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Celestial portents and apocalypticism in medieval Ireland

The Irish annals show that between the seventh and the twelfth centuries, Irish ecclesiastical scholars in various monastic centres were recording atmospheric and celestial phenomena as part of their wider noting-down of the significant events of each year: changes of rulership, famines, important battles, attacks on churches and monastic centres (Viking or otherwise), and the deaths of significant churchmen and of secular dynasts. These observations were often both astronomically accurate and perceptive.[1] The purpose of this first chapter is to examine this material, and to assess how the ways of considering such 'signs' changed over the centuries and influenced literary texts. As I noted in the Preface, Daniel McCarthy and Aidan Breen have studied the celestial phenomena noted in the annals, and concluded by scientific means that they largely reflect actual astronomical and meteorological events.[2] They argue that the impulse to make such observations derived from the fervid apocalyptic anxieties that characterized much of early medieval Irish religious experience and expression.[3] The churchmen in question were thus engaged in a process of finding meaning in celestial phenomena, fusing them with what Kathleen Hughes has termed 'the fantastic

[1] The relationship of the extant annals is complex, and thus it is not possible to state with certainty where any given observation was made. The non-extant 'Chronicle of Ireland'—which is thought to lie behind those sections of the Annals of Tigernach, the Annals of Ulster, and the *Chronicon Scottorum* (amongst others), which cover the years 431–91—seems to have been written in different centres at different periods. Further, strands from other chronicles were woven into the overall text in addition, making a textually complex body of records. But it is possible to say with confidence that until *c.*740 the place of composition appears to have been Iona, and after that point a monastery in Brega with Armagh connections. (See *The Chronicle of Ireland*, trans. T. M. Charles-Edwards [Liverpool, 2006], i, pp. 1–15.) The upshot of this is that we can say that the habit of recording celestial signs may possibly have *begun* in the community at Iona, but did not remain limited to that centre as the centuries passed.

[2] See McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', pp. 1–43. Their means of determining the accuracy of these observations include astronomical knowledge of the patterns of eclipses, including whether a given eclipse visible in Ireland was partial or total, and the cycles of numerous comets; for non-predictable events such as supernovae, they used comparison with the extensive Chinese astronomical records.

[3] For a succinct description of apocalypticism in the early Irish Church, see M. McNamara, 'Celtic Christianity, Creation and Apocalypse, Christ and Antichrist', *Milltown Studies* 23 (1989), pp. 5–39.

elaboration and detail' characteristic of apocryphal texts.[4] I attempt here to set the strategies identified by McCarthy and Breen in a wider context, comparing them to the Venerable Bede's attitude to celestial portents in England in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. I also contrast the ways in which portents were regarded in the Carolingian court, at which some Irish men of learning were at work in the early ninth century, and consider these physical portents in the sky alongside the vivid cosmic and meteorological miracles that were associated with some of the most important saints of early medieval Ireland. The limited nature of the Irish evidence means that some of the conclusions of this chapter must be tentative. However, I contend that the preconceptions and strategies which we find applied to portents in the annals have far greater applicability for early Irish vernacular literature than has hitherto been realized.

ANNALISTIC OBSERVATIONS AND APOCALYPTICISM

It seems that apocryphal and apocalyptic literature was circulated for longer in Ireland, and with greater influence, than elsewhere in Europe.[5] An eschatological focus on the apocalypse was one of the most dominant themes and characteristics of the early Irish Church, and appeared in liturgical texts, the various monastic rules, the decrees of Irish synods, commentaries and glosses upon scripture, the writings of highly placed churchmen, homiletic texts, litanies and lyric poetry, the vision and voyage literature, saints' lives, and secular saga.[6] Further, in his discussion of the wide dissemination of apocalyptic imagery and texts in early medieval Europe, Richard Emmerson has characterized the apocalypticism of the early Middle Ages as an orthodox, universal 'grammar of imagery', with accompanying narratives, which developed over time but retained its essential features.[7] He distinguishes this, on the other hand, from the naïve and revolutionary apocalypticism of the later medieval period, whereby specific political events and figures were identified with the personae of apocalyptic narratives. The

[4] K. Hughes, 'The Church in Irish Society, 400–800', in D. Ó Cróinín (ed.), *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), i, pp. 329–30.

[5] See Hughes, 'The Church in Irish Society', pp. 329–30. See also D. Dumville, 'Biblical Apocrypha and the Early Irish: A Preliminary Investigation', *PRIA* 73C (1973), p. 336, where he writes: '[C]onsidering the use of apocryphal works in liturgical and exegetical contexts, the early Irish seem to have allowed themselves a remarkable freedom to use the apocrypha and appear generally to have held such works in a high regard which would have been impermissible elsewhere.'

[6] See B. Grogan, 'Eschatological Teaching in the early Irish Church', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 1 (1976), pp. 46–58.

[7] R. K. Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle, 1981), pp. 1–3. Emmerson's concept of the apocalyptic 'grammar of imagery' is an important one. I make use of it at length both here and in Chapter 2, where I argue that such imagery could be isolated from its normal context and used to create a portrait of the magic of the pagan past.

astronomical descriptions in the Irish annals naturally belong to the first, 'unworldly' type, and indeed there does not seem to be any correspondence between the celestial phenomena as recorded in the annals and the mundane events that accompany them. Celestial portents in the annals eloquently bespeak an expectation of the final *consummatio mundi* and the signs heralding its arrival, not contemporary political anxieties. As McCarthy and Breen write:

> Of course, the context of all these observations was monastic and the explicit references in the annals to religious matters such as St. Martin's feast and Easter, and implicit references to the Crucifixion . . . in themselves indicate the religious light in which these observations were viewed by the annalists. Furthermore, the language in which some of the records are couched, for example, 'blood-red moon', 'colour of blood', 'dark sun', 'dragons' as well as explicit references to 'horrible portents' and 'a horrible and wonderful sign' leave no room for doubt that the Bible provided the specific inspiration and justification for the recording of these observations. Specifically, the Book of Revelation provides the principal Christian apocalypse or revelation concerning the end of time or 'last days', and it identifies these by repeated reference to natural and particularly celestial phenomena involving the sun, moon, stars, clouds and storms, dragons and earthquakes which are all used to portend the catastrophes prophesied to occur at this time.[8]

These apocalyptic images draw particularly on the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. At 21:11 in the Vulgate, Jesus tells the apostles that there will be *terroresque de caelo, et signa magna*, 'terrors from heaven also and great signs', and at 21:25 he prophesies *signa in sole, et luna, et stellis*, 'signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars.' The annals indicate that early Irish churchmen took these warnings very much to heart. The nature of these entries can be gauged from two examples, one from the seventh century and one from the eleventh. A representative instance is the following in the year 664:

> Annals of Ulster: Tenebrae in kl. Maii in nona hora, & eadem aestate coelum ardere visum est.
> Annals of Tigernach: tenebre i callaind Mai in hora nona, et in eadem estate celum ardere visum est.
> *Chronicon Scottorum*: Tenebrae in KL Mai in hora nona, et in eodem aestate coelum ardere visum est.
> Annals of the Four Masters: Dithgréin an treas la do Maii.[9]
>
> AU/AT/CS: Darkness on the calends of May at the ninth hour, and in the same summer the sky seemed to be on fire.
> AFM: A failure of the sun upon the third day of May.[10]

[8] McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', pp. 21–2.
[9] Ibid., p. 41.
[10] *Díthgréin* is not given in the *DIL*, but must be a compound of *grían*, 'sun' and *díthim*, 'act of lapsing, forfeiture' or its related adjective *díthech*, 'wanting, deficient, needy'. McCarthy and Breen note that a strong feature of these observations is the preference for recording *double* portents, as here, where two celestial signs are recorded together. This suggests an expectation on the part of the annalists that apocalyptic portents should occur in a sequence and be part of a complex of signs; I return to this issue later in this chapter.

McCarthy and Breen see this burning sky as a competent observation of an aurora, as 664 was apparently a year of auroral maximum.[11] But darkness and heavenly fire are also images drawn from Revelations, and are two of the most common forms of celestial portent to be encountered in medieval texts. In this fairly early entry, it should be noted that it is not explicitly stated that these phenomena are portents.[12] The spartan quality of the annals means that the religious preoccupations and reasoning behind the material included must be inferred, as here.[13]

Our second example is later, being drawn from the Annals of Tigernach entries for 1054, and occurring also in the *Chronicon Scottorum* and the Annals of the Four Masters. In this entry, we find an example of apocalyptic literature being used to crystallize a miniature narrative around an astronomical observation, increasing its metaphorical depth. The unusually extended passage describes a *cloictheach tenedh* ('a round tower of fire', as McCarthy and Breen translate), appearing over Ros Ela, near Durrow.[14] The entry continues into a surprising and sizeable quasi-literary interpolation:

Cloictheach tenedh do fhaicsin ir-Ros Ela dia-domnaigh fhele Gíurgi ria ré .u. n-úar do ló, 7 eoin duba diairme índ 7 as, 7 aen-en mor a medon, 7 teigdís fo cluim sidhe na heoín becca intan teighdís isin cloctheach. Tancatar amach co n-uargabatar in coin bai for lar in baile a n-airdi isin aér, 7 tarlaicset hé sís arís, co n-erbailt fochétoir, 7 tuargabatar tri brutu 7 di lénid a n-airde, 7 roleicsit sis aris. In chaill iarom for a ndesetar na heonu dorochair fothaib, 7 in dairbre for a ndessid in t-én mor robaí for crith cona fhremaib a talmuin.[15]

A round tower of fire was seen at Ros Ela on the Sunday of the feast of St. George, for the space of five hours of the day, and innumerable black birds passing into and out of it, and one great bird in the midst thereof, and when the little birds would enter the round tower they would come under her plumage. They came forth and lifted up the hound that lay amid the settlement up on high into the air, and they cast him down again, and he straightway died. And three mantles and two shirts they lifted up on high and down again they flung them. Now the wood whereon the birds perched fell beneath them, and the oak whereon the great bird sat was a-tremble with its roots in the earth.

This second example shows a far more developed and transmuted semiology than the first. Its significance is twofold, and references to it recur throughout this study. First, McCarthy and Breen make excellent sense of this enigmatic mixture

[11] McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 12.

[12] In contrast, see the AU and AT entries for both 745 and 765, in which an explicit *signum horribile et mirabile* is seen in the night sky. See McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 41.

[13] K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London, 1972), pp. 96–116.

[14] McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 31.

