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# DRUIDS, DEER AND “WORDS OF POWER”: COMING TO TERMS WITH EVIL IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND

JACQUELINE BORSJE

In religion, evil is believed to be everywhere and to appear in any form. I define evil as that which is believed to cause or to represent harm. A thought-provoking metaphor for evil is suggested in a Dutch novel from the 1980s: we should not compare the battle with evil to a heroic fight against a dragon, but with the daily cleaning of our dwelling places. Dust and dirt—visible and invisible—are everywhere and there is no end to the task of cleaning up.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the omnipresence and multiformity of evil, some religions have tried to name and identify evil as a category and as a part of a system. Christianity has followed Judaism in associating evil with supernatural beings and human acts. The Devil and demons are said to be the supernatural representatives of evil; sin is another word for evil human deeds and thoughts.

Our focus is on medieval Irish literature—one of the earliest written vernaculars in Europe. Within this rich tradition, the face of evil changes

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<sup>1</sup> Hannes Meinkema, *Te kwader min* (Amsterdam: Contact, 1984), 288. Meinkema in fact literally mentions killing vermin, keeping house and reading the newspaper as daily, never-ending tasks. Her source of inspiration for “the banality of evil” is Hannah Arendt, who is quoted at length: “It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never “radical”, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is “thought-defying” (...), because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality”. Only the good has depth and can be radical” (Meinkema, *Te kwader min*, 153). This paper, however, does deal with the demonic dimension of evil, because this was an important part of medieval belief. I am indebted to John Carey and Jan Platvoet for comments on an earlier version, and to Henry Jansen for the correction of my English. Any errors are my own responsibility.

according to genre. Heroic texts or sagas are somewhat elusive when one tries to pinpoint what exactly is considered to be evil. In hagiography, however, a clear distinction between good and evil can often be found. I will discuss three related examples from different genres in order to show how the medieval Irish portrayed evil and tried to come to terms with it. We will start with a hagiographic tale. The second text is a *lorica*, which is a form of verbal protection against evil. Our third example is a so-called mythological tale.<sup>2</sup>

### The location of evil in hagiography

In the fifth century Saint Patrick sailed to Ireland, in response to a vision in which the Irish asked him to return. He had been brought there earlier by force and he had lived as a slave in Ireland for several years. This former shepherd of animals becomes a spiritual shepherd and, if we can trust the documents pertaining to this saint,<sup>3</sup> his second visit changed Ireland completely. The Christianisation of Ireland is generally ascribed to Patrick, although we are now aware that this attribution is to a certain extent a symbolic one. The conversion of Ireland is described as a revolution in the supernatural world as well. Thus, in *The Tales of the Elders of Ireland* from the twelfth century, we read that “there was a demon on the bottom of every single blade of grass in Ireland” before

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<sup>2</sup> A division of the sagas into four cycles (the Ulster Cycle, Historical or Kings’ Cycle, Mythological Cycle, and Finn Cycle) is common in Celtic Studies. There are, however, many overlaps between the cycles. For instance, the supernatural beings from the Mythological Cycle are found in all four cycles, and all four cycles deal with mythological aspects. For hagiography as mythology, see Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients. Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 124–26.

<sup>3</sup> The most important of these are the *Confessio*, generally taken to be by Patrick himself, two seventh-century Latin Lives of Patrick by Muirchú and by Tírechán, and a Middle Irish Life of Patrick. For editions of these see [*Confessio*] David Howlett, ed. and trans. *Liber Epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi. The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994); [Muirchú and Tírechán] Ludwig Bieler, ed. and trans. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh. Scriptores Latini Hiberniae X.* (Dublin: DIAS, 1979); [Middle Irish Life] Kathleen Mulchrone, ed. *Bethu Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin: RIA, 1939); Whitley Stokes, trans. *The Tripartite Life of Patrick with Other Documents Relating to that Saint.* 2 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887). We distinguish roughly the following periods for the Irish language: 600–900 (Old Irish), 900–1200 (Middle Irish), 1200–1650 (Early Modern Irish).

Patrick set foot there, but, because of him, there is now an angel on every blade of Irish grass.<sup>4</sup>

The story of how Patrick made Ireland a land of Christians is told at length in one of the earliest versions of his hagiography: *The Life of Patrick*, written by Muirchú moccu Macthéni in the seventh century. The dualistic structure, common in hagiography, was also used by Muirchú. Saint Patrick and his followers represent good and the druids of the king of Ireland represent evil.<sup>5</sup> Muirchú uses the Tenach or Old Testament as a model for his description of the hostile encounters between the saint and the king with his druids. Thomas O’Loughlin rightly called this confrontation a “biblical trial of divinities”.<sup>6</sup>

Our first example consists of such an encounter, in which evil shows itself in the form of treason. A fierce conflict between Saint Patrick and the king with his druids ends in darkness and death. Then the following events are described:

*Veniensque regina ad Patricium dixit ei: “Homo iuste et potens, ne perdas regem; veniens enim rex genua flectet et adorabit dominum tuum.” Et venit rex timore coactus et flexit genua coram sancto et finxit adorare quem nolebat; et postquam separaverunt ab invicem paululum gradiens vocavit rex sanctum Patricium simulato verbo volens interficere eum quo modo. Sciens autem Patricius cogitationes regis pessimi benedictis in nomine Iesu Christi sociis suis octo viris cum puero venit ad regem ac numeravit eos rex venientes statimque nusquam conparuerunt ab oculis regis, sed viderunt gentiles octo tantum cervos cum hynulo euntes quasi ad dissertum, et rex Loiguire mestus, timidus et ignominiossus cum paucis evadentibus ad Temoriam versus est deluculo.*

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<sup>4</sup> Dooley, Ann and Harry Roe, trans. *Tales of the Elders of Ireland (Acallam na Senórach)*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 177.

<sup>5</sup> Muirchú states this explicitly when he describes the functionaries at the king’s court: I.10, *Hic autem scivos et magos et aurispices et incantatores et omnis malae artis inventores habuerat, qui poterant omnia scire et providere ex more gentilitatis et idolatriae antequam essent*, “He [i.e. the king] had around him sages and druids, fortune-tellers and sorcerers, and *the inventors of every evil craft*, who, according to the custom of paganism and idolatry, were able to know and foresee everything before it happened” (emphasis mine).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin, “Reading Muirchú’s Tara-event within Its Background as a Biblical ‘Trial of Divinities,’” in *Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults*, ed. Jane Cartwright (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 124. John Carey kindly reminds me of apocryphal sources of Muirchú (in I.17), when he compares the confrontation with that between Peter and Simon Magus (*Passio ss. Petri et Pauli and Actus Petri cum Simone*).

