratch* (Dublin 1967), line 2.

<sup>81</sup> Bergin and Best, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, III.10 p. 180.

<sup>82</sup> Bergin and Best, *Lebor na hUidre*, line 8020; W. Stokes, 'Togail Bruidne Da Choca: "Da Choca's Hostel"', *Revue celtique* 21 (1900), p. 152 (§6).

at his inauguration and belongs without doubt to the first category, the *erchuillti a fhiltha*: it is the closest of all to a prohibition in *The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland*.<sup>83</sup> The *erchuillti a sháegail* in *Togail Bruidne Da Choca* were, however, according to one of the two manuscripts of the text, imposed upon Cormac on the night that he was born by Cathbad, the druid, his grandfather.<sup>84</sup>

Yet, if it is possible to make useful distinctions in this field, it is necessary to notice also the associations made by the texts. The most important of such associations for us are those between oath, prophecy, omen, and prohibition. The prohibitions and the associated prescriptions contained in *The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland* are, almost without exception, instructions to avoid acts of ill omen and to perform acts of good omen. Some of Conaire's prohibitions belong, as we have seen, to the same category. The taboos of the kings are typically attached to place or person. They do not say 'do not travel widdershins when you are on circuit', but rather 'do not go widdershins around the *Fortuatha Laigen*'. This is true even of the prohibitions particular to Conaire, the *erchuillti a sháegail*. If the 'crooked beasts of Cernae' are indeed birds, as appears from *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*,<sup>85</sup> then the original general prohibition imposed by Conaire's father has become attached to a particular place by the time it appears in the list in §16. It is no longer 'you shall not kill birds', but 'you shall not hunt the birds of Cernae'.<sup>86</sup> From general instruction it has become the prohibition of an act of ill omen; instead of an association with solemn parental injunction we have an association with the instructions of druids at the inauguration of kings. Moreover, the druids are the professional interpreters and manipulators of omens. At the beginning of *TBC I*, the prophets and druids will not permit the army of Ailill and Medb to leave Cruachain while, for a fortnight, they await an omen.<sup>87</sup> Some omens are, however, well known: as Medb prepares to leave Cruachain, her charioteer says to her, 'wait now so that the chariot may turn right hand round, and so that the strength of the omen may come [to us] that we may come back again'.<sup>88</sup> The care of the charioteer in performing his own act of good omen may bring home the power of the druids' omen. His act is made the more interesting for us because, when Cú Chulainn returns to Emain in all the fury of his first expedition across the frontier he threatens the Ulster warriors by an ominous action and an oath.<sup>89</sup>

Then he turns the left side of his chariot towards Emain and that was a *geis* for it. And Cú Chulainn said: 'I swear to the god to whom the Ulstermen swear that unless a man be found to fight against me, I shall shed the blood of everyone in the fort.'

<sup>83</sup> *De Shil Chonairi Móir*, ll. 61–62; cf. Dillon, 'The Taboos of the Kings of Ireland', p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> W. Stokes, *Bruiden Da Choca*, p. 152, §6 (Stokes's ms B).

<sup>85</sup> D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (Dublin 1963), ll. 149–57, 171.

<sup>86</sup> P. O'Leary, 'Honour-bound: the Social Context of Early Irish Heroic *Geis*', pp. 88–9, has noted the tendency of *geis* to be specific in terms of place.

<sup>87</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 22–23.

<sup>88</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 27–28.

<sup>89</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 806–09. On this example, see D. Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', pp. 14–15, who pointed out its use as a method of challenging an opponent to battle.

The *geiss* in this instance is simply an act of ill omen, followed by a vow, the whole serving as a challenge to battle. The act is comparable to the way Lóegaire is portrayed by Muirchú as going to Patrick, ‘hominum et equorum facies secundum congruum illis sensum ad leuam uertentes’.<sup>90</sup>

In *TBDD* omen is associated with prophecy and prophecy with oath. Cailb, the woman of the other-world who comes in §61 to the door of the hostel (in other words, Bodb, the goddess of war in a thin disguise),<sup>91</sup> begins by putting the evil eye (*admilliud*) on Conaire and his companions. Conaire then says to her:<sup>92</sup>

“Well then, woman, what do you see for us, since you are a seer?”

To which she replies:

“I see for thee that neither wart nor flesh of thine shall escape from the house into which thou hast come, except what birds shall take in their fangs.”