[15] The translation given is that by McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 31, which is a lightly adapted version of that of Stokes; see 'The Annals of Tigernach', ed. and trans. W. Stokes, *RC* 17 (1896), pp. 392–5. I have, however, changed the translation of *baile* from the anachronistic 'town' to 'settlement'.

by relating it to the medieval Antichrist legend.[16] They identify the event that gave rise to this entry as the sudden appearance of a supernova in 1054, which continues to be visible to this day as the Crab Nebula. Thus we find here an unusual celestial phenomenon not only being viewed through an apocalyptic lens, but also being actively embellished with details drawn from pious legend. Secondly, this embellishment is obscured or distanced by the substitution of more homely, native elements for the key figures of the Antichrist legend. The medieval 'Life of Antichrist' has been transposed into a native key.[17] For example, according to the legend, Antichrist will emerge from a bottomless shaft within a smoking pit, accompanied by a horde of armed locusts (drawing strongly on Revelations 9:1–11). But in the annalistic entry, we find a flock of dark birds, under the command of a great *female* of their kind, emerging from the *cloictheach tenedh*.[18] The fiery tower itself also echoes the *stella magna ardens tamquam facula*, 'a great star blazing like a torch' of Revelation 8:10. The Antichrist legend describes how the prophet Elijah will be killed and his corpse dropped by Antichrist in Jerusalem; here he has become the hound who is dropped in the settlement. The letting fall of the mantles stands for the dropping of Elijah's mantle to Elisha, both traditional opponents of Antichrist. Finally, Antichrist traditionally has a destructive or unnatural effect on trees, reversing them and causing their roots to put forth flowers by sorcery, for example, and the great bird and her flock have a similarly disruptive effect. Perhaps most importantly, McCarthy and Breen suggest the identification of the monstrous blackbird with the Morrígan, the native war-goddess, who is often described as taking the form of a crow.[19] If this is indeed the case, it is a significant superimposition of a female figure from native myth onto one from widely accepted Christian legend. This strongly suggests that the creator of this little vignette was learnedly familiar with the native literary tradition, and hints at the ways whereby the 'apocalyptic outlook' might come to affect the imagery of the vernacular sagas.[20] There is a curious duality about this entry, which McCarthy

[16] The reception of the medieval 'Vita Antichristi' in Ireland is handled in detail in the third chapter of this study. For the development of the legend and a summary of its features, see Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–11.

[17] The literary resonances and effects of the legend of Antichrist in Ireland are discussed at length in Chapter 2.

[18] See McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 31, for grammatical evidence for the femaleness of the black bird. I have written 'dark birds' here, to avoid either 'blackbirds' or the awkward 'black birds'; crows are almost certainly implied here, with their sinister overtones of battlefields and carrion, rather than the homely blackbird.

[19] For the mythology of the Morrígan in general, see R. Clark, 'Aspects of the Morrígan in Early Irish Literature', *Irish University Review* 17 (1987), pp. 223–36.

[20] A number of indications survive suggesting that early Irish literati were able to make identifications between their own mythology and non-native figures. The most famous example is in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, where the Graeco-Roman Fury Allecto (*Allechtu*) is introduced, only to be immediately glossed as the Morrígan. See *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Recension I, ed. and trans. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin 1976), p. 152.

and Breen do not identify. They regard this brief narrative as an elaboration of an originally much simpler celestial observation by an interpolator. As they write: 'this was not done long afterwards, because the language of the interpolation is eleventh-century Irish. The original annal was submerged in an oblique form of the Irish version of the Antichrist legend'.[21] But the duality here is that this entry is at once both a fantastical elaboration *and* a localized scaling-down. The original observation has been greatly expanded, but the elements of the Antichrist legend used in this expansion have in fact been rendered far less lurid.

An important shift is discernable between the two examples of annalistic portents I have discussed. There is a movement from literal towards the literary, an increasing accommodation of fiction. The expectation of the imminent advent of Antichrist and the events of the Book of Revelations is apparent behind the first three centuries of Irish annalistic observations, which reach a peak in the eighth century.[22] Tellingly, the first vernacular description of the signs of Antichrist occurs in the third quarter of that same century, in the final verses of the poetry by Blathmac son of Cú Brettan son of Congus, who belonged to the Uí Shégáin people of the Fir Roiss in what is now County Monaghan. Blathmac closely follows the list of such signs which the Christian apologist Lactantius had drawn up in the fourth century.[23] Coupled with the annalists' fondness for double portents, this suggests that the minds of some early Irish churchmen were much exercised by the sign-schemas of Revelation and Lactantius, which they continued to elaborate and systematize. At the same time these churchmen had access to, and high esteem for, a wide range of apocryphal texts, the vivid imagery of which exerted a strong imaginative influence upon them. These certainly included the fourth-century Latin *Apocalypse of Thomas*, which contains a list of the signs that are to occur on the seven days preceding Doomsday.[24] This powerful mixture of intellectual, theological and literary influences bore fruit in the late tenth century with strophes 153–62 of the collection of biblical poems known as *Saltair na Rann*, 'The Psalter of the Stanzas' (or 'Quatrains'), which also describe the portents of judgement. William Heist has demonstrated conclusively that this section of *Saltair na Rann* went on to form the basis for the development of the 'Fifteen Signs before Doomsday' legend, which enjoyed wide popularity throughout medieval Europe.[25] This urge to schematize and elaborate seems to have encouraged the apocalyptic framework for conceptualizing celestial portents to take on literary form. Therefore, from the evidence of the annals, I propose that a subtle shift in mentality occurred between the mid-eighth and tenth centuries. During this period, celestial portents seem to

[21] McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 38.
[22] See McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', p. 39.
[23] See *The Poems of Blathmac Son of Cú Brettan*, ed. and trans. J. Carney (Dublin, 1964), pp. 80–1.
[24] See W. W. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday* (East Lansing, 1952), pp. 62–5.
[25] See Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, pp. 193–5.

change from being alarming signs of the expected and imminent end of the world to being part of a literary schema, open to development and poetic elaboration by the learned. This is not to imply that the apocalypse itself was thereby any less feared or anticipated by such *literati*. Indeed, we might more accurately say that such signs additionally take on vernacular literary form, rather than instead of being expected to occur in reality. This schema is thus a version of Emmerson's 'grammar of imagery', but crucially, in Ireland at least, it seems to have been flexible enough to have been capable of losing its overtly apocalyptic and even Christian flavour. This may seem like a great weight of interpretation to place on the annalistic astronomical observations, which are relatively few in number. (Eleven observations are recorded for the eighth century; this is the maximum. Between the seventh and the twelfth centuries, the average is just under six per century.) But in fact this very change in mentality can be seen in miniature in the Ros Ela interpolation discussed above. As an interpolation, it is by its nature after the event. Thus the writer would have been quite aware that Antichrist did not, in fact, noticeably appear in the Irish midlands at some point during July 1054. Why then recast the legend so strangely, and in such localized terms? A satirical or comic purpose seems unlikely. The naturalization of apocalyptic imagery suggests that this schematic way of thinking about the signs of Doomsday could function in two ways: first, as an arcane puzzle for the learned, who might be expected to recognize the allusions, and second, as a stimulus to writing secular literature with fantastical content, behind which the audience or readers were perhaps also expected to detect the ironic outline of apocalyptic legend.

PORTENTS IN BEDE AND AT THE CAROLINGIAN COURT

I resume below my argument about the literary effect of this 'apocalyptic' way of considering celestial portents. It is necessary first to pause in order to consider how *unusual* this early medieval Irish mode of thought was in its European context, and whether apocalypticism represented the sole way in which the early medieval Irish could conceive of the significance of celestial phenomena. The two most salient sources for comparison are the Venerable Bede, in the first third of the eighth century, and the writers of the Carolingian court in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In the early Middle Ages, there was nothing out of the ordinary in noting striking astronomical phenomena in a historiographical context.[26] Bede mentions such occurrences at several points in the *Historia*

[26] As McCarthy and Breen note (see 'Astronomical Observations', p. 12), the Irish annalists used a variety of continental sources for their entries at least until 612, some of which, such as the sixth-century *Chronicle* of the Byzantine *Comes* or 'Count' Marcellinus, noted astronomical phenomena.

Ecclesiastica. He records eclipses in 678 and 728, but they are mentioned matter of factly, and not described in any way as signs or portents. Comets are another matter, and in the *De natura rerum*, he accepts them as portents, and indeed their status as such is part of his definition:

> Cometae sunt stellae flammis crinitae, repente nascentes, regni mutationem aut pestilentiem aut bella, uel uentos aestusue, portendentes. Quarum aliae mouentur errantium modo, aliae immobiles haerent.[27]
>
> Comets are stars with hair of flames, which come into existence suddenly and portend the alteration of kingdoms or plague or wars, or winds or tides. Some of them are moved in the manner of the planets, others stay in one place without moving.

And in an earlier chapter of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, he gives a description of two portentous comets appearing at the same time in 729:

> Anno dominicae incarnationis DCCXXVIIII apparuerunt cometae duae circa solem, multum intuentibus terrorem incutientes. Vna quippe solem praecedebat mane orientem, altera uespere sequebatur occidentem, quasi Orienti simul et Occidenti dirae cladis praesagae; uel certe una diei, altera noctis praecurrebat exortum, ut utroque tempore mala mortalibus imminere signarent. Portabant autem facem ignis contra aquilonem, quasi ad accendendum adclinem, apparebantque mense Ianuario et duabus ferme septimanis permanebant. Quo tempore grauissima Sarracenorum lues Galles misera caede uastabat, et ipsi non multo post in eadem prouincia dignas suae perfidiae poenas luebant.[28]
>
> In the year of the Lord's incarnation 729, two comets appeared around the sun, striking great fear into those who observed them. One of them went before the sun as it rose in the morning, the other followed as it set in the evening, like forewarnings of terrible disaster for the east and west alike; or certainly one preceded the onset of the day and the other that of the night, so that they indicated that misfortunes threatened mortals at both times. However they bore a flaming torch of fire [i.e. a tail] against the north, as though to set light to the world, and they appeared in the month of January and remained for nearly a fortnight. In that time, a dreadful plague of Saracens laid waste to France with wretched slaughter, and they themselves shortly afterwards in the same province received the punishment their treachery merited.

Bede's standpoint on the status of comets is ambiguous here. The pair of comets are only 'like' forewarnings of disaster, but later he plainly says that they 'indicated' dire misfortunes, identified by implication with the ravages and subsequent misfortunes of the Saracens ('disaster for east and west alike'). It should be noted in passing that Bede's works imply, as we would expect, next to no familiarity with astrology. In the *De rerum natura*, he is simply aware of the signs of the zodiac and commonplace planetary associations: thus Saturn

[27] Bede, *De Rerum Natura*, xiii, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina cxxiii, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera, Pars I: Opera Didascalica* (Turnhout, 1975), p. 216.

[28] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, xxiii, 2, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), p. 556.

possesses a *naturam gelidum*, 'an icy nature', Mars is *feruidum*, 'fiery', whereas Jupiter is *temperatum*, 'moderate, well-balanced'.[29]

Uncertainty and ambivalence on a larger scale attended the interpretation of portents at the courts of Charlemagne and his successors, who presided over a great increase in interest in astronomy in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, as part of the general intellectual and cultural revival known as the Carolingian renaissance.[30] But even in such a learned context, as Scott Ashley has noted, '[t]he pathway events, such as the appearance of a new star, took, from being a symbol, that which has a multiplicity of possible meanings, to being a sign, to which one agreed meaning has been attached, was a complicated one.'[31] In a letter to the Northumbrian ecclesiastic, scholar, and poet Alcuin in the late eighth century, quoted by Ashley, Lupus of Ferrières shows deep uncertainty, rooted in the conflicting statements of classical authors, on the subject of whether the appearance of a comet might imply misfortune, or military success, or indeed anything at all.[32] But in general, we can say that two things are striking about the evidence for the interpretation of portents in the Carolingian era, which stand in illuminating contrast to the Irish annalistic material. The first is that their realm of applicability is the arena of earthly events, including that of secular politics. As with Bede's twin comets, the celestial phenomena seen as portents in some quarters of the Carolingian court are accorded 'mundane' relevance, to borrow an astrological term anachronistically.[33] They can indicate divine judgement, but do not herald the end of the world.[34] The second is that some of them look superficially astrological. For example, the unknown author of the *Vita Hludovici*, usually referred to as 'the Astronomer', and writing in the 840s, described the concern felt by Louis the Pious, King of the Franks and son of Charlemagne, at the appearance of the comet in 837, and the instructions which attended his disquiet:

At vero mediante festivitate paschali dirum semper ac triste portentum, id est cometae sidus, in signo virginis apparuit, in ea parte eiusdem signi, qua penulam eius subtus caudam vero

[29] Bede, *De Rerum Natura*, x, 111. Historians of astrology have seen more in these references than is there, Bede's supposed 'astrology' being nothing more than details culled from Pliny and Isidore. See, for example, N. Campion, 'Astrology in England before the Normans', *Astrology* 56.2 (1982), pp. 51–8, where he tries hard, but I think unsuccessfully, to make Bede out to have been the father of English astrology.