And the queen went to Patrick and said to him: “O just and powerful man, do not bring death upon the king! For the king will come and bend his knees and adore your lord.” And the king came, impelled by fear, and bent his knees before the holy man, and pretended to do him reverence though he did not mean it; and after they had parted and the king had gone a short distance away, he called holy Patrick with false words, wishing to kill him by any means. Patrick, however, knew the thoughts of the wicked king.<sup>7</sup> He blessed his companions, eight men with a boy, in the name of Jesus Christ, and started on his way to the king, and the king counted them as they went along, and suddenly they disappeared from the king’s eyes; instead, the pagans merely saw eight deer with a fawn going, as it were, into the wilds. And king Loíguire, sad, frightened, and in great shame, went back to Tara at dawn with the few who had escaped.<sup>8</sup>

The king thus feigns subservience but in fact secretly plans to kill the saint. His false words are contrasted with “the good words”<sup>9</sup> of the saint. Patrick’s blessing in the name of Jesus Christ saves lives: the clerics disappear and deer are seen escaping into the wild. The king’s evil plan fails and Muirchú describes his emotional reaction: Loegaire experiences sadness, fear and humiliation. The first two kinds of feeling are understandable, but why would he be ashamed?

Joseph Nagy suggests an answer to this question in his brilliant monograph on the religious and cultural change in Ireland brought about by Christianity and literacy, which arrived hand in hand. Nagy connects this episode with Celtic kingship mythology, in which a hero may win kingship through a successful deer hunt.<sup>10</sup> This explains why Loegaire feels humiliated: the escape of the saint and his followers signifies not merely a failed plan but also exposes a failed king. How serious this is should be understood in the light of the fact that kingship was seen as sacred in medieval Irish ideology.<sup>11</sup> In Celtic kingship mythology, deer are

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<sup>7</sup> Bieler translates “the wicked thoughts of the wicked king”, but *pessimus* is only mentioned once and qualifies the king.

<sup>8</sup> Muirchú I.18.

<sup>9</sup> Latin *benedicere*, “to bless”, literally means “to speak good, well”.

<sup>10</sup> Nagy, *Conversing*, 88; cf. Rachel Bromwich, “Celtic Dynastic Themes and the Breton Lays,” *ÉC* 9 (1961), 442-44.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Maartje Draak, “Some Aspects of Kingship in Pagan Ireland,” in *Studies in the History of Religions. Supplements to Numen 4: The Sacred Kingship*. (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 651-663; P. Wormald, “Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship: Some Further Thoughts,” in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1986), 151-183; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), 107-37.

often transformed supernatural beings.<sup>12</sup> These are the *áes síde*, “the people of the hollow hills”, sometimes called fairies or elves. It is possible that these were the ancient Gods of pre-Christian times.<sup>13</sup> Another tradition tells about harpers who become transformed into deer when pursued by the king’s men. They are also identified as druids with great supernatural knowledge.<sup>14</sup> It is fascinating that Saint Patrick is associated with this specific image, just as the elves and the druids are.<sup>15</sup>

There is, moreover, another element in this tale that appears to have a counterpart in the sagas. Muirchú tells us that the king counts the approaching saint with his followers. This element of trying to count opponents also occurs in the Old Irish *Battle of Mag Muccrama* from the early ninth century. Supernatural swine (*mucca gentliucht*) come out of the cave of Crúachan and lay the land waste. The earth they touch becomes barren for seven years. They cannot be killed, but the text suggests another way to end this evil: counting the pigs would make them leave the land. This, however, turns out to be impossible: nobody arrives

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<sup>12</sup> Nagy, *Conversing*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> John Carey, “The Baptism of the Gods,” in John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun. Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover: Celtic Studies Publications, 1999), 1-38. For another example in which Saint Patrick is associated with the *áes síde*, see Jacqueline Borsje, “De goede buren van God: Verschillende vormen van inculturatie van het volk van de elfenheuvelds in het middeleeuwse Ierse christendom,” in *Veelkleurig christendom. Contextualisatie in Noord, Zuid, Oost en West*, ed. Cors van der Burg, Jerry Gort, Reender Kranenborg, Lourens Minnema & Henk Vroom (Religieus pluralisme en multiculturaliteit 3, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2003), 197-210; Borsje, “Monotheistic to a Certain Extent. The ‘Good Neighbours’ of God in Ireland” in *Boundaries of Western Monotheism*, ed. M. de Haardt and A.-M. Korte (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 53-80.

<sup>14</sup> Cecile O’Rahilly, ed. *Táin Bó Cúailnge. Recension I*. (Dublin: DIAS, 1976), 30, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Two episodes in Muirchú’s *Life* are somehow connected with this one. First, there is the tale of Saint Patrick receiving the piece of land at Armagh, where the future centre of his cult will be established. A hind and her fawn are lying there on the ground and Patrick’s companions want to catch and kill the fawn. Saint Patrick, however, takes up the little fawn and carries it to a safe place to let it go there. Its mother follows the saint gently and in a docile way. The hunt motif is here superseded by a portrayal of the harmonious relationship between the saint and animals. Another episode in the *Life* deals with transformation, but now as a divine punishment. A cruel king persecutes Christians and refuses to take heed of Saint Patrick’s letter on this. Then after a musical performance, which announces his end, he is miraculously transformed into a fox and disappears from the scene. See Muirchú I.29 on the fox transformation; I.24 on the deer; and Nagy, *Conversing*, 116-18 (deer); 105-09 (fox) for a discussion and analysis.

at the same number. Then the king and queen try to count them. When one pig jumps over their chariot, the queen grabs a leg and the pig leaves it in her hand together with his skin. As a result, the swine disappear forever.<sup>16</sup>

The king and queen are portrayed here in their sacral function of protecting the land, and counting is their method. Evil “invaders” destroy the fertility of the land. Where does this evil come from? The only information we have is the place where the swine come from and the adjectives that describe them. The *Battle of Mag Muccrama* identifies the cave of Crúachan as “Ireland’s Gate to Hell”.<sup>17</sup> The Old Irish *Adventurous Journey of Nera* describes the cave as an entrance to the world of the *áes síde* or elves.<sup>18</sup> The adjective used for the pigs is *gentliucht*, a term derived from Latin *gentilis* and meaning “gentilism, heathenism; especially heathen lore, wizardry, heathen spells etc.”<sup>19</sup> A variant version of the tale calls them “a herd of druidic swine” (*muctret drúidechta*).<sup>20</sup> In the form of these swine, evil is thus difficult to categorise: the possibilities range from fairy to supernatural to druidic to demonic and infernal.

Returning to Muirchú’s tale, we can conclude that just as the king and queen tried to banish the destructive invaders by counting, so did King Loegaire try to count the evil invaders who threatened his land. Viewing the scene from this perspective overturns the usual hagiographic ideology, in which the saint symbolises “good” and not “evil”. There is, however, another aspect of evil that we should consider: not only is beauty in the eye of the beholder, but evil is as well.<sup>21</sup> What is evil to me may be good to another. The demons of today may be the gods of yesterday or

<sup>16</sup> Máirín O Daly, ed. *Cath Maige Muccrama. The Battle of Mag Muccrama*. (Dublin: ITS vol. L, 1975), 48-49; cf. Whitley Stokes, “The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*,” *RC* 15 (1894), 470.