“May it not be an ill-omen that we have augured, woman,’ says he, ‘It is not you who augur for us as a rule.”

This is a prophecy, the vision of a seer (*fissid*, line 545), but it is, or at least is in danger of being, an omen. Conaire’s reply shows the same refusal to take a prophecy as infallible as do Medb’s replies to Fedelm the *banfhili* in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. But Cailb’s prophecy is undeniably ominous, particularly in its all too apt reference to birds.

In part 3 of the tale, the descriptions of the *imdada* in the hostel, Fer Rogain identifies the persons described by Ingcél and then prophesies what they will accomplish in the battle. Many of his prophecies are introduced by variations on an oath of the standard type, ‘I swear what my people swear. . .’.<sup>93</sup> The authors of the surviving versions of *TBDD* achieve an impressive power by this combination of prophecy, prohibition, omen, and oath: the determination of the future is utterly inexorable.<sup>94</sup>

In *TBDD* the prohibition is but one of a number of interconnected actions or events, all of which determine for the audience what the tale will bring. The word *geiss* was, however, to capture, during the Middle Irish period, much of the field previously occupied by related terms. For this reason, it is quite wrong to invent *geissi* where the texts do not mention them and thus to repeat in modern scholarship the same wide extension of the term which occurred in Middle and

<sup>90</sup> L. Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979), p. 86 (Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, I.16 [15].3).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Badb, *TBDD*, §62, line 560.

<sup>92</sup> *TBDD*, §62, ll. 545–50.

<sup>93</sup> R. Ó hUiginn, ‘Tongu do dia toinges mo thuath and related expressions’, in L. Breatnach, K. McCone and D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic Studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 332–41.

<sup>94</sup> The power of omen is even present in the very name-variants Aingcél, Ingcél, Éccél, of which the first is close to Welsh *anghoel* (not otherwise attested until the modern period and then in a different sense; similarly *hygoel*, *anhygoel*), while only the last is Irish. *Cél* is itself a loan-word from Welsh: E. Bachellery & P.-Y. Lambert, *Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien*, fasc. C (Dublin and Paris 1987), p. 59.

Early Modern Irish narrative.<sup>95</sup> In general terms, this phenomenon has been noted by James Carney and by David Greene, but it is worth documenting the point, since it has also been denied.<sup>96</sup> A valuable guide to what was happening in the Middle Irish period is provided by a comparison between Recension I and Recension II of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, that is to say, between what is essentially an eighth- or ninth-century version and an early twelfth-century version.

The first evidence is afforded by the way in which the two recensions handle the delaying tactics by which, towards the beginning of the story, Cú Chulainn slows the advance of the army of Ailill and Medb towards Cuailnge. What Cú Chulainn does is to cut down a branch or to place it in a way which no one except a man of heroic strength and skill could achieve. On the branch he inscribes a challenge that the host is not to pass until one of its number has performed a similar feat. On the first occasion, at Ard (or Iraird) Cuillenn, the ogam message is on a ring made of a pliable branch and placed round a standing stone.<sup>97</sup> The setting strongly reinforces the challenge: the standing stone and the ogam inscription, which only the druids can fully interpret but which Fergus can read, recall the ogam stones used to stand guard at the boundary of estates.<sup>98</sup> The second occasion is less fully exploited, although the sequence of events is much the same as in the first.<sup>99</sup> In their descriptions of the first occasion, neither version uses the word *geiss*. It is, as David Greene noted, a challenge to the honour of the enemy.<sup>100</sup> The challenge has peculiar authority: if it had been ignored, truth would have been violated and the ring placed round the standing-stone would have been insulted.<sup>101</sup> Moreover the insulted ring would follow the man who wrote the inscription and he would then be likely to kill a man from the army before the morning.<sup>102</sup> On the first occasion, then, both versions appeal to concepts of truth or justice, *fir*, and to honour, but not to *geiss*.

<sup>95</sup> For example, P. O'Leary, 'Honour-bound', p. 99, has credited me with having 'suggested convincingly that one of the most formidable of all [women in early Irish tales], the wife of Rónán in *Fingal Rónáin*, owes her deadly authority over the fate of Mael Fothartaig to the power of *geis*'. I must disclaim having made any such suggestion, for the good reason that the tale never mentions *geis*: T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', *Ériu* 29 (1978), pp. 133–34.