[30] See M. Esposito, 'A Ninth-Century Astronomical Treatise', *Modern Philology* 18.4 (1920), pp. 179–80, for a list of astronomical (or rather computistical) texts studied at the Frankish court.

[31] S. Ashley, 'The Power of Symbols: Interpreting Portents in the Carolingian Empire', *Medieval History* 4 (1996), p. 35.

[32] See Ashley, 'The Power of Symbols', pp. 34–5.

[33] 'Mundane' astrology, one of the ancient subdivisions of the art, is that branch of astrology concerned with the fates of large groups, such as peoples or countries, including their rulers, and with politics in general.

[34] See Ashley, 'The Power of Symbols', p. 42, for the historian Einhard's interpretation of the comet of 837 (which happened to be Halley's comet) as an indication of sin and a warning of imminent divine punishment.

serpentis similiter corvumque constringunt. Quod cum non more errantium septem siderum orientem versus peteret, per viginti quinque dies, quod mirum est dictu, idem sydus et Leonis ac Cancri necnon et Geminorum transiens signa, in capite Tauri tandem sub Aurigae pedes igneum globum iubarumque prolixitatem deposuit, quas usquequaque porrexerat.

Perge, inquid, *in moenia huic domui contigua et nobis quae perspexens nuntia. Novi enim a me hanc stellam nequaquam praeterita vespera visam, vel a te monstratam; sed scio hoc signum cometarum esse, de quo iam praeteritis locuti sumus diebus. Quid autem portendere tibi videatur, edicito.* Cumque aliqua dicerem, et tacuissem; *Unum est,* inquit, *quod adhuc silentio premis. Mutationem enim regni mortemque principis hoc monstrari portento dicitur.*[35]

But in the midst of the Paschal activity an omen, foreboding and sad, appeared in the sign of Virgo, in that part of the sign where under its mantle it shackles the tail of Serpens and Corvus. For twenty-five days it travelled, not towards the east after the manner of the seven wandering stars . . . and passed through the signs of Leo, Cancer, and Gemini.

. . .

'Go,' said the Emperor, 'into the enclosure adjoining this house and report to us what you have observed. For I know that this is a star not seen by me or by you last evening. I am aware that this is a comet such as we have often spoken of in days gone by. Make known, therefore, what it seems to you to portend.' When I spoke about some things and was mute about others, he said: 'There is one thing you are concealing in silence. For they say that by this token a change in the realm and the death of the prince are made known.'

Here the view of comets as portents of the death of kings is, as it were, a given, identical with Bede's *regni mutationem*. Similarly, it is based on classical literature (Pliny once again) rather than being a direct continuation of the astrology of the ancient world, but the astrological tone is potentially misleading.[36] The astronomical learning of the Carolingian court was, however, not entirely unknown to certain Irishmen. The monk and geographer Dícuil's treatise *De astronomia*, composed in 814–16 at the Frankish court, bears the imprint of the Carolingian interest in astronomy and cosmology.[37] Its four books of mixed prose and verse draw strongly upon Solinus, Isidore of Seville, and, especially, Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*. But Dícuil seems to show no awareness of the debate over the interpretation of celestial portents that so concerned the 'Astronomer' and

[35] *Vita Hludovici Imperatoris*, §58 (MGH SS ii, pp. 604–48); the following translation is from *Son of Charlemagne: A Contemporary Life of Louis the Pious*, trans. A. Cabaniss (Syracuse, 1961), pp. 112–14.

[36] For example, the constellations Serpens and Corvus have never had any relevance for astrology, and it is exceptionally difficult to work out the position of a heavenly body within the astrological zodiac simply from observing the actual constellations, which are not the same as the signs for astrological purposes. Flint argues that this material is evidence for a Church-sponsored revival of astrology as an officially sanctioned form of magic (see V. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford 1991), pp. 145–6), but I am unconvinced. The 'astrological' manuscripts available at the time simply did not give enough information (such as tables of longitude) to enable a Frankish astronomer to erect a horoscope. See P. McGurk, 'Carolingian Astrological Manuscripts', in M. Gibson and J. L. Nelson, (eds.), *Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 317–22.

[37] See D. Ó Cróinín, 'Hiberno-Latin Literature to 1169', in Cróinín (ed.), *A New History*, pp. 394–5, for attitudes towards the work of Irish scholars such as Dícuil by non-Irish contemporaries among the Franks, which were not always welcoming.

Louis the Pious two decades later. This may be simply because a discussion of such phenomena was not required in a computistical tract. But on the other hand Dícuil's writing demonstrates the 'scientific' cosmology which was part of the astronomical learning of his Frankish colleagues. Mario Esposito writes in his edition of Dícuil's treatise: 'Among other things the treatise contains rules for finding out what the month is counting from April, and what day of the month, what the moon's ages is, and what days Easter and the beginning of Lent fall upon. The great cycles of the sun and moon, the lunar cycle of nineteen years, the cycles of the stars, and also the length of the solar and lunar years, are discussed.'[38] For example, he gives a list of the relative positions of the planets:

> A terra lunam, luna iam Mercurium atque
> Mercurio Venerem, Venere alto tramite Solem,
> Sole vident Martem, iam Marte Iovemque videbunt,
> Ac Iove Saturnum, Saturno sidera caeli,
> Quot stadia ac lucae quot sunt hic milia nosces.[39]

You will comprehend how many stades and how many thousands of leagues there are from the earth to the Moon, then from the Moon on to Mercury, from Mercury to Venus, from Venus by way of a deep gulf to the Sun; from the Sun they perceive Mars, and then from Mars they will perceive Jupiter, and from Jupiter, Saturn, and from Saturn, the stars of the firmament.

This information is taken directly from Pliny.[40] The expertise in *computus* of early Irish churchmen meant that Dícuil was not a lone example of a cosmologically learned Irishman studying in exile. Rather, *computus* had already been stimulating the minds of Irish ecclesiastics for over two centuries. It had advanced strikingly during the seventh century with the arrival of new learning from Spain, including the works of Isidore.[41] But it does not seem to have brought with it a non-apocalyptic way of thinking about celestial portents.[42] As a result, we can say that the Irish way of considering such phenomena stands apart in several respects. The Irish material is always 'sacred', not secular, in its sphere of applicability. Both Bede and the annalists considered comets to be omens, and thus worth recording. But while for Bede, such portents implied political turmoil, for the Irish churchmen of the seventh to eleventh centuries, they were signs of God's plan for the end of the world, beyond mere temporal affairs. Unlike the learned men of the Frankish court, it seems the annalists made no connection between the

[38] M. Esposito, *Irish Books and Learning in Mediaeval Europe*, ed. M. Lapidge (Aldershot, 1990), pp. 378–9.
[39] Dícuil, *De astronomia*, ii, 1, ed. Esposito, *Irish Books and Learning,* p. 399.
[40] See Esposito, 'A Ninth-Century Astronomical Treatise', p. 180.
[41] For Irish computistics, see Cróinín, 'Hiberno-Latin Literature', in Cróinín (ed.), *A New History*, pp. 390–1.
[42] As Carey notes, the late tenth-century *Saltair na Rann* incorporates material from a lost eighth-century Irish cosmological treatise, perhaps a precursor of Dícuil's. But the poem's conception of signs and portents in the heavens is purely connected with the expectation of Doomsday, as I discuss below. See J. Carey, 'Cosmology in *Saltair na Rann*', *Celtica* 17 (1985), p. 50.

comets and eclipses which they recorded and classical conceptions of the significance of such phenomena. Whilst Carolingian scholars had texts referring to astrology (though not the wherewithal to practise the art), the Irish, despite their expertise in *computus*, maintained a rigidly biblical theory of heavenly *portenta*.[43]

COSMOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE WORKS OF THE IRISH 'AUGUSTINE'

It seems that Dícuil's treatise had little influence even within his immediate circle. As Esposito writes: 'Dicuil's *Computus* appears to have remained totally unknown down to modern times. Later ninth-century writers on the same subject . . . had no knowledge of Dícuil. Indeed the fact that we possess only one MS of his work show that it was a complete failure and was but rarely copied.'[44] But a century and half before Dícuil wrote, the anonymous exegete we know as the 'Irish Augustine' had considered two of the most important biblical portents in his *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*. Called 'Augustine' because his works were long mistakenly ascribed by copyists to Augustine of Hippo, the author of the *De mirabilibus* composed his tract shortly after the middle of the seventh century, probably in the monastery of Lismore.[45] He discusses two biblical 'signs', the eclipse at the crucifixion described in all three synoptic Gospels, and the star of Bethlehem.[46] Of the former, we read:

> Solis defectio iuxta carnem, ut non solet, quando luna accenditur, facta erat; sed in plena luna, scilicet quinta decima die mensis, ne casu putaretur fuisse, quod evenerat: et tantum lucem solis media die tenebrae obscuraverunt, ut per tres illas horas defectionis, stellae in coelo visae sint.[47]
>
> The sun's physical eclipse happened not when the moon was kindled [i.e. at new moon] as is usual, but at the full moon, the fifteenth day of the month, lest it be thought that it had happened by chance. And darkness obscured the sun's light at midday to such an extent that the stars were visible in the sky throughout the three hours of the eclipse.[48]

[43] That Irish churchmen might have long held themselves aloof in eschatological matters is suggested by a Roman chronologist cited in the late seventh-century *Laterculus Malalianus*, and quoted by Ó Cróinín: 'All are agreed that the Lord will have appeared at the end of 6,000 years, although the Irish don't agree – they who believe themselves to have wisdom but who have lost knowledge.' See Cróinín, 'Hiberno-Latin Literature', in Cróinín (ed.), *A New History*, p. 394. See also J. Stevenson, *The 'Laterculus Malalianus' and the School of Archbishop Theodore* (Cambridge, 1995), in which a case is made for Theodore of Canterbury's authorship of the tract.

[44] Esposito, 'A Ninth-Century Astronomical Treatise', p. 182.

[45] See *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings*, trans. J. Carey (Dublin, 1988), p. 51. Henceforth I drop the inverted commas around the name.

[46] For the period of darkness associated with Jesus' crucifixion, see Matt. 27:45, Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44–5.