<sup>17</sup> *Cath Maige Muccrama*, 48-49

<sup>18</sup> Kuno Meyer. “The Adventures of Nera,” *RC* 10 (1889), 212-28.

<sup>19</sup> *DIL* s.v.

<sup>20</sup> Stokes, “The Prose Tales,” 470. This variant version describes the acts of the king and queen to protect their land as a hunt (*selg*) as well.

<sup>21</sup> With regard to the metaphor of dirt for evil (see above), compare Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (London: Routledge, 1966; repr. 1991), 2, who plays with this saying as follows: “So primitive religious fear, together with the idea that it blocks the functioning of the mind, seems to be a false trail for understanding these religions. Hygiene, by contrast, turns out to be an excellent route (...). As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear (...). [It is because] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is (...) a positive effort to organise the environment.” I am grateful to Jan Platvoet, who reminded me of this passage.

tomorrow. Muirchú explicitly states that Patrick's advent means evil to the king and the status quo. In a flashback he tells about the druids who have been prophesying the revolution that will be brought about by Christianity and Patrick. A foreign way of life and a new kingdom will come. This new teaching will "overthrow kingdoms, kill the kings who offer resistance, seduce the crowds, destroy all their gods, banish all the works of their craft, and reign for ever".<sup>22</sup> Muirchú translates a druidic poem on Saint Patrick, which declares that he will chant impiety (*incantabit nefas*).<sup>23</sup> Thus, Saint Patrick is described as an evil invader, bringing death and destruction.<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting that Muirchú, despite the dualism that is common in hagiography, gives expression in some ways to the perspective ascribed to the druids. We notice this perspective also in the terminology for the supernatural beings venerated by the pre-Christian Irish. When Muirchú is writing as the narrator, he refers to them as "false gods" and "idols" and veneration of them as "idolatry"<sup>25</sup> but when he has the druids speak for themselves, they call these supernatural beings "gods".<sup>26</sup> In a description of a contest in signs (*signa*) between a druid and Patrick, Muirchú is, however, unambiguous with respect to his own view on these supernatural beings. In this episode, the druid is first said to utter magic incantations (*incantationes magicae*) that bring snow. When they are up to their waists in snow, the saint challenges the druid to remove it again, but this turns out to be impossible for the next twenty-four hours.<sup>27</sup> Patrick comments that the druid is only capable of doing evil: he cannot perform supernatural acts that produce good (*Potes malum et non bonum facere*).<sup>28</sup> His blessing then makes the snow disappear. The druid creates a second sign—a very dense darkness—by invoking demons. With this choice of words, Muirchú is writing from the Christian perspective once more but acknowledges the supernatural entities that the druid invokes. The source of his power are the "demons" who are defeated in this "trial of divinities".<sup>29</sup> Patrick's prayer and blessing dispel the darkness.

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<sup>22</sup> Muirchú I.10.

<sup>23</sup> Muirchú I.10.

<sup>24</sup> Compare also the darkness and death that Saint Patrick called forth prior to the king's ambush.

<sup>25</sup> Muirchú I.1, I.10, I.13, I.15.

<sup>26</sup> Muirchú I.10, I.16.

<sup>27</sup> Compare the second section of this contribution as well.

<sup>28</sup> Muirchú I.20.

<sup>29</sup> Muirchú also refers to Satan and the Devil when describing a supernatural attack and evil inspiration. In the first instance, Saint Patrick suffers from an experience

In this contest, both the druid and Patrick use words as instruments, just as Patrick's blessing is a verbal instrument by which he is said to escape the king's ambush. Words are thus used in the perceived confrontations with evil: as an instrument in a contest and as a form of postulated protection against physical violence. Our second example is another instance of presumed verbal protection.

### Protection against evil by using words of power

In medieval Ireland, a certain type of rhetorical prose was used for protection against evil. This type of text was known as a "breastplate", *lorica* in Latin and *lúirech* in Irish.<sup>30</sup> James Kenney describes these texts as "litany-like prayers", "strange pieces", in which "the ideas and *formulae* of pagan incantations were converted to the use of Christian devotion".<sup>31</sup> He also suggests an inverted development, in which "genuine hymns" were used as *loricae* with "magical properties".<sup>32</sup>

The name *lorica* probably owes its existence to biblical descriptions of spiritual armour. One could think of the following passage from the New Testament.<sup>33</sup> I quote from the Vulgate, because the medieval Irish used Latin versions of the Bible:

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that we might call sleep paralysis or a nightmare, and in the second instance, a king is said to commit suicide at the devil's instigation (see Muirchú I.2, I.12). Patrick's *Confessio* 20 also contains a description of the nocturnal attack by Satan.

<sup>30</sup> See Louis Gougaud, "Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur les prières qui s'en rapprochent," *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et d'archéologie chrétiennes* 1 (1911), 265-281; Louis Gougaud, "Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques et sur les prières qui s'en rapprochent (Suite)," *Bulletin d'ancienne littérature et d'archéologie chrétiennes* 2 (1912), 33-41, 101-27.

<sup>31</sup> James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. An Introduction and Guide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929; repr. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1979), 254.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also Maartje Draak, *Betovering voor een etmaal* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1955), 10. The origin and development of this genre needs further study, especially in the light of recent insights gained in Celtic Studies and Comparative Religion.

<sup>33</sup> Predecessors of this imagery can be found in the Tenach or Old Testament. See, for instance, Psalm 90 in which God's shield protects the believer from the terror of the night, the arrow flying by day, the pestilence walking in darkness and the midday demon (the Hebrew original refers to destruction that devastates at noon); and see the imagery in Isaiah 59:17: God putting on justice as a breastplate, a helmet of salvation, the garments of vengeance, and zeal as a cloak.

*Induite vos arma Dei*  
*Ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli*  
*Quia non est nobis conluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem*  
*Sed adversus principes et potestates*  
*Adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum*  
*Contra spiritalia nequitiæ in caelestibus*  
*Propterea accipite armaturam Dei*  
*ut possitis resistere in die malo*  
*Et omnibus perfectis stare*  
*State ergo succincti lumbos vestros in veritate*  
*Et induiti lorica m iustitiæ*  
*Et calciati pedes in præparatione evangelii pacis*  
*In omnibus sumentes scutum fidei*  
*In quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere*  
*Et galeam salutis adsumite*  
*Et gladium Spiritus*  
*Quod est verbum Dei*  
*per omnem orationem et obsecrationem*  
*orantes omni tempore in Spiritu<sup>34</sup>*

Put you on the armour of God,  
 that you may be able to stand against the deceits of the devil  
 For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood;  
 but against principalities and powers,  
 against the rulers of the world of this darkness,  
 against the spirits of wickedness in the high places.  
 Therefore take unto you the armour of God,  
 that you may be able to resist in the evil day,  
 and to stand in all things perfect.  
 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth,  
 and having on the breastplate of justice,  
 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace:  
 In all things taking the shield of faith,  
 wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most  
 wicked one.  
 And take unto you the helmet of salvation,  
 and the sword of the Spirit,  
 which is the word of God.  
 By all prayer and supplication praying at all times in the Spirit.