<sup>96</sup> J. Carney, *Studies in Early Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955), p. 193; Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', p. 9. Contrast E. P. Hamp, 'Varia III: 4. *geis*', *Ériu* 32 (1981) 161–2: 'While Greene incisively discloses how it was that the APPLICATION of *geis* could change through time, we may further draw the conclusion that the MEANING scarcely changed. That is *geis* always covered the inexplicable and unmotivated, and therefore expanded its scope as institutions and their workings got forgotten. Thus we may say that *geis* always referred to "just what happened".' The phrase 'just what happened' is wholly inadequate as a characterisation of either the meaning or the reference of *geis*. The semantic foundation of Hamp's etymology (a derivative in *ī* / *īā* from a verbal adjective \**ghed-to-* to the \**ghed-* of J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [Bern 1959], pp. 437–8) is thus unsound. Thurneysen's etymology (*Heldensage*, p. 80) was anticipated by a legal glossator: 'geiss .i. guide', *CIH* 1553.11.

<sup>97</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 225–6.

<sup>98</sup> C. Plummer, 'On the Meaning of Ogam Stones', *Revue celtique*, 40 (1923), pp. 387–90; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish Law', in P. H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval settlement: continuity and change*, (London 1976), pp. 83–7.

<sup>99</sup> *TBC I* ll. 331–59, esp. 343–45.

<sup>100</sup> Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', p. 15.

<sup>101</sup> *TBC I*, line 287.

<sup>102</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 294–97.

On the second occasion, however, the later recension introduces the term *geiss* in a sentence which has no counterpart in the other version. It identifies the act of going into the ford before the challenge has been successfully taken up as a *geiss*, 'prohibited action'.<sup>103</sup> In the older version all we have is a simple prohibition without any talk of a *geiss*.

The next evidence is given by three episodes among Cú Chulainn's boyhood-deeds, *macgnímrada*. The first is the episode when he goes on to the playing field of the boys at Emain without his safety having first been guaranteed. In the earlier version of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* it is a question of a custom: 'no one used to go (*ní théged nech*) to them in their playing field until his protection had been bound upon them'.<sup>104</sup> Cú Chulainn flouts custom and hence Follomun mac Conchobair can say, 'the boy insults us'.<sup>105</sup> In a gloss by the scribe H, the custom of which Cú Chulainn was ignorant is explained thus: *.i. in ges bot foruib*, 'i.e. the *geiss* which was on them'.<sup>106</sup> Here we meet the idea of a *geiss* being upon someone, an idea which does not occur in *TBDD*, or in Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, but which is commonplace in later texts. Version II of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* twice uses *geiss* in this episode, in both cases with the syntax normal in the older period ('is *geiss* dúib maccáem do thichtain . . . conid *geiss* dóib mac dar tír cuccu can chur a faísma forro').<sup>107</sup> In this episode we again have clear evidence of an extension of the use of *geiss* in the Middle Irish period. In Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, there is only custom (perhaps itself a matter of the ordinary law such as that contained in the fragmentary lawtract *Mellbretha*).<sup>108</sup> If such custom is flouted, it causes insult to the group whose custom it is. In Version II of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, however, there is *geiss*, 'prohibited action', and in the gloss by H *geiss* appears to mean the prohibition itself which is thought of as being on the boys rather as an obligation might be bound on them.

A later incident among the boyhood-deeds shows an extension of usage in Version II of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* similar to the earlier one. Cú Chulainn has taken arms and has reached the border of Ulster where Conall Cernach is watching the ford. When Conall Cernach offers to accompany Cú Chulainn southwards, Cú Chulainn makes a cast at Conall's chariot and damages it. When asked why he has done this, Cú Chulainn replies, in Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'it is the custom with you Ulstermen that you do not drive on in a chariot which is unsafe';<sup>109</sup> but, in Version II, 'it is *geiss* for you Ulstermen to proceed on your way despite an insecure chariot'.<sup>110</sup> Here a custom that the Ulstermen do not do something has been transformed into the identification of the act contrary to custom as a *geiss*, 'prohibited action'.

<sup>103</sup> C. O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cuailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin [1967] repr. 1984) [henceforth *TBC II*], line 634.

<sup>104</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 418–19.

<sup>105</sup> *TBC I*, line 421.

<sup>106</sup> *TBC I*, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> *TBC II*, ll. 776, 799.

<sup>108</sup> A. O'Sullivan and W. O'Sullivan, 'A Legal Fragment', *Celtica* 8 (1968), pp. 140–43; D. A. Binchy, 'Mellbretha', *Celtica* 8 (1968), pp. 144–54.