[47] *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, iii, 13, Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina 35, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1861), col. 2199.

[48] Translation from *King of Mysteries*, trans. Carey, p. 72.

What is remarkable about this passage is that the nature of the event *as a sign* forces Augustine to abandon his usual exegetical methodology. He normally exhibits a remarkable concern to explain miraculous biblical events without invoking God's violation of the rules of his own creation. In this, he is motivated (as Carey tells us), 'not by a reductive rationalism, but by a heartfelt, if idiosyncratic piety'.[49] But the darkness of the synoptic Gospels causes him problems. As an exegete, no doubt familiar with the details of the *computus*, he is aware that the Passover, and thus the crucifixion, took place at the full moon. Thus a concurrent solar eclipse was physically impossible. Augustine makes a virtue of this difficulty, arguing that this unique event was brought about by God specifically so that there could be no doubt that the event was a portent, and not a mere coincidence. A similar difficulty presents itself when he considers the star of Bethlehem:

> Si enim simpliciter stellam accipiendam esse quis maluerit, a caeteris stellis in hoc ducatu quomodo deviavit? Quarum natura ab initio condita, in firmamento coeli constituta fuisse dignoscitur, sicut libri Geneseos auctoritate manifestatur. Si ergo in firmamento coeli maneret, inter Bethlehem et Jerusalem dux fieri ambulantibus qualiter posset? Et si per aera, sagitta more . . . assuetum in firmamento locum et cursum interim desereret. Quod nec majoribus quidem luminaribus accidisse scripturae describunt, cum in signis aut steterunt, aut reversa sunt.[50]
>
> For if one chooses to view it simply as a star, how did it leave the company of the other stars in order to lead (the Magi)? For we know that the nature (of the stars) was set in the beginning, as the authority of the Book of Genesis makes plain. If it therefore remained in the firmament of heaven, how could it be a guide to men walking between Jerusalem and Bethlehem? And if it flew through the air like an arrow . . . it would in the meantime have abandoned its customary position and path in the firmament, something which the scriptures do not describe as happening even in the case of the major luminaries when they are stationary or retrograde in the (zodiacal) signs.[51]

Again, this passage disrupts Augustine's preferred method of explanation. His line of thought shows a considered cosmological awareness, which, once again, presumably derives from the skilled Irish knowledge of the *computus*.[52] This is perhaps suggested by the awkward mixture of scriptural exegesis and scientific learning in the last sentence.[53] In this case, Augustine is forced to fall back on the explanation that the star represented the direct intervention of an angel:

[49] *King of Mysteries*, trans. Carey, p. 51.
[50] *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, iii, 4.
[51] Translation from *King of Mysteries*, trans. Carey, pp. 64–5.
[52] This passage is glossed over by Marina Smyth, who argues that seventh-century Irish cosmology was naively biblical. In fact, Augustine's reasoning here suggests a familiarity with continental learning and some grasp of the cosmology of late antiquity. See M. Smyth, *Understanding the Universe in Seventh-Century Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1996), p. 172, and Ó Cróinín's sharply critical assessment in *The English Historical Review* 113 (1988), pp. 397–8.
[53] The Bible never mentions the signs of the zodiac or the stationary and retrograde positions of the planets therein (with the exception of the word *mazzaroth*, a mysterious *hapax legomenon* occurring at Job 31:2, which may possibly refer to the zodiac, or more simply to the constellations). Further, Augustine displays a telling confusion of terms here. The 'major luminaries' to which he

Nimirum eorum in ista vice angelus dux Magorum efficitur, qui astrologis in stellae similitudinem et clarissimi sideris fulgorem transformatur.

It would have been no wonder if on this occasion, when an angel was made the guide of the Magi, he should for the benefit of those astrologers have been transformed into the semblance of a star, and the radiance of a blazing luminary.[54]

The mention made of astrology here is significant. A fuller examination of the awareness of astrology among the early medieval Irish forms part of the next chapter of this study; but here I would simply suggest that Augustine's acceptance that the Magi were astrologers reflects a long-standing patristic belief. Of the early Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian all regarded the Magi as astrologers, though the issue became more controversial in the early Middle Ages.[55] Augustine appears neither to condemn nor condone astrology here, but he certainly knows what it is.[56] In all, celestial signs in the Bible seem to have been problematic for the author of the *De mirabilibus*, and disruptive to his preferred way of envisioning God's miraculous action within nature. Though his writings quoted here are striking evidence for Irish exegetical consideration of celestial portents and awareness of astrology in the seventh century, he falls back on rather conventional conclusions. When God wishes to create a heavenly sign, he intervenes directly within his creation to make something otherwise impossible happen, or else an angel is dispatched. Paradoxically, it is thus the Irish Augustine's rational knowledge of cosmology that pushes him towards uncharacteristically irrational explanations in this area. Though he does not discuss future portents, which are beyond the scope of his treatise, there is nothing in his view of such signs which is incompatible with the apocalyptic orientation which we saw reflected in the annals.

refers must imply the planets, as the 'fixed' stars can never appear stationary or retrograde. However, the term 'luminary' has always been used to refer to the sun and moon, to the exclusion of the planets. The sun and moon are also never stationary or retrograde. I am unwilling to place too great a weight of interpretation upon a single phrase, but it is possible that this confusion suggests that the author was familiar with certain bits of astrological jargon, perhaps through contacts between southern Ireland and Spain, where Priscillianist texts and teachings were strongly associated with astrology; some Priscillianist apocryphal material seems to have made its way to Ireland. (See Dumville, 'Biblical Apocrypha', p. 322.) If so, Augustine has understood the terminology imperfectly.

[54] Translation from *King of Mysteries*, trans. Carey, p. 65. Note that the word Carey translates as 'luminary' (*sidus*) here is not the same as the 'luminary' the relevance of which I discuss above: English, unlike Latin, does not have two common words for 'star'.

[55] See T. Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London, 1994), pp. 71–3, and Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, pp. 369–75.

[56] Augustine goes on to make an interesting connection with the gentile prophet Balaam of Numbers 22–4, to whom he refers also as an *astrologus*. Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:47, *Orietur stella ex Iacob*, 'A star will arise out of Jacob', is glossed as the light of Christ illuminating the darkness of pagan unbelief. Whilst Balaam is depicted as a diviner in the biblical text, the identification of his art as astrology seems to be Rabbinic. How Augustine could have come across this tradition is unclear to me; possibly the prominence of the star in Balaam's prophecy suggested the idea independently, either to him himself or to one of his sources.

APOCALYPTIC PORTENTS IN THE EARLY IRISH SAGAS

I return now to a consideration of the wider literary effect of this apocalyptic framework on the representation of portents in early medieval Ireland. We saw above that Brogan had mentioned that apocalypticism affected Irish 'secular romances', and I take this to refer to the saga texts. Striking examples of the naturalization of biblical portents are found in two sagas: *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, or 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', the crucial second recension of which dates to the ninth century, and the probably eighth-century *Aided Chonchobuir,* 'The Violent Death of Conchobor'.[57] In the former, Irish society breaks down as a result of a bad judgment by its king, Conaire Mór, who is gradually led to certain death by the mysterious supernatural forces which formerly validated his rulership. Just as Conaire's youth and justice had brought about a kind of agricultural and social golden age (in a common topos), his misjudgement brings universal disaster.[58] The author of the saga uses a subtle apocalyptic allusion to underscore the cosmic nature of the calamity:

Is ed gabsait, seach Huisneach Mide co n-accus íar sin a n-indread anair 7 aníar 7 andeas 7 atúaid, 7 co n-accatar na buidne 7 na slúagu mo seach 7 na firu lomnacht 7 rop nem thened tír Húa Néill immi.

Cid an ní seo? ol Conaire.

Ní anse, ol a munter. Ní duaichnid isí in cháin ro mebaid and in tan ro gabad for loscad in tíre.[59]

[57] For the complex development of *TBDD*, see M. West, 'The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne da Derga*: a Reappraisal of the 'Two-source' Theory', *Celtica* 23 (1999), pp. 413–35. As she tells us, Recension II of *TBDD* is undoubtedly a composite tale, but of a more complex type than has hitherto been assumed. It is probably composed of at least three and possibly many more written and oral versions and variants of the story of the doomed king Conaire Mór. As Knott argues in her edition, Recension II seems to have taken its current textual form during the ninth century. For the dating of *Aided Chonchobuir*, in its four medieval versions, A, B, C, and D, see J. Corthals, 'The *retoiric* in *Aided Chonchobuir*', *Ériu* 40 (1989), pp. 41–60. A poem spoken by Conchobar and appearing in the Book of Leinster and RIA MS 23 N 10 versions is tentatively dated by Corthals to the early eighth century, which suggests that the genesis of the text as a whole is to be placed at some point in that century. T. O. Clancy, in 'Lethal weapon / means of grace: Mess-Gegra's brain in *The Death of Conchobor*', *Æstel* 4 (1996), pp. 87–115, discusses the variants in detail; it is Version A, which he calls 'a short narrative in the concise and careful prose of the early medieval period' (pp. 912), that concerns us here. As he indicates, by the end of the tenth century, three versions of the tale were in existence, A, B, and D. D is a poem ascribed to Cináed úa hArtacáin (d. 975); B and the Book of Leinster version of A contain a poem which Corthals tentatively ascribes to the early eighth century; the language of A and B is of the Old Irish period. This suggests that A and B have the chronological priority among the texts, and date to the eighth century.

[58] See *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. E. Knott (Dublin, 1975), §17, p. 6.

[59] *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, §25–6, p. 8.

They went past Uisnech Mide, and after that they saw forays from the east and from the west, from the south and from the north, and they saw bands of people and hosts going hither and thither, and naked men, and the land of the Uí Néill was a heaven of fire about them.

'What is this?' said Conaire. 'Not difficult', said his people. 'It is easy to see that the law has been broken when the land has been set on fire.'

On the one hand, clearly this image describes an earthly, political calamity: fields being set alight and social displacement in an outbreak of general lawlessness prompted by the failure of the archetypal, validating power of the *fír flathemon*, the 'Ruler's Truth'. On the other, the phrase *nem thened*, 'a heaven of fire', recalls the 'burning sky', which is one of the most frequent portents recorded of the annals, as in the 664 entry quoted above.[60] This alerts us to the fact that *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is, rather like *King Lear*, a text that is in some sense about the end of the world. The failure of the *fír flathemon* sets in motion a series of apocalyptic events which borrows from the 'grammar of apocalyptic imagery' referred to by Emmerson. The recurrent imagery of *néla féimmid*, 'clouds of blood', which the reaver Ingcél Cáech prophesies will befall in a chilling refrain, all recall the Book of Revelation and the annalistic observations in which blood-coloured meteorological phenomena are repeatedly recorded. It is also possible, I suspect, that the three ghastly, entirely red spectral horsemen whom Conaire and his party encounter are inspired by the four horsemen of Revelation 6, 'paganized' by the Celtic penchant for triplism.[61] Of the red horseman of Revelation 6:4, the Vulgate says *datum est ei ut sumeret pacem de terra et ut invicem se interficiant*, which is a strikingly accurate description of the *dénouement* of the tale, in which few escape from Da Derga's hostel alive.[62] Even the escalating tension of the saga, with its obscure sequence of grotesque signs and sinister, half-comprehensible warnings, suggests that portent motifs drawn from apocalyptic literature have been woven into its texture. The description of the interior of the hostel, like the Revelation of St John, is rich in groups of people, often numbered, with symbolic colouration and engaged in repetitive activities.[63]

The appearance of portentous signs in the brief tale *Aided Chonchobuir* provokes the death of Conchobor, king of the Ulaid, in a grotesque and wildly imaginative scenario. The tradition of the end of Conchobor's life represented in

[60] See McCarthy and Breen, 'Astronomical Observations', pp. 39–42 for numerous examples and a discussion of the basis of this imagery in the Book of Revelation.