With these divine attributes, the readers are exhorted to defend themselves  
 against spiritual enemies. These postulated demonic adversaries are not of  
 flesh and blood. We see here a clear dichotomy, just as in hagiography:

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<sup>34</sup> Eph. 6:11-18.

God and good versus evil spirits and darkness. The second sign of the druid, the calling forth of *tenebrae*, with Saint Patrick praying for sunlight can, therefore, be seen as a symbolic statement as well. Darkness was associated with evil, and hence, the night was also connected with evil. Thus, in I Thessalonians, Christians are placed in the category of the day:

*Nos autem qui diei sumus sobrii simus  
Induti lorica[m] fidei et caritatis et galeam spem salutis.*<sup>35</sup>

But let us, who are of the day, be sober,  
having on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of  
salvation.

A famous Irish specimen of this spiritual armour from the eighth century is *Faíd Fiada*, “The Deer’s Cry”.<sup>36</sup> Before studying its contents, I will first discuss its reception history.

The title “The Deer’s Cry” stems from a Middle Irish preface to the text in the *Liber Hymnorum* from the eleventh century. According to this preface, Saint Patrick composed the “Deer’s Cry”<sup>37</sup> in order to escape from the ambush laid by King Loegaire and his men (cf. the episode discussed above). The preface not only calls this text a hymn, but also credits it with supernatural power. Two claims were made: firstly, the text protected Patrick and his followers by the deer transformation or illusion.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the text will protect anyone who recites it from danger.

Maartje Draak connects this text with early Irish spells that are said to work for a day and a night. One of her examples is the above-mentioned magic incantation by the druid who could not remove the snow until the same time the next day. Similarly, she argues, it was believed that the person who recited this *lorica* would be protected from harm for twenty-four hours. Draak points out that not only does the preface prescribe daily

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<sup>35</sup> I Thess. 5:8.

<sup>36</sup> Preface edited by Daniel A. Binchy in “Varia III (3. *Atomriug*; 4. The date of the so-called ‘Hymn of Patrick’),” *Ériu* 20 (1966), 234-37; translated by John Carey in *King of Mysteries. Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 128.

<sup>37</sup> “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate” is an alternative, later title. As Draak (*Betovering voor een etmaal*, 9) points out, an earlier but uncertain link between the text and Saint Patrick is found in the Book of Armagh (an Irish manuscript dated 807). There are four honours due to Patrick from all Irish monasteries and churches; the fourth is: *canticum eius Scotticum semper canere*, “always to chant his Gaelic [i.e. Irish] canticle”; Bieler, ed. *The Patrician Texts*, 166-167.

<sup>38</sup> Compare the third section of this contribution as well.

recitation but the text itself also refers regularly to “today”. The preface calls the text a hymn, but Draak sees it as a charm. She is aware of the New Testament background of the term *lorica* but points out that this genre is part of the twilight zone between the pre-Christian and Christian worldviews.<sup>39</sup> Although Christian elements form a part of it, she rejects the term “prayer” for this text. Her argument is that the text does not ask for protection but accomplishes it. Uttering the words causes protection. Nobody is addressed; there is no Thou. The only exception is the final stanza in Latin (*Salus tua, Domine, sit semper nobiscum*), which she assumes to be a later addition.<sup>40</sup>

Draak sees the “Deer’s Cry” as the most pagan representative of the genre of *loricae*.<sup>41</sup> John Carey, however, sees the text as rising “well above the semi-magical pragmatism of many of its other surviving representatives”.<sup>42</sup> Carey’s qualification of “semi-magical pragmatism” seems to refer to the same phenomenon that Draak emphasised: texts that are believed to offer protection when they are voiced. Carey compares the genre with incantations. The postulated efficacy of both kinds of text depends on exhaustive enumeration. Supernatural protective entities, body parts to be protected and dangers from which one wants to be protected are listed. The person who utters the “Deer’s Cry” does not seem to invoke supernatural beings or natural phenomena but to gird oneself with their presumed power and virtues. Nonetheless, Carey defines *loricae* as “protective prayers” and he calls the reciter a “suppliant”, who is “suspended in prayerful submission to an ubiquitous Deity”.<sup>43</sup>

The basis for this different reading of the text is found in the Middle Irish preface. We saw that Draak focused on the exhortation to recite the *lorica* daily. Carey, however, takes the essential feature of spiritual

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<sup>39</sup> Draak, *Betovering voor een etmaal*, 9-12. Similarly, Wolfgang Meid writes: “*Den Übergang von ‘druidischer’ zu christlicher Weltanschauung verdeutlichen zwei Gedichte, die beide zur Kategorie der magischen Wappnungen, lorica* (‘Brustpanzer’) genannt, gehören; es sind die Anrufungen um Schutz vor Feinden und Gefahren” [The transition from a “druidic” to a Christian worldview is clarified by two poems, both belonging to the category of magical armour called *lorica* (“breastplate”): they are the invocations for protection from enemies and dangers]. Wolfgang Meid, “Die Dichtung der irischen Frühzeit im Übergang zur Schriftkultur”, in Wolfgang Meid, *Formen dichterischer Sprache im Keltischen und Germanischen* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1990), 27. See also Gougaud, “Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques” (1912), 115-22.

<sup>40</sup> Draak, *Betovering voor een etmaal*, 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Draak, *Betovering voor een etmaal*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Carey, *King of mysteries*, 127.

<sup>43</sup> Carey, *King of mysteries*, 127.

engagement into account, which is demanded during recitation. This removes the grounds for qualifying the postulated process of protective efficacy as automatic. We find, embedded between references to the legendary origin of the text,<sup>44</sup> a declaration of its ongoing, daily use and miraculous effect:

*Ocus is luirech hirse inso  
fri himdegail cuirp 7 anma ar demnaib 7 dúinib 7 dualchib.  
Cech duine nosgéba cech dia co ninnithem léir i nDia,  
ní thairisfet demna fria gnúis,  
bid dtín dó ar cech neim 7 fhormat,  
bid co[e]mna dó fri dianbas,  
bid lúrech dia anmain iarna éitsecht.*<sup>45</sup>

And it is a breastplate of faith,  
to protect body and soul against demons and people<sup>46</sup> and vices.  
If anyone recites it every day, with his mind fixed wholly upon God,  
demons will not stand against him,  
it will protect him against poison and envy (=the evil eye),<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The structure of the preface is as follows. We first read about the author, time and cause of the hymn. Then the quoted declaration follows, after which the preface concludes with the description of the miracle worked by Patrick's singing the hymn called the "Deer's Cry".

<sup>45</sup> Edited in *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, ed. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901-1903, repr. Dublin: DIAS, 1987), vol.2, 354.