<sup>109</sup> *TBC I*, line 684.

<sup>110</sup> *TBC II*, line 1034.

In a third episode among the *macgnímrada*, the situation is different. Both recensions have the word *geiss*, but each uses it in a way different from the other. Cú Chulainn has reached the *dún* of the sons of Nechtan Scéne who have boasted that they have killed as many Ulstermen as there are Ulstermen living. Cú Chulainn and his charioteer unyoke their chariot by a river to the south of the fort. Cú Chulainn then finds a standing stone with a withe round it. According to Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, Cú Chulainn cast the withe into the river 'because it was a violation of a *geiss* for the sons of Nechtan Scéne'.<sup>111</sup> This use of *geiss* is not quite clear, but *coll ngeisse*, 'violation of a *geiss*', must be a description of Cú Chulainn's action. The whole clause, 'ar ba coll ngeisse do maccaib Nechta Scéne aní sin', appears to be parallel in construction to the usual type *ba geiss dó aní sin*. In both constructions the preposition *do* introduces the person or persons disadvantaged: there is no suggestion in Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* that Cú Chulainn rather than the sons of Nechtan Scéne will be disadvantaged by his doing something which is a *coll ngeisse*. In the normal construction we should expect either *ba geiss do maccaib N. Sc. sreud ind ide isin n-abainn* or *ba geiss do maccaib N. Sc. in id do shriud isin n-abainn*, where *geiss* is a description of the act of throwing the withe into the river. *Coll ngeisse*, therefore, appears here in the same context and syntactical construction as is normal for *geiss* itself. Hence *geiss* must mean 'prohibition' rather than 'prohibited action' in this passage.<sup>112</sup>

Version II of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* uses the word *geiss* in a different way in this episode. In its version there is an ogam message on the withe. The message reads 'Whoever should come to this green, if he be armed, a *geiss* on him that he depart not from the green without offering single combat'.<sup>113</sup> Here, as in the gloss by H in Version I, *geiss* is followed by a prepositional phrase introduced by *for*. Whereas in the usual Old and Middle Irish construction, *geiss do*. . ., *do* introduces the person or persons disadvantaged by the *geiss*, the prohibited action, in this construction *for* introduces the person or persons bound by the *geiss*. Here too, therefore, *geiss* does not mean 'prohibited action', as in the normal construction, but rather 'prohibition'. The one resemblance in this episode, therefore, between the uses of *geiss* in the two versions of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* is in the meaning to be given to *geiss*. Otherwise everything—context and syntax alike—is different.

For a final example from the *Táin* we may turn to a much later stage in the story. Cú Chulainn has been holding down the army of Ailill and Medb for three months. His father Sualtaim goes to Emain to try to rouse the Ulstermen from their *ces*, for Cú Chulainn is covered in wounds and can hardly continue much longer. On arrival at Emain he calls out three times, *Fir gontair, mná brattar, baí agthar!*, 'Men are slain, women carried off, cattle driven away!' The earlier version of the *Táin* continues:<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 712–13.

<sup>112</sup> Similarly, in the 'Tripartite Life of St Patrick', when Patrick lights the paschal fire, Lóegaire says, 'Is coll geisi 7 cána dam-sa inní sin, 7 findaid cá dorónai': K. Mulchrone (ed.), *Bethu Phátraic: the Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin 1939), p. 27, ll. 447–8. What Patrick has violated is, in Muirchú's Latin, 'quidam mos . . . per edictum omnibus intimatus' (L. Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, p. 84, l. 15,3).

<sup>113</sup> *TBC II*, 1072.

<sup>114</sup> *TBC I*, ll. 3428–29.

No one replied. It was an *airmert* for the Ulstermen: none of them would speak except to Conchobar; Conchobar would not speak except in the presence of the three druids.

The corresponding passage in Version II goes as follows:<sup>115</sup>

He did not get the answer which would satisfy him from the Ulstermen. This is how the Ulstermen were: it was a *geiss* for the Ulstermen to speak before their king, a *geiss* for the king to speak before his druids.

Here we have an example of custom just as in the episode of Cú Chulainn's arrival at the boys' playing-field at Emain Macha and in the episode in which he damages Conall Cernach's chariot. For Version I of the *Táin*, both were simply the customs of particular groups that such-and-such a thing was not done. In Version II, both were *geissi*.