[61] *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Knott, §30, p. 9.

[62] This association has been suggested by McCone: see K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1990), p. 44. He also shows that the man upon the red horse (*super equum rufum*) of Zecheriah 1:8 may also be relevant here.

[63] It is also possible that the repetitive description and identification of the people who are in the Hostel by Ingcél Cáech and Fer Rogain in §75–140, with its constant verbs of seeing, echoes the visionary structure of the Book of Revelation. Irish churchmen were certainly willing to use the topoi and tropes of visionary texts in the vernacular, as the tenth–eleventh-century *Fís Adomnáin* makes clear, for example.

the four versions of *Aided Chonchobuir* seems to have been created in order to incorporate these signs, and to enable the Ulster king's anachronistic baptism, bringing one of the Ulster Cycle's major players into the Christian fold. What is probably the original tradition of Conchobor's death seems also to be preserved, concealed like a fossil within the *Aided Chonchobuir* itself, however.[64] The unfortunate king is struck in the head by a slingshot wielded by the hero, Cet mac Mágach, and the text then reads:

For brú Átha Daire Dá Báeth is and dorochair Conchobar. Atá a lige and baile i torchair 7 corthe fria chend 7 corthe fria chossa.[65]

The place he fell was the edge of the ford of Daire Dá Báeth. His grave is there where he fell, and a pillar-stone at his head and another at his feet.

This seems likely to be the earliest tradition. In contrast, according to the body of the tale, Conchobor is treated by having the slingshot—which is lodged in his fractured skull, and is itself made of calcified brain-tissue—sewn up into his head. This bizarre and precarious medical arrangement leaves the king's capacity for activity severely curtailed: it is made clear that if he were to have sexual relations or get over-excited, his brain would literally fall out. This unhappy situation continues for seven years. We are then told in version A:

Tanic and side crith mór forsna dúli, 7 rochrithnaid nem 7 talam le mét in gníma dorónad and .i. Ísu Chríst mac Dé do chrochad cen chinaid. 'Craet so?' ar Conchobur fria drúid. 'Cía olc mór dogníther isin lathiu-sa indiú?' 'Is fír on ém', ar in drúi. 'Is mór in gním sin', ar Conchobur. 'In fer sin dano', ar in drúi 'i n-óenaidchi rogein 7 rogenis-[s]iu .i. i n-ocht calde enair cen cop inund bliadain.'

Is andsin rochreiti Conchobar. Ocus issé sin indara fer rochreti do Día i nHérinn ria tiachtain creitmi é .i. Morand in fer aile. 'Maith tra', ar Conchobar. [*Following Edinburgh MS xl from this point*] 'Dofaetsat mile fer n-armach lim-sa ac tesarcain Christ.' Roling iarsin 'chum a di gai 7 rusbertaig co tenn gurromuigiter in adorn 7 rogab iarum a chlaidem ina laim 7 rogab do caillid uime co ndernaig mag don caill .i. Mag Lamrigi a Feraib Rus 7 ised asbert: 'is amlaid so do digolainn-si Crist for Iudalaib 7 for in lucht rochroch he da roisind iat.' Lasin feirg sin roling incinn Miscegra asa cinn co tainic a incind fein fair curbo marb de 7 conid aire sin aderait cach: 'is nemedac[h] Conchobar trit an durtacht doroine Conchobar.'[66]

At that time there came a great trembling over the elements, and heaven and earth shook with the enormity of the deed which was done then, namely the Crucifixion of Christ Son of God without guilt. 'What is this?' said Conchobar to his druids. 'What great evil is being done today on this day?' 'That is true indeed' said the druid. 'Awful is that deed' said Conchobor.

[64] This suggestion was first made by James Carney. See J. Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 296–7.

[65] *Aided Chonchobuir*, ed. and trans. K. Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes* (Dublin, 1906), pp. 6–7.

[66] *Aided Chonchobuir*, ed. and trans. Meyer, pp. 8–11. The section dealing with Conchobor's blundering out into the rain to defend Christ is missing in the Book of Leinster version, but present in the version in Edinburgh MS xl; the Edinburgh text is given in a footnote by Meyer.

'That man, now,' said the druid, 'was born in the same night in which you were born, namely on the eighth night before the calends of January, though not in the same year.' It was then that Conchobor believed. He was one of only two people in Ireland to believe in God before the coming of the Faith, Morann being the other one. 'Well then', said Conchobor, 'I will kill a thousand men to rescue Christ!', and he seized his two spears and shook them so violently they broke in his hands. He drew his sword and attacked the woods around him until it was an empty plain, which is now Mag Lámraige in Fir Ros. 'If I could reach them, this is how I would avenge Christ on the Jews and those who have crucified him.'

His fury caused Mes Gegra's brain to burst out of his head, and his own brain with it, and he died. Everyone now says 'An inhabitant of heaven is Conchobor for the wish which he has uttered'.

But it is the C version of the tale, which Clancy describes as 'an antiquarian combination of various traditions recorded in Versions A and B', which presents us with a more vivid description of celestial signs.[67] C tells the same story as versions A, B, and Cináed úa hArtacáin's poem, D, but presents us with two alternative scenarios. In the first, Conchobor is informed about the Crucifixion, after the event, by a Roman soldier named Altus who is himself a Christian; as a result, he over-exerts himself and expires. Druids and portents do not feature. The second account is then given, which is of more relevance for our purposes. Its description of the events leading to Conchobor's death is very similar to that of the A-version, but the tale is told in a more condensed way. Despite this, it is richer in its deployment of heavenly portents:

Budh Concubur i ndáil 7 maithi fer nÉirenn uime an lá rocrochadh Críst. Antan dodechaidh teimheal forsin ngréin 7 rosúi ésga a ndath fola rofiarfaigh Concubur immorro do Cathbad dúss cid rombátar na dúile. 'Do chomhalta-sa,' ar sé, 'in fer rogéanair a n-óenadchi frit, anosa martar docuirthi(?) fair 7 doradadh a croich hé 7 isé sin chanuid anní sin.'[68]

Conchobor was at a gathering the day that Christ was crucified, and the nobles of the men of Ireland were about him. When darkness came upon the sun, and the moon turned the colour of blood, Conchobor asked Cathbad what was wrong with the elements. 'Your foster-brother', he said, 'the man who was born on the same night as you, he is now undergoing martyrdom, and he has been put on the cross, and that is what that thing portends.'

This gory tale demonstrates how pagan prophecy or magical insight could be freighted with Christian semiology, a theme to which I return in Chapter 2. The A version has picked up the account of the earthquake from Matthew's Gospel, and Conchobor's druids seem to know the cause of this ominous trembling either by instinct or supernatural insight. In the later account in the C version, however, the druids are able to interpret elemental signs, rather than relying on clairvoyant

[67] Clancy, 'Lethal weapon / means of grace', p. 91. Found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum,* which dates to the first half of the fifteenth century, Version C must post-date the other three medieval versions of the tale, and may therefore date to the eleventh century. The language shows Middle Irish developments such as the verbal form *fiarfraigh*, 'he asked', with prosthetic *f*.

[68] *Aided Chonchobuir*, ed and trans. Meyer, pp. 16–17.

insight. This passage depends on the audience's knowledge of Acts 2:16–21, which provides the key to its interpretation. It shows also that an apocalyptic mode of thinking lies behind this incident, though it is, of course, set at the time of the crucifixion. The relevant section is Peter's address to the heckling crowds when the apostles are granted the ability to speak in tongues at the first Pentecost. He explains that the apostles are not drunk, and quotes the prophet Joel:

16: sed hoc est quod dictum est per prophetam Joel:
17: Et erit in novissimis diebus, dicit Dominus, effundam de Spiritu meo super omnem carnem: et prophetabunt filii vestri et filiæ vestræ, et juvenes vestri visiones videbunt, et seniores vestri somnia somniabunt.
18: Et quidem super servos meos, et super ancillas meas, in diebus illis effundam de Spiritu meo, et prophetabunt:
19: et dabo prodigia in cælo sursum, et signa in terra deorsum, sanguinem, et ignem, et vaporem fumi:
20: sol convertetur in tenebras, et luna in sanguinem, antequam veniat dies Domini magnus et manifestus.
21: Et erit: omnis quicumque invocaverit nomen Domini, salvus erit.

This meaning of the C version of the *Aided* hangs on this instance of intertextuality, which superimposes the crucifixion and the second coming in a clever piece of temporal sleight of hand.[69] The description of the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood is a direct verbal echo of Acts 2 (and through it, of Joel 2) alerting us that these are apocalyptic signs, heralding the 'last days', *novissimis diebus*. But according to the timeline of the death-tale, these signs occurred at the moment of the Crucifixion, fifty days before. So more than one New Testament passage has been blended here, with, I think, two probable purposes. First, by evoking the New Testament in this way, pagan druidic prophecy can be ingeniously legitimized. The druids genuinely *can* have insight into these terrifying events, because in the last days the Holy Spirit will apportion the power of prophetic insight more freely.[70] Secondly, Conchobor can be saved with explicit biblical sanction, because by calling out to Christ he fulfils the requirements of Acts 2:21. However, the confusion of time-periods is theologically awkward,

[69] The description of the Passion in Matthew's Gospel shows a similar freighting of the Crucifixion with eschatological imagery, in order to emphasize its cosmic significance. In Matthew 27:52–3, at the moment of Christ's death, the tombs burst open: *multa corpora sanctorum*, 'many bodies of the saints', are resurrected and come into Jerusalem, anticipating the Last Judgement. The problem of these prematurely revived dead deeply troubled the Irish Augustine; see *De Mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae*, iii, 14. The account of the eclipse from the sixth to the ninth hour in the synoptic gospels almost certainly also draws on Joel 2; *Aided Chonchobuir*'s temporal 'sleight of hand', as I have termed it, thus also has a biblical precedent.

[70] Presenting druids as possessed of a measure of natural grace is not unique to *Aided Chonchobuir*, but this tale is unusual in that the biblical intertext discussed here provides a pneumatological explanation for their skills. For the literary depiction of druids as quasi-Old Testament prophets, see T. M. O. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 197–8.

because Conchobor dies before the Resurrection. Indeed the author of the *Aided* places him in hell (*iffern*) until its harrowing by Christ, but as he has undergone a form of baptism when his own blood spurted over his head, he is taken to Heaven along with the just of the Old Testament.[71] But he is unlike the patriarchs, kings, and prophets, because he has known Christ and believed before death, making him something of a Christian *avant la lettre*. A case could be made that Conchobor is therefore in much the same situation *theologically* as the repentant thief of Luke 23:42–3, who is explicitly assured by Jesus that he will enter paradise 'today'; like Conchobor, he believes in Christ before death and is thus saved, despite dying before the central mystery of Christianity—the Resurrection—takes place. In all, it is possible to argue that we see a kind of rapprochement underway in *Aided Chonchobuir*, whereby Christ and the king of the Ulstermen can come to a harmonious accord; hence presumably the detail that they are born on the same day in the A version of the tale, and are 'foster-brothers' in the C version.[72] It is striking that the imagery of celestial *portenta* interpreted by druids occurs in the latest version of the tale. This may anticipate the growth of interest in depicting modes of druidic divination which developed in the twelfth century, and which I examine in Chapter 2. But first we must turn back from secular saga towards an examination of cosmological signs and wonders in the hagiography of early medieval Ireland, in which druids also feature; but this time as sinister magicians and workers of prodigies.

PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN *SIGNA ET PORTENTA*

In our examination of *Aided Chonchobuir* above, we saw how druidic prophecy could be cunningly legitimized by the intertextual evocation of certain passages in the Book of Joel and Acts of the Apostles. Though druids could be pressed into service in secular saga as prophets or visionaries of the truth of Christian

[71] See *Aided Chonchobuir*, ed. and trans. Meyer, pp. 16–17.

[72] We might compare the rather less harmonious words of Óengus mac Óengobann, Óengus the Culdee, in lines 61–2 of his famous Martyrology, *Félire Óengusso*, which was written about the year 800:

> Mórríg inna gente
> Bithgolait il-loscad.
>
> The great kings of the pagans
> wail for ever in burning.

(*Félire Óengusso Céli Dé: the martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, ed. and trans. W. Stokes (London, 1905), p. 19.) This seems unequivocal about the damnation of pagan rulers to my eyes, but for an alternative view, see B. Lambkin, 'Blathmac and the Céili Dé: A Reappraisal', *Celtica* 23 (1999), p. 146.

revelation, this was certainly *not* the case in the earliest Irish hagiographical material, in which the power of these pagan priest-magicians functions metonymically as the prime symbol for the unconverted nature of the island. In battles with pagan wonder-workers, the saint (or rather, God through the saint) accomplishes 'vertical' miracles, often involving the weather, which make a cosmological statement. They dramatically show that the Christian God is the controller of the universe and the wielder of ultimate power over it, and the miracle thus becomes a vindication of a certain view of the nature of the cosmos. Some stress is laid by three of the four earliest named Irish hagiographers on the druids' capacity to produce specious miracles which appear to show their control over nature and over the heavens in particular. The first two of this trio of hagiographers are the authors of the two earliest extended Patrician texts, namely Tírechán, whose rather diffuse writings about St Patrick Ludwig Bieler usefully entitled the *Collectanea*, and Muirchú, who produced the *Vita Patricii*, the first 'Life' of Ireland's patron saint.[73] The third is of course Adomnán of Iona, whose *Vita S. Columbae* is the earliest life of Ireland's second-greatest male saint, Columba. All three date to the second half of the seventh century, or very slightly after in the case of Adomnán, but some difficulties with dating remain, especially for Tírechán and Muirchú's writings. It is reasonably certain that Tírechán's *Collectanea* should probably be placed after 665.[74] Muirchú's *Vita Patricii* likely follows: though any date between 661 and 700 is possible, according to Bieler, Kim McCone has argued that Muirchú's *Vita* is post-675.[75] Finally, Adomnán's *Vita* is probably the last of these three texts and the most secure in date, having being composed not later than 704.[76] As Richard Sharpe has pointed out, this early hagiographical richness fades quickly, and only a few early lives refer to saints who lived after around 640.[77] Though these sources are heterogeneous in geographical origin, use of Latin, style, and purpose, they all share the 'backward look' towards an already passed age of saints. And of course, all three pose serious problems as sources for contemporary historiography; Tírechán and Muirchú are problematic because of the lack of facts concerning Patrick beyond those in his own writings, the *Confessio*, and the *Epistola ad Coroticum*, though Adomnán falls into a somewhat different category, as he may well have had formal *testimonia* relating to Columba's life and it is likely that he also had access to Cumméne's

[73] See *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), ed. L. Bieler, pp. 38–9 for the use of this title.

[74] For the dating of Tírechán, see K. McCone, 'Brigit in the Seventh Century: a Saint with Three Lives?', *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp.108–11. However, there is debate on the issue of dating; see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 9–10, where a date of *c.*690 is preferred.

[75] McCone, 'Brigit in the Seventh Century', pp. 108–9.

[76] See Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, ed. A. O. and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (Edinburgh, 1961), p. 96, where a date of composition between the years 688 and 692 is put forward. Sharpe suggests that the text must post-date the Synod of Birr, which took place in 697. See *The Life of St Columba*, trans. R. Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 55.

[77] R. Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives* (Oxford, 1981), p. 9.

lost description of the saint's miracles, written in the second quarter of the seventh century.[78] Nevertheless, not even Adomnán's text can be treated as anything like a historically secure document because its major purpose is to demonstrate the sanctity of the founder of the monastic community at Iona by describing his miracles.[79]

Scenes of conflict between pagan wonderworkers and Christian saints seem to be an Irish innovation among the imported rules and conventions that came to the island with the hagiographical genre. Early medieval hagiographical texts from the Continent occasionally mention magicians or sorcerers as guardians of pagan cult centres, but the emphasis is not on their power to perform supernatural wonders. In Ireland, a new topos developed: the druid as pagan magician appears as an important figure in the early hagiographical corpus, able to raise winds, bring fog and snow, or call down supernatural darkness. But the druid's ability in this regard is solely evil, and the set-piece encounter between druid and saint necessarily involves the saint visibly and publically breaking the power of wicked, pagan magic.[80] In the *Vita Patricii,* for example, the second day of 'battle' between Patrick and the druid Lucet Máel turns upon elemental contests, in each of which Patrick conclusively demonstrates the narrowness and feebleness of his opponent's abilities. The druid is able to bring about snow and darkness—but when challenged, he can only remove it at a given hour the following day. Strangely, it is not so much the *nature* of the supernatural act as the way it is viewed that differentiates druid and saint: in the *Collectanea*, Tírechán has the druids term their weather-magic *signa*, which here means 'act of magic, enchantment' but which implies something like Ashley's concept of the 'bad portent' as opposed to the 'good miracle' as well, echoing Christ's words at Luke 21.[81] The saint's response to the *signa* is to demonstrate the false basis of the druid or druids' arrogance, and the speciousness of their 'miracle':

[78] For a discussion of Adomnán's assent to and use of the likely political perspectives of Cumméne's text, see J. E. Fraser, 'St Columba and the Convention at Druimm Cete: Peace and Politics at Seventh-century Iona', *Early Medieval Europe* 15.3 (2007), pp. 315–34, especially pp. 323ff. See also his 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts', *Peritia* 17–18 (2003–4), pp. 183–98.

[79] See T. O. Clancy, 'Personal, Political, Pastoral: The Multiple Agenda of Adomnán's Life of St Columba', in E. J. Cowan and D. Gifford (eds.), *The Polar Twins* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 39–60, and for an overview of the issues determining the historical value of the *VSC*, see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 13–35.

[80] For a discussion of the differences between the Irish and the earlier continental hagiographical conventions, see J.-M. Picard, 'The Marvellous in Irish and Continental Saints' Lives of the Merovingian Period', in H. B. Clarke and M. Brennan (eds.), *Columbanus and Merovingian Monasticism* (London, 1981), p. 93.

[81] Tírechán, *Collectanea*, ed. and trans. L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 139: '*Faciamus signa super hunc campum maximum'*, 'We shall create signs/portents/miracles over this vast plain'. This meaning of *signum* presumably derives from Deuteronomy 26:8, *et eduxit nos de Aegypto . . . in ingenti pavore in signis atque portentis*, but the same semantic shift is seen also in Welsh *swyn*, 'enchantment', <Br. Latin *sēgnum* for classical *signum*.

Et paulo post inuocatis demonibus induxit magus densissimas tenebras super terram in signum et mormurauerunt omnes. Et ait sanctus: 'Expelle tenebras'. At ille similiter non poterat. Sanctus autem orans benedixit et reppente expulsae sunt tenebrae et refulsit sol, et exclamauerunt omnes et gratias egerunt.[82]

And a little later the druid, through the invocation of demons, brought a thick fog over the land as a sign, and the people muttered angrily. And the holy man said: 'Remove the fog'; but again the other was not able to do so. The holy man, however, prayed, blessed (the place), and the fog was dispelled at once and the sun shone again and all the people cheered and gave thanks.

The druids only partially control the elements which they manipulate by demonic agency, and their magic is also simply pointless, bringing no benefits for human life, as is underlined by the detail that the assembled spectators cheer roundly when Patrick's prayers restore the sunlight. The contest is allegorical of the entire process of conversion, as the sun/darkness motif is drawn from the same symbolism that leads Tírechán to term Patrick *lucifer*, one who brings the sunlight of the faith. The contest represents a cosmic struggle—which is really no struggle at all—between God's power and the power of demons, lying behind the battle between saint and druid. Further, the importance of control over the elements is central to the next trial in the *Vita Patricii*, whereby the druids, reluctant to throw their books into water, suggest that Patrick has some special and particular power over that substance. The same protest then occurs with fire. As Thomas O'Loughlin writes:

Muirchú has formulated a sophisticated model for the relationship of Christianity to the former religion through the use of Old Testament images of the relationship of the God of Israel to that of 'the gods of the nations' around them. Each has his experts, each an elaborate cult, each has books, prophecies and an awareness of the dependence of humanity on a higher being. Because of these common elements both can enter into a trial together with the hope that the best/the true will win.[83]

As in the *VSC*, we find a paradoxical anxiety about the nature of the atmosphere in these contests between druid and saint. In one sense, the atmosphere is the site of the in-breaking of the Heavenly Kingdom, as made manifest in the numerous miracles of fire and the angelic visitations in Adomnán's account; but in another sense, the sublunary lower airs are simultaneously the haunt of demons. The druids in the *Vita Patricii* were able to manipulate the weather by invoking demons; the Pictish *magus* (druid) Broíchán does much the same in the *VSC*:

Broichanus e contra, 'Non poteris,' ait; 'nam ego ventum tibi contrarium facere, caliginemque umbrosam superinducere possum.' Sanctus, 'Omnipotentia Dei,' ait, 'omnium dominatur, in cujus nomine nostri omnes motus, ipso gubernante, diriguntur.' Quid plura? Sanctus die eadem,

[82] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, i, 20 (19); Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, pp. 94–5.

[83] T. O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's Tara-event within its Background as a Biblical "Trial of Divinities",' in J. Cartwright (ed.), *Celtic Hagiography and Saints' Cults* (Cardiff, 2003), p. 132.

sicut corde proposuit, ad lacum Nesae fluminis longum multa prosequente caterva, venit. Magi vero gaudere tum coepere, magnam videntes superinductam caliginem, et contrarium cum tempestate flatum. Nec mirum haec interdum arte daemonum posse fieri, Deo permittente, ut etiam venti et aequora in asperius concitentur.[84]

Broíchán said, 'On the contrary, you will not be able [to do so], for I can make the winds unfavourable to your voyage, and call into being a shadowy mist.' Upon this the saint observed: 'The almighty power of God rules all things, and in His name and under His guiding providence all our movements are directed.' What more need I say? That same day, the saint, accompanied by a large number of followers, went to the long lake of the river Nes, as he had intended. Then the druids began to exult, seeing that a great fog had come into being, with a contrary wind and violent weather. Nor should we wonder that God sometimes allows that winds and waters may be violently agitated with the aid of evil spirits.