<sup>46</sup> Carey translates this as "men"; *King of Mysteries*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Carey translates "jealousy". It should be noted that *format*, "envy", could also be translated as "the evil eye". See Jacqueline Borsje and Fergus Kelly, "'The Evil Eye' in Early Irish Literature and Law," *Celtica* 24 (2003), 3, 29-31. I interpret *format* in this way: the evil eye was very much feared and people took verbal and ritual precautions against its effect. Its mention in the preface may be based upon the *lorica* itself, although *foirmdechaib aicnid* is difficult to translate (see below). Another *lorica*, associated with Saint Brendan, mentions the evil eye explicitly after poison and envy in a list of evils: (...) *defende me Domine ab igne, a fulgure, a tonitruo, a grandine, a nive, a pluvia, a periculis, a terraemotu, ab omnibus malis, a veneficiis, ab invidiis, et a malis oculis, auribus, et a periculis lacu et tenebrarum, a demonio, et a sagitta volante in die, a negotio perambulante in tenebris*, "(...) defend me, Lord, from fire, from lightning, from thunder, from hail, from snow, from rain, from dangers, from earthquakes, from all evils, from poisons (or: magic potions), from envies and from evil eyes, ears (?), and from the dangers of the pit and of darkness, from the demon, and from the arrow that flies by day, from the trouble (or: pestilence) that walks through the darkness"; Patrick Francis Moran, ed. *Acta Sancti Brendani: Original Latin Documents Connected with*

it will guard him against sudden death,  
it will be a breastplate for his soul after death.<sup>48</sup>

Once more, the biblical background is clear: a breastplate of faith (and love) is mentioned in I Thessalonians 5:8 and a similar exhortation on spiritual engagement during prayer is found in Ephesians 6:18 (see above). The latter text suggests divine armour against spiritual enemies; the preface to the Irish text promises safety not only from spiritual danger but also from enemies of flesh and blood. The protection of body and soul against demons, people and vices has been taken over from the *lorica* itself.<sup>49</sup>

Is this *lorica* a pre-Christian charm with Christian interpolations (Draak) or a prayer for protection in the form of an incantation (Carey)? I propose that the terms attributed later to the text, such as hymn, charm and prayer, be left aside and that more neutral terms be used. We are dealing with “words of power”: words that are believed to be capable of influencing reality in a material sense although not through empirically verifiable methods. These words are believed to have the power to transform reality either through some intrinsic power that they possess or through the agency of a supernatural entity.<sup>50</sup> Turning now to the *Deer’s Cry*, we notice a diverse range of presumed entities whose postulated protective power is drawn upon:

1. *Atomriug indiu*  
*Niurt tréun:*  
*Togairm Trindóite,*  
*Cretim Treodait,*  
*Fáisitín Oendatad,*

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*the Life of Saint Brendan, Patron of Kerry and Clonfert* (Dublin: Kelly, 1872), 42. Translation mine. This last part quotes Psalm 90:5-6, which was traditionally sung at night for protection against danger (cf. above). Gougaud incidentally, quotes from a different manuscript, which reads *ab omnibus hominibus malis et veneficiis* and which refers to the midday demon from the Greek (and its Latin) translation of Psalm 90; Gougaud, “Étude sur les *loricae* celtiques” (1912), 103.

<sup>48</sup> Translated in Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 130.

<sup>49</sup> (...) *fri himdegail cuirp 7 anma ar demnaib 7 dúinib 7 dualchib* (Middle Irish preface) from *ar intledaib demnae, ar aslagib dualche, ar foirmdechaib aicnid, ar cech duine mídúthrustar dam* (Lorica stanza 5) and *Tocuiriuir etrum indiu inna uili nert-so fri cech nert n-annas n-étrocar fristai dom churp ocus dom anmain, (...) fri cech físs arachuille corp ocus anmain duini* (stanza 6; emphasis mine).

<sup>50</sup> Claire Fanger, “Things Done Wisely by a Wise Enchanter: Negotiating the Power of Words in the Thirteenth Century,” *Esoterica* 1 (1999), 98.

*i nDúlemon dáil.*

1. Today I gird myself

With a mighty power:  
 invocation of the Trinity,  
 belief in the Threeness,  
 confession<sup>51</sup> of the Oneness,  
 in the Creator's presence.

2. *Atomriug indiu*

*Niurt gene Críst cona bathius,  
 Niurt a chrochtho cona adnacul,  
 Niurt a essérgi cona fhresgabáil,  
 Niurt a thoíniudo fri brithemnas mbrátho.*

2. Today I gird myself

With the power of Christ's birth together with his baptism,  
 With the power of his crucifixion together with his burial,  
 With the power of his resurrection together with his ascension,  
 With the power of his descent to pronounce the judgment of  
 Doomsday.

3. *Atomriug indiu*

*niurt gráid hiruphin,  
 i n-aurlataid aingel,  
 i frestul inna n-archaingel,  
 i freiscisin esséirgi ar chium fochraicce,  
 i n-ernaighib uasalathrach,  
 i tairchetlaib fáithe,  
 i preceptaib apstal,  
 i n-iresaib fáismedach,  
 i n-enccai noebingen,  
 i ngnímaib fer firén.*

3. Today I gird myself

With the power of the order of the cherubim,  
 With the obedience of angels,  
 With the ministry of the archangels,  
 With the expectation of resurrection for the sake of a reward,  
 With the prayers of patriarchs,  
 With the predictions of prophets,

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<sup>51</sup> Carey translates here “affirmation” and in stanza 8 “proclamation”, but the same Irish word—*fáisitiu* in the *dativus singularis*—is used. I have replaced his translations with the primary meaning given in *DIL*.

With the precepts of apostles,  
 With the faith of confessors,  
 With the innocence of holy virgins,  
 With the deeds of righteous men.

4. *Atomriug indiu*  
*niurt nime,*  
*soilsí gréne,*  
*étrochtai éscái,*  
*áni thened,*  
*déni lóchet,*  
*luaithi gáithe,*  
*fudommai mara,*  
*tairismigi thalman,*  
*cobsaidi ailech.*

4. Today I gird myself  
 With the strength of heaven,  
 Light of the sun,  
 Brightness of the moon,  
 Brilliance of fire,  
 Speed of lightning,  
 Swiftiness of wind,  
 Depth of sea,  
 Firmness of earth,  
 Stability of rock.

5. <i>Atomriug indiu</i>	
<i>niurt Dé</i>	<i>dom luamairecht.</i>
<i>Cumachtae nDé</i>	<i>dom chumgabáil,</i>
<i>ciall Dé</i>	<i>dom imthús,</i>
<i>rosc nDé</i>	<i>dom remcisiu,</i>
<i>cluas Dé</i>	<i>dom étsecht,</i>
<i>briathar Dé</i>	<i>dom erlabrai,</i>
<i>lám Dé</i>	<i>dom imdegail,</i>
<i>intech Dé</i>	<i>dom remthechtas,</i>
<i>sciath Dé</i>	<i>dom imdíin,</i>
<i>sochraite Dé</i>	<i>dom anacul,</i>
	<i>ar intledaib demnae,</i>
	<i>ar aslagib dualche</i>
	<i>ar foirmdechaib<sup>52</sup> aicnid</i>
	<i>ar cech duine mídíthrastar dam,</i>
	<i>i céin ocus i n-ocus,</i>

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<sup>52</sup> Carey emends *foirmthechtaib*.