The term *airmert*, found in Version I's rendering of this incident (*airmert* in MS. Y, *hairmbert* in MS. C), deserves further consideration. In Version II, *airmirt* was used alongside *geiss* in the first episode in the *macgnímrada*.<sup>116</sup> The word has been variously analysed: Henry Lewis and Holger Pedersen gave it as the verbal noun of *ar-bertha*, cognate with Welsh *armerth*, *darmertb*,<sup>117</sup> but in 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*) some examples may be found under *airmert* analysed as the verbal noun of *ar-bertha*, others under *airmbert* analysed as the verbal noun of *ar-imbir* (*air-imb-beir*). The spelling in MS C, which appears to be older than that in MS Y, suggests that our example is of *air(i)mbert*. The context confirms the suggestion: a common meaning of *imm-beir* is 'practices, uses'. *Airmert* in Version I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, line 3428, is used exactly as is *bés* in line 684. The probability is that, in this instance, it means '(negative) custom, practice' (cf. *airchuillte*, *airgart* 'negative command, prohibition'). In the course of the Middle Irish period it was brought into association with *geiss*, perhaps as a result of the then popular prose style which liked to string together nouns and adjectives of similar meaning. By the late Middle Irish period it seems in effect to be a synonym for *geiss*.

Perhaps it would be better to say that *geiss* had by then taken over territory previously occupied by such words as *airmbert* and, to some extent, *bés*, and had dragged *airmbert* along in its train as a synonym. The same phenomenon can be observed elsewhere. In the Old Irish recension of *Longes mac nUislen* Fergus is unable to avoid an invitation to a beer-drinking spree because of the insistence of his hosts, put up to it by Conchobar.<sup>118</sup> Later he has a *geiss* which will not allow him to refuse such an invitation.<sup>119</sup> In *Aided Oínfhir Aife* Cú Chulainn prohibits the

<sup>115</sup> *TBC II*, ll. 4016–17. Similar wording is used in J. C. Watson (ed.), *Mesca Ulad* (Dublin 1941), ll. 234–5.

<sup>116</sup> *TBC II*, line 798.

<sup>117</sup> H. Lewis and H. Pedersen, *A Concise comparative Celtic grammar* (Göttingen [1937] revised 1961), §507.

<sup>118</sup> V. Hull, *Longes mac nUislen* §14.

<sup>119</sup> Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 330.

son whom he has just fathered from giving way to anyone or uttering his name to anyone when he comes to Ireland.<sup>120</sup> In later versions he puts his son under *geasa*.<sup>121</sup> In the early Old Irish story of Conall Corc's acquisition of the kingship of Munster, Corc's mother, a satirist, compelled his father to sleep with her by putting an *áilges*, 'importunate request', on the king.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, Greene has observed that in *Longes mac nUislenn* Derdriu compels Noísiu to elope with her by threatening him with shame and dishonour if he does not, whereas in the later example of the same motif in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* Gráinne puts Diarmaid under *geasa* to elope with her.<sup>123</sup> Whereas the old *geissi* are all negative prohibitions or prohibited acts, *geasa* may now compel positive action rather than avoidance. It is clear, I suggest, that the *geiss* or *geas* of the late Middle Irish and Early Modern Irish periods has acquired its prominence in the texts only relatively recently. It has done so by extending the range of situations to which it can be applied at the expense of other words, and in so doing it has changed its meaning.<sup>124</sup> Yet even in *TBDD* the list of prohibited actions, *geissi*, was already heterogeneous. It included both the acts of ill omen which the druid, at the king's inauguration, had warned him to avoid, and also paternal injunctions placed upon a child at his birth (or, in a divine or heroic context, his conception) or at the moment when the father gave the child his name and so acknowledged paternity. Parallels to such paternal injunctions suggest that they, too, were not originally *geissi*. A different method is used by relations to compel Conall Corc to behave in accordance with their wishes: the vicarious oath. Conall has married the daughter of the king of Alba and wishes to bring her back to Ireland. To prevent him, his foster-mother, foster-father, and wife each swear an oath on his behalf that he will remain for a year in Alba.<sup>125</sup> They play upon the solidarity of the kindred by employing a device which has a perfectly ordinary use in everyday life. Similarly, Irish law recognised another device used by a father to impose obligations upon his son: a solemn declaration, sometimes made shortly before death, binding a son to carry out his wishes.<sup>126</sup> Any society must have means by which rights and obligations can be passed from one generation to another. In a society which makes little or no use of the written word, solemn oral declarations must necessarily perform this function. It is these everyday realities which have been employed by the story-tellers to give intelligibility to the *geiss* imposed upon a man, often by supernatural authority, at conception or birth. Such a *geiss* is not an isolated, and therefore mysterious, phenomenon. It is a literary device which has obvious parallels in ordinary life.