Adomnán goes on to compare a similar incident in the *Vita S. Germani* of Constantius of Lyons, written around 480, and it is probable that this text is the inspiration for this episode in the *VSC*. It may also have been one of the channels by which the idea that demons throng in the lower atmosphere came to early medieval Ireland, but the specific link between bad weather, demons, and druids or *magi* appears to be an Irish invention.[85] Whether it tells us anything of the historical druids themselves is an open question, and one which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2.[86] The concept of the demon-haunted lower atmosphere has a considerable pedigree, which Flint has discussed at length. She shows that demons associated with the air were unknown in the Old Testament, but phrases such as St Paul's *principem potestatis aeris huius spiritus qui nunc operatur in filios diffidentiae*, 'the prince of the power of air, this spirit which now works in the sons of disobedience', in Ephesians 2:3, were taken to imply that the devil especially favoured high places and the lower air, which combined easily with beliefs about the sublunary dwelling places of the more neutral *daimones* or divine spirits of the classical world. Isidore of Seville expressed his belief that demons resided in the lower air awaiting the Day of Judgement, and Augustine had strongly emphasized their attraction to damp vapours.[87] Adomnán notes that God allows such demons to make mischief to try the virtue of believers. So there is a paradox here, because the power of the saint is not (in theory, at least) inherent, but is God's power working through him; and God can, as it were, choose not to act. Within the world of the early Irish hagiographical text, the druids do in fact genuinely have supernatural powers thanks to demonic agency, and so a balance must be maintained in these 'contest' narratives between allowing the demons some power, and preserving God's freedom; otherwise

[84] *VSC*, ii, 35. See also Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 194–5.
[85] In the *Vita S. Germani*, demons cause the bad weather at sea, but no pagan magicians are involved.
[86] The linkage of druids with mists, fogs, and clouds is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
[87] See Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, pp. 101–4 and 146–57.

the story would lack all trace of narrative tension. Hence we find peculiarities such as the fact that Muirchú's druids are able to make snow on command but cannot remove it until the next day. Not only is attention drawn to their inability to achieve anything positive, but their power is made to seem awkwardly circumscribed and strangely contingent.

However, when no such competition is involved, the hagiographer is of course at liberty to demonstrate God's omnipotence via a heavenly sign in the most direct way imaginable. In Muirchú's *Vita*, the angel Victorinus prophesies to Patrick concerning the miracles that will accompany his death:

'Et contra noctem terminum pones', quia in illa die mortis eius nox non erat et per duodecim dies in illa prouincia in qua mortis eius exequiae peractae sunt nox non inruit et fuscis tellurem non amplexerat alis et pallor non tantus erat noctis et astriferas non induxerat Bosferus umbras; et plebs Ulod dixit quod usque in finem anni totius in quo aibierat numquam noctium tales tenebrae errant quales antea fuerunt . . .

Si quis autem terminum contra noctem et noctem non uissam esse in tota prouincia breui tempore in quo luctus Patricii peractus est abnegare infideliter uoluerit, audiat et diligenter attendat qualiter Ezechiae languenti in horolagio Acaz demonstrato sanitatis indico (sol per decem lineas recurrens ostensus sit paene duplicito die et sicut sol contra Gabaon et luna contra uallem Achilon stetit. . . .)[88]

'And you will suspend nightfall' (said the angel). For on the day of the day of his death there was no night, and for twelve days night did not fall in the province in which his exequies were celebrated, and it did not enfold the earth with its dark wings, and night was not so pale and Hesperus did not send the shadows which bring along the stars; and the people of the Ulstermen say that to the end of the entire year in which he had deceased the nights were never as dark as they used to be . . .

If, however, any person should be inclined to deny that night was suspended and that in the whole province no night was witnessed during the short time while Patrick was being mourned, let him hear and note carefully how Hezechiah in his illness, as a sign of recovery, was shown the sun going back over ten lines of the sundial of Achaz so that the day was nearly doubled, and how the sun stood still against Gabaon and the moon against the valley of Achilon.

Whereas the contests between druidic magic and Christian miracle demonstrated to the pagans God's omnipotence over the cosmos within the narratives themselves, this sign is directed outwards to the reader, proving God's omnipotence to us, the audience or readers. Several aspects of this passage are notable; the first is that of all the miracles in the Patrician dossier, this is the most grand and cosmic in scale, and Muirchú has chosen to use a particularly heightened and poetic register, with the epic imagery of personified night with its dark wings, and the unusual, evocative words *astriferas* and *Bosferus*. But he almost seems to forget himself and describes this miraculous celestial sign in terms of Patrick's own agency rather than that of God, saying '*You* will suspend nightfall', as though

[88] Muirchú, *Vita Patricii*, ii, 8 (7); *The Patrician Texts*, ed. Bieler, pp. 118–19.

Patrick was once again engaging with the pagan sorcerers on equal terms. Finally, this miracle—like that of the appearance of the angel Victorinus in the burning bush that frames it within the hagiographical narrative—is explicitly and boldly set within the context of biblical precedents. Muirchú confronts readers who might feel that the stopping of the sun for twelve days strains their credulity, and reminds us that the Bible demonstrates that God has been pleased 'to use the heavenly bodies as signs and even as determinants', as Flint puts it.[89]

THE MEDIEVAL IRISH 'DOOMSDAY SCENARIO'

Such biblical signs and wonders are drawn upon, then, by both the annalistic observations of the earlier period, with their fondness for double portents, and by the writers of the earliest Irish hagiography: in particular, Acts 2:19–20, as well as Luke 21, were clearly formative texts for the way in which the Irish annalists thought about heavenly signs. This biblical way of thinking about celestial *prodigia* was clearly also available for deployment within secular saga-texts; as we have seen, *Aided Chonchobuir* closely echoed the kinds of portents that appear in the annals. I argued above that the striking Ros Ela interpolation in the annals—with its fiery round-tower and sinister black bird—hinted that a gradual shift of mentality took place as the centuries passed, involving the naturalization of apocalyptic imagery and its elaboration into more complex literary sign-sequences. The creation of such sequences was not in itself original, as the raw material was present in Lactantius, the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, as well as in the canonical Book of Revelation. However, the combination of learning and vivid imagination brought to bear upon that material was distinctively Irish. It is this mixture which is so striking in the two texts which present us with elaborate sign-sequences, the ninth-century homiletical treatise *In Tenga Bithnua*, or 'The Ever-new Tongue', and the late tenth-century collection of poems on biblical themes known as *Saltair na Rann*, which we have already encountered.[90] This change in the way in which the signs of the 'end-time' were conceived also made its mark upon secular literature, and prophesied sign-sequences appear in two secular texts. The first is the ninth-century mythological saga *Cath Maige Tuired*, 'The Battle of Moytura', and the second is *Immacallam in dá Thuarad*, 'The Two Sages'

[89] Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, p. 140.

[90] The most conservative recension of *In Tenga Bithnua* is found in the fifteenth-century Book of Lismore; the edition is *In Tenga Bithnua,* ed. W. Stokes, *Ériu* 2 (1905), pp. 96–162. The ninth-century dating is suggested by John Carey, 'The Sun's Night Journey: A Pharaonic Image in Medieval Ireland', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57 (1994), p. 14. Whilst Carey is the most recent scholar to examine the text, it should be noted that Whitley Stokes preferred a tenth- or eleventh-century date. As for *Saltair na Rann*, Gearóid Mac Eoin's dating of the text to the year 988 still stands, despite recent challenges. See G. Mac Eoin, 'Observations upon *Saltair na Rann*', *ZCP* 39 (1982), pp. 1–28. See also the online ed. and trans. by D. Greene, <http://www.celt.dias.ie/publications/online/saltair_na_rann> (accessed 23 September 2007).

Colloquy', the tenth-century tale of the contention of the poets Néde and Ferchertne, a large proportion of which is allusive verse of deep obscurity.[91] It will be apparent from the foregoing that the *Immacallam* may be close in date to *Saltair na Rann*, and indeed there is a particularly close relationship between the imagery of these texts at some points. I begin by discussing the two overtly religious texts, and then move on to the two secular tales, in order to clarify their relationships.

In Tenga Bithnua—one of the strangest and most oblique of all Irish medieval religious writings, an area not short of quirky texts—is a difficult work to categorize and exhibits numerous peculiar features. It is likely to be based upon a lost Latin *Apocalypse of Philip*, in yet another sign of the richness of the apocryphal materials known to the early Irish church.[92] As John Carey writes, '[it] consists for the most part of a colourful and exotic description of the universe, loosely structured to fit the seven days of creation; this description is introduced by an account of how its doctrines were revealed by the disembodied voice of the apostle Philip, speaking from heaven to a multitude of dignitaries assembled on Mount Zion.'[93] From this lost *Apocalypse*, a series of terrifying signs are drawn:

> Cucligiu 7 maidm inna .u. nime occa filliud for talmanda. Comeirge 7 toirm inna secht ngaeth tentidhe a mimasclaigib nimhe la fuaim 7 tethacht thorainn 7 luachait da cach aird. Torandfadach inna cóic rind sechtmogat ar .ccc. ar teora milib, do thutim asind nim. In t-esca do shoudh i ndath fola. In grian do dhith a soilse.[94]
>
> The tottering and breaking of the five heavens as they bend down upon the lands. The rising and the tumult of the seven fiery winds from the four cardinal points of heaven, with roaring and the coming of thunder and lightning from every side. The thundering of the 3,375 stars as they fall from heaven. The moon turning the colour of blood. The sun quenching its light.

Once again, the darkened sun and bloody moon of Acts 2 appear, but framed within a more complex sequence of signs, drawn in part from Luke 21. The text retains something of the teeming, insistent quality of a Gnostic treatise, and Carey has drawn attention to the boldness of its premise, noting that 'far from being simply a commentary on the testimony of the Bible, it purports to be a

[91] For the dating of these two texts, see *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. and trans. E. A. Gray (Naas, 1982), p. 11, and *Immacallam in Dá Thuarad*, ed. W. Stokes, *RC* 26 (1905), p. 5. The dating of both is somewhat tentative; in particular, *Cath Maige Tuired* is generally considered to be an eleventh- or twelfth-century redaction of a text originally composed in the ninth century; an extra layer of textual complication is added because the manuscript in which the saga is contained is written in a late and peculiar orthography.

[92] See *In Tenga Bithnua*, ed. Stokes, pp. 96–7, and Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, pp. 33 and 65. Heist writes: 'To the inexpert eye, it looks very much an attempt to make of Philip a sort of Christian Enoch, for the material is mainly the same kind of cosmological and scientific matter that fills the *Book of Enoch*.'

[93] Carey, 'The Sun's Night Journey', p. 14.