*i n-uathud ocus i sochaidi.*

## 5. Today I gird myself

With the strength of God to direct me.  
 The might of God to exalt me,  
 The mind of God to lead me,  
 The eye of God to watch over me,  
 The ear of God to hear me,  
 The word of God to speak to me,  
 The hand of God to defend me,  
 The path of God to go before me,  
 The shield of God to guard me,  
 The help of God to protect me,  
 Against the snares of demons,  
 Against the temptations of vices,  
 Against the envious ones by nature (?),<sup>53</sup>  
 Against everyone who wishes me ill,  
 Far and near,  
 Among few and among many.

6. *Tocuiriuir etrum indiu inna uili nert-so*

*fri cech nert n-ammas n-étrocar fristai dom churp ocus dom anmain,*  
*fri tinchetla saibfháithe,*  
*fri dubrechtu gentliuchtae,*  
*fri saibrechtu heretecdae,*  
*fri imchellacht n-ídlachtae,*  
*fri brichtu ban ocus gobann ocus druad,*  
*fri cech fiss arachuille corp ocus anmain duini.*

## 6. Today I interpose all these powers between myself

And every harsh pitiless power which may come against my body  
 and my soul,  
 Against the incantations<sup>54</sup> of false prophets,

<sup>53</sup> Carey translates “against the tendencies (?) of nature”. The manuscripts read *irnechaib*, *foirmdechaib*, *formdechaib*. I base my tentative translation on *DIL* s.v. *formtech*, “envious”, where this text is quoted as an example. Presumably, *format*, “envy; the evil eye”, in the Middle Irish preface may have been influenced by this phrase. What is mentioned here might refer to people who possess the evil eye and, therefore, are envious by nature. Specific possessors of the evil eye are mentioned in a Middle Irish commentary on an Old Irish law fragment; see Borsje and Kelly, “‘The Evil Eye’,” 31, 34-39.

<sup>54</sup> Carey translates “predictions”, but *DIL* translates *tinchetal* as “the act of casting spells, incantation”. Many of the examples in this dictionary ascribe this act to druids.

Against the black laws of paganism,  
 Against the crooked laws of heretics,  
 Against the encirclement of idolatry,  
 Against the spells of women and smiths and druids,  
 Against every knowledge which harms one's<sup>55</sup> body and soul.

7. *Crist dom imdegail indiu*

*ar neim,*  
*ar loscud,*  
*ar bádud,*  
*ar guin,*  
*condom-thair ilar fochraicce.*

*Crist limm, Crist reum, Crist im degaid,*  
*Crist indium, Crist tsum, Crist uasum,*  
*Crist desum, Crist tuathum,*  
*Crist i llius, Crist i sius, Crist i n-erus,*  
*Crist i cridiu cech duini immumrorda,*  
*Crist i ngin cech oin rododom-labrathar,*  
*Crist i cech rusc nodom-dercathar,*  
*Crist i cech cluais rododom-chloathar.*

7. May Christ protect me today

Against poison,  
 Against burning,  
 Against drowning,  
 Against wounding,<sup>56</sup>

That many rewards may come to me.

May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
 Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
 Christ to my right, Christ to my left,  
 Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit, Christ where I stand,  
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,

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<sup>55</sup> Carey translates “a man’s”.

<sup>56</sup> It is tempting to see this list reflected in the Middle Irish preface: poison would refer to poison and envy (=the evil eye; for the association of the evil eye with poison, see Borsje and Kelly, “‘The evil eye’,” 5-9); burning, drowning, and wounding—this trio is well-known as the motif of threefold death—would refer to sudden death. See, e.g. Donald J. Ward, “The Threefold Death: An Indo-European Trifunctional Sacrifice?” in *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 132-42; Joan Newlon Radner, “The Significance of the Threefold Death in Celtic Tradition,” in *Celtic Folklore and Christianity. Studies in memory of William W. Heist*, ed. P. K. Ford (Santa Barbara: McNally & Loftin, 1983), 180-99; Dan M. Wiley, “The Maledictory Psalms,” *Peritia* 15 (2001), 277-78.

Christ in every eye which looks on me,  
 Christ in every ear which hears me.

8. *Atomriug indiu*

*Niurt tréun:  
 Togairm Trindóite,  
 Cretim Treodait,  
 Faisitín Oendatad,  
 i nDúlemon dáil.*

8. Today I gird myself

with a mighty power:  
 invocation of the Trinity,  
 belief in the Threeness,  
 confession of the Oneness,  
 in the Creator's presence.

*Domini est salus, Domini est salus, Christi est salus,  
 Salus tua, Domine, sit semper nobiscum.*

Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is of Christ,  
 may your salvation, Lord, be always with us.<sup>57</sup>

The text consists of eight stanzas in Irish; the first and the last are identical. The conclusion is formed by an adaptation of the last verse of Psalm 3 in Latin.<sup>58</sup> Each stanza covers a certain meta-empirical or empirical field of which the perceived powers are called forth for the sake of protection: stanza 1 refers to the Trinity; 2 to events from the life of Christ, 3 to angelic and human orders, 4 to nature, 5 to God, 7 to Christ and 8 to the Trinity again, rounding off with the Latin prayer to Christ. Stanzas 5, 6 and 7 enumerate the evils from which one wants to be protected.

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<sup>57</sup> Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 130-35.

<sup>58</sup> Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 129, 135. This Psalm, which describes God's protection against one's enemies, is traditionally part of the night office; Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West. The origins of the divine office and its meaning for today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986, repr. 1993), 118, 134, 169, 199, 221, 230, 279. The last verse reads: *Domini est salus et super populum tuum benedictio tua*, "Salvation is of the Lord and your blessing upon your people". Verse 4 of the translation of the Hebrew Psalm also refers to divine, spiritual armour: *tu autem Domine clipeus circa me*, "but you, O God, are a shield around me". This Psalm is one of the "maledictory psalms"; see Wiley, "The Maledictory Psalms," 265. I am indebted to Martin McNamara, who drew my attention to this alternative ritual medieval Irish use of the psalm.

Applying Claire Fanger's definition of "words of power" to this text, I conclude that these words are not regarded as having an intrinsic power, but constitute an appeal to the strengths of supernatural entities, such as the Trinity, God and Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is as if the text surrounds the evils listed literally with divine protection: they are enclosed by a description of God as an anthropomorphic guard with a shield (stanza 5) and by a portrayal of Christ as an invisible force surrounding the speaker on all sides, perhaps comparable to an enveloping mist (stanza 7). Stanza 5 gives the general outline of "evil": the traps ascribed to evil supernatural beings, the seduction of sinful behaviour, and people thought to be harmful. Stanza 6 puts the invoked powers as a kind of shield between the speaker and the presumed evil powers. Interestingly, stanza 6 describes verbal and conceptual danger. What the speaker fears are incantations; wrong kinds of law either within or outside of Christianity; "words of power" from women, smiths and druids; and "fatal knowledge", thought to lead people astray, thereby ruining one's life on earth and one's soul after death. Stanza 7 mainly enumerates physical evils.