<sup>120</sup> *Aided Óenfir Afé* in A. G. van Hamel (ed.), *Compert Con Culainn and other stories* (Dublin 1933), p. 11, §1.

<sup>121</sup> Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 409–10.

<sup>122</sup> K. Meyer, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', in O. Bergin et al. (ed.) *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* III, (1910) p. 57, line 7. Translated V. Hull, 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 62 (1947), p. 892.

<sup>123</sup> Greene, 'Tabu in Early Irish Narrative', pp. 16–19.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Keating's splendid account of the druids' use of *geasa* in G. Keating *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: the history of Ireland* (ed. D. Comyn vols 1–2; P. S. Dinneen, vols 2–4, [London 1902–14]) ii, p. 348.

<sup>125</sup> K. Meyer, *Anecdota* III, p. 59. Cf. D. A. Binchy, 'Irish Law and Irish History, II', *Studia Hibernica* 16 (1976), p. 21; T. Charles-Edwards and F. Kelly (ed.), *Bechbretha* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 137–8.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

If we may put this type of *geiss* aside, we are left with the prohibition by the druid of an act of ill omen. Here there are reasons of a different order for the prominence of this device in the literature. In the Old Irish period the professional tellers of tales were the *filid*.<sup>127</sup> Their principal inherited function, however, was not story-telling but prophecy. In the picture of the pagan past which saga-writers of the early christian period have presented to us, the *filid* were the partners of the druids.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, their functions are by no means clearly distinct, although on the whole the druids seem to deal with omens and accomplish feats of magical power, while the *filid*, the seers, prophesy the future and remember the past.<sup>129</sup> Irish prose tales, then, began as one of the duties of a professional order which claimed other functions of greater importance. It is not surprising that these other functions should have left their mark upon the matter of the tales. The world of the druid and the seer was one in which omen and prophecy must, of necessity, exert wide influence, if for no other reason than because such matters were essential to the way in which they perceived their own roles in society.

The story of the destruction of Da Derga's hostel shows clear evidence of the professional preoccupations of druid and seer as they were perceived by christian writers in the Old Irish period. Conaire's destruction is accomplished in two stages, in the first through the violation of prohibitions against acts of ill omen, in the second through events prophesied in minute detail followed by the triumph of the plunderers through druidical magic. The story-teller is not in the least interested in the battle itself except in its fore-life in the mouth of the prophet. As Conaire's men take their places in Da Derga's hostel they are distinguished not by rank or attainment but as *geis* or *nemgeis*. The saga-writer is not concerned with those things which would have been the stuff of any heroic tale. If he had a merely aristocratic audience in mind, he paid little attention to what one might have supposed were the natural interests of his hearers. The criticism of such tales as *TBDD* is vitiated, therefore, not only by the importation of modern assumptions, but also by a failure to realise that the Irish saga contains two interwoven strands, that of the learned orders and that of heroic tradition. These are often mixed, but in *TBDD* the learned strand is clearly predominant.

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<sup>127</sup> Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 66–70.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–1.

<sup>129</sup> An example of the difficulty in distinguishing these functions is provided by Hull, *Longes mac nUislenm*, §§1–5, where an omen (the scream of the child in the womb) is interpreted by Cathbad, the druid, but the interpretation involves prophecy. Similarly, in the law-tract *Córus Béscnai*, *CIH* 527.27–8; 528.5–6, a druid prophesies to Lóegaire. For numerous other examples, see C. Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford 1910), I, pp. clviii–clxiii, especially p. clxii. On the other hand, the early hagiography portrays druids as magicians who are defeated by the *uirrutes*, 'miracles of power', of the holy man, while the *poeta*, the *filid*, is acceptable (cf. *CIH* 527.20–1 and 528.17–20, with Bieler, *The Patrician texts*, pp. 84–90, 92–6, 130–2, 156). So in Adomnán's Life of St Columba, *magi* are defeated in Book II, devoted to *uirrutum miracula*, not in Book I, concerned with *profeticeae reuelationes* (II.11, 16, 17, 33–34).