Again, we see druids described as people associated with evil, casting spells. Women are also mentioned in this context: this may refer not only to human representatives but also to supernatural women.<sup>59</sup> The exact same expression—*brechta(e/i) ban*, "the spells of women"—is used in the Old Irish *Adventure of Connlai*.<sup>60</sup> A king calls his druid when a woman from the *síd* threatens to lure his son away. He complains about a deceitful

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 133 n. 13. The possibility that women of flesh and blood are meant should not be ruled out, despite the verbal parallel in the Old Irish tale mentioned below. In another eighth-century *lorica*, called *Cétmad n-Aíse*, "A chant of long life", dangerous women are mentioned among thieves and warriors: *Ním-millethar teól, ná cuire ban, ná cuire buiden*, "May no thief destroy me, nor a company of women, nor a company of warriors"; Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 137. Another *lorica* in Irish from Klosterneuburg, Codex regularum Ms. 587, from the eleventh or twelfth century also refers to women's spells; I.C. Zeuss, *Grammatica Celtica* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1871), 954-955; Whitley Stokes, "The Klosterneuburg incantation," *RC* 2 (1873-1875), 112-15; see now also David Stifter, "Die Klosterneuburger *lorica*," in *Kelten-Einfälle an der Donau. Akten des Vierten Symposiums deutschsprachiger Keltologinnen und Keltologen*, ed. Helmut Birkhan (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 503-27. Another *lorica* perhaps mentions women's judgements; A. O'Kelleher, "A hymn of invocation," *Ériu* 4 (1910), 236-37, 239.

<sup>60</sup> Kim McCone, ed. *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary*. (Maynooth: Department of Old and Middle Irish, NUI, Maynooth, 2000), 149-56.

contest with invisible beings: his son will be abducted by evil moves and women's spells. The woman is invisible to human beings, but they can hear her. The only one who sees her is the son of the king and he falls in love with her. The chanting of the druid expels the woman temporarily.<sup>61</sup> After a month,<sup>62</sup> her voice is heard again. Ironically, she now warns the king of druids' spells in a prophecy on the coming of Saint Patrick:

*Mo-tub:ticfa a recht.*  
*Con:scéra **brichtu druad** tárdechto*  
*Ar bélaib demuin duib dolbthig.*<sup>63</sup>

His law will soon come to you.  
 He will destroy *the spells of the druids* of base teaching  
 In front of the black, bewitching Devil.<sup>64</sup>

At the end of the tale the woman and the young man disappear in a crystal ship,<sup>65</sup> never to be seen again. This text dates from the eighth century.<sup>66</sup> It illustrates the dangers attributed to spells by women and druids, and refers to Patrick's law. Such spells and pagan and heretical laws are mentioned as evils in "The Deer's Cry", which is also from the eighth century. The narrative, however, is not as clear in distinguishing between good and evil as the *lorica* is.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This is another example of the motif of spells being effective for a certain period of time.

<sup>62</sup> During this month Connlae, the son, neither eats nor drinks. The only thing he digests is an apple thrown to him by the woman. This miraculous apple stays whole, no matter how much he eats from it. One could compare this narrative motif with the special diet of Eithne of the Túatha Dé Danann described in section 3 of this contribution. Both Connlae and Eithne are going to migrate from one world to another. For a study on similar motifs as representing *rites de passage*, see Dan M. Wiley, "Baptizing the Fairies: The Christian-Conversion Typescene as a *Rite de Passage*," *PHCC* 15 (1995), 139-46.

<sup>63</sup> *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 122.

<sup>64</sup> *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 181; emphasis mine.

<sup>65</sup> For the motif of boats from diverse materials and their symbolic meaning, see Jonathan M. Wooding, "St Brendan's Boat: Dead Hides and the Living Sea in Columban and Related Hagiography," in *Studies in Irish Hagiography: Saints and Scholars*, ed. John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001) 77-92.

<sup>66</sup> McCone, ed. *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 29.

<sup>67</sup> There are many ways to view this tale; for a survey of the literature and the discussion, see McCone, ed. *Echtrae Chonnlai*, 47-119.

## The forces of darkness, mist and invisibility

In the first part of this paper I pointed out a similarity between Patrick, druids and elves: their talents as described in the literature include their transformation into deer. The textual tradition is, however, rather subtle on this point. Muirchú merely refers to what witnesses have seen: the king no longer sees the clerics and the Irish see deer disappear. Both invisibility and transformation seem to be implied. The motif of the fawn strengthens the idea of transformation: it would refer to Patrick's young pupil Benignus. His name in Irish, Benén, moreover, hints at *bennán*, the Irish word for "fawn, calf". The double motif of transformation and invisibility is also present in the Middle Irish *Life of Patrick*. According to this text, Patrick's blessing calls forth a *dícheltair*, "a covering, concealment, disguise, invisibility, an invisibility spell". The text, however, also explicitly identifies the deer and the fawn as Patrick, his men and the boy.<sup>68</sup> The Middle Irish preface to the *lorica* says that Patrick and his men looked like deer in the eyes of their enemies.<sup>69</sup> This seems to hint that the transformation was a matter of illusion. The title, *Faíd fiada*, "Deer's Cry", might also contain a word play on *féth fia(da)*. This concept refers to invisibility and is connected with druids, elves and the Túatha Dé Danann in Middle Irish and later texts.<sup>70</sup>

The Túatha Dé Danann are supposed to be supernatural inhabitants of Ireland. There are many medieval and modern speculations on their nature and origin. According to the Early Modern Irish tale "The Fosterage of the

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<sup>68</sup> Mulchrone, ed. *Bethu Phátraic*, 30-31; Stokes, ed. and trans. *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, 46-47.

<sup>69</sup> *Conid annsin atchess a fiad lucht na netarnade comtis aige alta 7 iarróe ina ndiaid .i. Benen* (Stokes and Strachan, ed. *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* II, 354), "so that it seemed to those who lay in wait that they were wild deer with a fawn following them (that was Benén)" (Carey, *King of Mysteries*, 130).

<sup>70</sup> Druids are said to practise the *féth fia*, according to a legal commentary (*CIH* vol. V: 1612, ll. 8-9). *Fé* or *féth fiada* (or *fia(d)*) is said to make the hollow hills (*síde*) and their inhabitants (*áes síde*) invisible to human eyes, except on Samain, the feast of the beginning of winter, as described in e.g. "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn" and "The Tales of the Elders of Ireland." Kuno Meyer, "Macgnimmartha Find," *RC* 5, 1881-1883, 202; Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw. The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 216; Whitley Stokes, ed. "Acallamh na Senórach," in W. Stokes and Ernst Windisch, *Irische Texte* IV.1 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1900), 143, 318; Dooley and Roe, trans. *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, 145-46. An example about the Túatha Dé Danann is discussed in this third section of this contribution.

House of the Two Vessels”,<sup>71</sup> the Túatha Dé Danann live in the hollow hills of Ireland. Each hollow hill has a leader. Just as the Irish are said to have a high king, so do the supernatural beings. Their high king is called Manannán mac Lir, who lives elsewhere, in the Land of Promise. He is more powerful and knowledgeable than the others. Interestingly, the Túatha Dé Danann are also said to venerate Gods.<sup>72</sup> In fact, this text shows a clear hierarchy. The Túatha Dé Danann are powerful beings (*cumachtaig*; §3), but Manannán is superior to them: he is very powerful (*mórcumachtach*; §§2, 9). There is, however, someone who is superior to him, someone who is almighty (*uilechumachtach*; §§4, 9): God the high king who created heaven, earth, sea and the four elements (§4). Manannán knew of this superior God long before the arrival of Christianity. He tells his protégé Oengus of the ten orders of angels and of the fall and banishment of the tenth order through pride.<sup>73</sup> These angels are now demons. Here we find a fascinating weaving together of traditions. Manannán does not call his own people demons, but a well-known tradition indeed identifies the Túatha Dé Danann with these fallen angels.<sup>74</sup>

Manannán is portrayed in this text as a prophet, high-king and a culture hero. He instructs the Túatha Dé Danann about their dwellings and teaches them powerful supernatural arts. These include the *féth fiada*, by means of which the Túatha Dé Danann became invisible to human eyes (§2). The *féth fiada* is mentioned again at the end of the tale where the protagonist is a beautiful, charming, modest girl of the Túatha Dé Danann, called Eithne.

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<sup>71</sup> Margaret C. Dobbs, “*Altromh tighi da medar*,” *ZCP* 18 (1930), 189-230; Lillian Duncan, “*Altram Tige Dá Medar*,” *Ériu* 11 (1932), 184-225. The text dates from the fourteenth century; Gerard Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: At the Three Candles, 1961), 32.

<sup>72</sup> The tale refers to this idea as follows: they swear by “the beautiful gods of adoration”; Oengus asks whether there is “a god over our gods” (§4). Later, Patrick tells Oengus to “shun vain gods” (§12). In this text, the Túatha Dé Danann are, therefore, neither Gods nor demons, but in other texts they may be identified as the former or the latter.

<sup>73</sup> McCone, *Pagan Past*, 149-51.

<sup>74</sup> John Carey, “Time, Memory, and the Boyne Necropolis,” *PHCC* 10 (1990), 32 n. 8. Another interesting detail in this part of the text is that God needed words of power to drive the evil angels from heaven. This charm (*sén*) was also used by the Túatha Dé Danann to take Ireland from previous inhabitants (the Fir Bolg), and the Irish used it to take the kingship from the Túatha Dé Danann (§4). Manannán teaches the charm to his protégée, who uses it to take over the most impressive hollow hill in the land (§5), which had caused envy among all the powerful Túatha Dé Danann (§3).

After a visitor insults her, she suddenly cannot eat and drink anymore. The only thing that she is capable of digesting is the milk from two special cows from India, milked by her into a golden vessel (§7). Oengus owns one cow and Manannán the other. Eithne lives alternately in their houses so that she can have access to the special milk. Manannán explains that the insult changed her nature: she has become different from the Túatha Dé Danann on two counts. First, an angel has taken the place of her accompanying demon. Second, she now venerates the Trinity instead of the arts of druids and devilry (§§8, 9).

This text associates the Túatha Dé Danann with demons in a creative way: they are portrayed as possessed by demons and their religion is characterised as “magic” connected with druids and devils.

Eithne lives on in this way until the time of King Loegaire (§9). Saint Patrick arrives and, the text tells us, he banishes the druids and demons from Ireland (§10). The Irish become Christians, but the Túatha Dé Danann live on as if nothing has changed. One day, Eithne is swimming with her friends in the River Boyne. They are all invisible, but Eithne suddenly loses her *féth fiada*. She does not notice that her friends have left. A cleric sees her and they talk together. She tells him that from now on she belongs to the people of God and no longer to the Túatha Dé Danann. His psalms sound more beautiful to her than the wonderful music from the Land of Promise. When she bends over his book, she is suddenly able to read (§§10, 11).

After a while, the Túatha Dé Danann come to look for her. She sees them, but they remain hidden to the cleric, because of the *féth fiada* (§11). The cleric summons Patrick to the scene to protect her, and Oengus and Patrick quarrel over her. When Oengus threatens to abduct the girl, Patrick replies: “The strength and the power of the Lord from me against you” (§12).<sup>75</sup> God’s power is thus invoked verbally and used as a shield, according to the tale. The girl stays with Patrick but dies of sadness, after which her soul goes to heaven.

The tale is concluded<sup>76</sup> with a promise by Patrick that the telling of this tale will bring many blessings to those who listen to it carefully. Here again, words are credited with tremendous power: telling the tale of the girl from the Túatha Dé Danann would bring success in enterprises and

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<sup>75</sup> *Nert 7 cumhachta in Choimdedh uaimsi att agaidh*; Duncan, ed. “*Altram Tige Dá Medar*,” 201. The word *nert* in dative singular is often used in the “Deer’s Cry” to indicate the powers that are invoked.

<sup>76</sup> It ends in the usual medieval Irish fashion by giving the title of the tale at the end. The promise of Patrick is, therefore, clearly an addition to the tale.

family life, safety during journeys across water, during law suits and hunts and protection from fights and weapons (§12).

Invisibility was traditionally associated with supernatural beings. Saint Patrick also used it, according to the older texts that I have discussed. In this Early Modern Irish tale, however, the invisibility of the Túatha Dé Danann became a symbol of incompatibility with Christianity. The text tells of a choice for the Túatha Dé Danann to join this new religious order, whereas unambiguous representatives of evil, in this tale druids and demons, must leave the land.

## Conclusion

In an earlier study,<sup>77</sup> I noted that there were at least two options for dealing with evil according to medieval Irish texts. The first was to look for safety and security by formulating rules that allow people to locate and avoid evil. The second was to interpret the meaning of evil and give it a place in one's worldview. The way to cope with evil that we have discussed in the present paper is to utter "words of power". The texts credit such words with some kind of supernatural power that was believed to be capable of transforming reality and bringing about safety.

Being confronted with evil may cause feelings of despair and lead to passivity and depression. Coping mechanisms help one to fight these feelings. The belief in words of power was probably such a source of support for medieval Irish people when faced with evil.

To return to the metaphor with which we began: this is a first step in our continuous task of cleaning. In our secularised view of the world and with our knowledge of the monstrous evils of our day and age, we realise only too well that it is just a first step.

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<sup>77</sup> Jacqueline Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An investigation related to the process of Christianization and the concept of evil* (Instrumenta Patristica XXIX. Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 331-34.

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