[94] *In Tenga Bithnua,* ed. W. Stokes, pp. 136–8.

separate heavenly revelation, unveiling all of the mysteries of the universe.'[95] It was presumably intended to be delivered as a homily as part of the Easter vigil, when the events which it describes are set. It is thus intended for an ecclesiastical, learned audience. The same is true of *Saltair na Rann*, in which the description of the signs before the Day of Judgement has grown tremendously. The audience for these poems would almost certainly have been clerics who were familiar with the stories themselves, and thus at leisure to appreciate the poet's art in handling these tales in intricate, metrical verse.[96] The signs are given, as in *In Tenga Bithnua*, for the seven days preceding Doomsday. But the signs of the *Saltair* are more complicated than those of the homiletic treatise, incorporating numerous imaginative details. Many of these are drawn from the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, but some are likely to be inventions by the author. A fairly typical example is as follows:

> Ticfa nél derg teinntide
> a tuaisciurd nime ninaig
> gránna gér garb geintide,
> lethfaid dar talmain tinaig.
>
> Ticfa fleochud fuilidi
> asind niúl dorcha dogor,
> trúag deochair diar cuirib-ne.
> línfaid in nhuili ndomon.[97]
>
> A red fiery cloud will come
> From the north of shining heaven;
> Hateful, sharp, harsh, heathen,
> It will spread out over the many-sided earth.
>
> A bloody rain will come
> Out of the dark, sad cloud—
> A pitiful trouble to our hosts—
> It will fill the whole world.

In Tenga Bithnua and the signs of judgement in *Saltair na Rann* are thus both likely to have been intended for a monastic audience familiar with a range of apocryphal texts, and with a keenly millenarian outlook. In this, they closely reflect the 'symbolic orientation' of the annalistic observations, but they also show the channelling of apocalyptic expectations into literature. *Saltair na Rann*,

[95] *King of Mysteries*, trans. Carey, p. 75. As a purely subjective judgement, this authoritative, apocalyptic quality means that the reader of *In Tenga Bithnua* is sometimes disconcertingly put in mind of the Qu'ran.

[96] See K. Hughes, 'The Irish Church, 800–*c.*1050', in Cróinín (ed.), *A New History*, p. 650.

[97] *Saltair na Rann*, ed. and trans. D. Greene, <http://www.celt.dias.ie/publications/online/saltair_na_rann/> (accessed 1 October 2009), ll. 8025–32. As this reference makes clear, editions of the text are not wholly satisfactory. In quotations from the *Saltair*, I use David Greene's edition and translation, as yet only available in electronic form. See also *Saltair na Rann* (strophes 153–62), ed. and trans. Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, pp. 2–3. Heist's text of the 'Doomsday' strophes, though based on Stokes' 1883 edn, adds linguistic glosses and Kuno Meyer's emendations. Greene tends to follow Heist closely.

in particular, successfully achieves a form which includes vividly creative imagery without compromising the solemn profundity of its subject matter.

Our two secular texts are rather different. *Cath Maige Tuired* concludes with a double prophecy by the Morrígan, the war-goddess, one half describing the world's fulfilment, and the other its collapse, and the overturning of the natural and social orders:

'Nach scél laut?' ar cách friai-se ann suide.

'Sith co nem. Nem co doman. Doman fo nim, nert hi cach, án forlann, lan do mil, mid co saith. Sam hi ngam . . .

. . .

Boí-si íarum oc taircetul deridh an betha ann beus, 7 oc tairngire cech uilc nobíad ann, 7 cech teadma 7 gac[h] díglau; conid ann rocachain an laid-se sís:

'Ní accus bith nombeo mbaid: sam cin blatha, beto bai cin blichda, mna can feli, fir gan gail. Gabala can righ rinna ulcha ilmoigi beola bron, feda cin mes. Muir can toradh. Tuir bainbthineimmat moel rátha, fás a forgnam locha diersit- dinn atrifit – linn lines sechilar flaithie faoilti fria holc, ilach imgnath gnuse ul-. Incrada docredb-cluind ili, imairecc catha, toebh fri ech delceta imda dala braith m-c flaithi forbuid bron sen saorbretha. Brecfásach mbrithiom-braithiomh cech fer. Foglaid cech mac. Ragaid mac i lligie a athar. Ragaid athair a lligi a meic. Cliamain cech a brathar. Ni sia nech mnai assa tigh. Gigniot- cenmair olc aimser immera mac a athair, imera ingen . . .[98]

'Have you any news?' everyone asked her then.

'Peace up to heaven.
Heaven down to earth.
Earth beneath heaven,
Strength in each,
A cup very full,
Full of honey;
Mead in abundance.
Summer in winter . . .

She also prophesied the end of the world, foretelling every evil that would occur then, and every disease and every vengeance; and she chanted the following poem:

'I shall not see a world
Which will be dear to me:
Summer without blossoms,
Cattle will be without milk,
Women without modesty,
Men without valour.
Conquests without a king . . .
Woods without mast.
Sea without produce . . .
False judgements of old men.

[98] *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, pp. 70–3.

> False precedents of lawyers,
> Every man a betrayer.
> Every son a reaver.
> The son will go to the bed of his father,
> The father will go to the bed of his son.
> Each his brother's brother-in-law.
> Nobody will seek a woman outside his house . . .
> An evil time. Son will deceive his father
> Daughter will deceive . . . '

The choice of the Morrígan, the divinity of carrion and carnage, as the speaker of this sibylline prophecy is problematic. On the one hand, no one could be more appropriate as a harbinger of disaster; but, on the other, she is a strange figure to have deliver the first, positive, prophecy. A parallel, and possibly a direct connection, may exist between the Morrígan's prophecy and the Sibyls of classical legend. In the *De civitate Dei*, Augustine of Hippo had provided a translation into Latin hexameters of the famous Greek acrostic verses attributed to the Erythraean Sibyl, prophesying the disasters of Doomsday.[99] Augustine's popularity made these verses widely known, and indeed until Heist's research, they were thought to be among the primary sources for the tradition of the Fifteen Signs, to which they bear some resemblance.[100] It is not impossible that the otherwise puzzling choice of the Morrígan (a female, pagan figure) as prophet of Doomsday is related to these famous verses, albeit by some indirect route.[101] Be that as it may, the most striking feature of her prophecy is its focus on social anxieties, which are given a cosmic dimension through the inclusion of agricultural details. The Morrígan's dire predictions are of the breakdown and transgression of social bonds accompanied by the failure of Ireland's fertility, and thus they are unlike the signs of *Saltair na Rann* or *In Tenga Bithnua*. Her *deridh an betha* also fails to mention the Last Judgement, or, indeed, God in any way. This has led scholars to see her prophecy as rooted in native traditions featuring some kind of final cosmic disaster, rather than Christian eschatology.[102]

It is notable that the *Immacallam* shares this concern with moral and social collapse at the world's end. The tale describes the contention of two poets, one young, one old, for the chair of Emain Machae. In the course of their riddling encounter, the younger poet, Néde, prophesies bounty and fertility, and the older, Ferchertne, prophesies disaster:

[99] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, xviii, 23, Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 41, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1861), col. 579.

[100] See Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, pp. 58–9.

[101] In the ninth–tenth centuries, and thus in the same period as *Saltair na Rann* and the secular tales discussed here, it seems to have become traditional in southern Spain for the Sibylline prophecy to be *sung* as part of the Christmas matins.

[102] For example, John Carey makes a valiant case for such a druidic eschatology in 'Saint Patrick, the Druids, and the End of the World', *History of Religions* 36.1 (1996), pp. 42–53.

Soifid esbretha 7 fingala ir-rigu 7 tigernu. Soifid digaire 7 rosire i mmenmain cech dune, conna fogenat mogaid na cumala a comdedu, cona cechlat ríg na tigerna itge a tuath nach a cocerta, conna coistifet ind airchinnig fria manchu 7 a mmuntera, conna fodéma in císaige éraic a dligid dia fhlaith conna fogéna in manach dia dilius a eclais 7 a apaid ndligthech, cona fodema in ben brethir a cétmuntire uaste, conna fogenat maic 7 ingena a n-athre nach a mmáthre, cona urérset felmaic a fithithre.[103]

Wrong judgements and kin-slaying will pass into kings and lords. Undutifulness and anger will pass into the mind of each person, so that neither male slaves nor female slaves will serve their masters; so that neither kings nor lords will hear the prayers of their tribes or their judgements; so that the heads of churches will not listen to their ecclesiastical tenants and their communities; so that the person liable to tribute will not allow the payment of his due to his lord; so that the ecclesiastical tenant will not serve his own church and rightful abbot; so that the wife will not endure her first-husband's word over her; so that sons and daughters will not serve their fathers or their mothers; so that pupils will not rise up (respectfully) before their teachers.

As in *Cath Maige Tuired*, the apocalypse is envisioned by imagining the disintegration of human society, but especially with the collapse of the professional classes and diminution of the status of poets. Unlike the Morrígan, Ferchertne goes on to describe an overtly Christian apocalypse, including elements of the Irish Antichrist legend which, as we saw, lie behind the Ros Ela interpolation.[104]

Ticfair iarsain aireda geine Ancríst,
Gignitir in cach thuaith toraithair,
Tosoifet fria sruthu sruthlinne,
Suifid aicde i n-orthdathu
Suifid usce i finblassu,
Suifid antrenna i n-óglanna,
Soifid móna hi scothshemmair,
Forloiscfitir etir slébib sathemain.
Arfuiset tuli mara on trath co araile.
Ticfait iarsin .uii. [m]bliadna dorcha.
Docelat lésbaire nime. . . .
Bid bráth, a meicc; mora scela,
scela huatha, olcc amser.[105]

Thereafter will come the signs of Antichrist's birth. In every people, monsters will be born. Streampools will turn against streams. Horsedung (?) will turn into gold-colours. Water will

[103] *Immacallam*, ed. Stokes, pp. 42–3.

[104] The surviving texts of the Irish Antichrist legend all post-date the *Immacallam*. Two notable examples of the tradition are found in a homily on St Michael in the Leabhar Breac and another in the Book of Lismore, both of which date from the early fifteenth century; both examples are discussed at length in the second chapter of this book. Nevertheless, it is clear that the tradition was familiar to the author of the *Immacallam* in the tenth century, as to the author of the Ros Ela interpolation in the eleventh. See Heist, *The Fifteen Signs*, pp. 93–5.

[105] *Immacallam*, ed. Stokes, pp. 48–9.

turn into tastes of wine. Mountains will turn into level lands. Bogs will turn into flowery clover. Swarms of bees will be burnt among uplands. The floodtides of the sea will delay from one day to another. Thereafter seven dark years will come. They will hide the lamps of heaven. . . . It will be the Judgement, my son. Great tidings, awful tidings, an evil time!

Setting these texts together, it is possible to draw certain conclusions from the differing presentations of the signs of Doomsday. *Cath Maige Tuired* and the *Immacallam* are undoubtedly this-worldly compositions, and this accounts for their shared concern with the destruction of the social order. Both texts eschew the cosmic catastrophes of *Saltair na Rann* and *In Tenga Bithnua* for more earthly anxieties about descent and the implosion of the family unit through incest. The political concerns of *Cath Maige Tuired* in particular suggest that it is designed for a noble audience, whereas the *Immacallam*, though similarly secular in focus, is likely to be a tale for the more highly learned members of lay society. The latter text's concern with allusive knowledge, with lore which must not be set out but can only be hinted at, suggests that this text is a composition by the *filid*, for the *filid*. The thoroughgoing display of both native and ecclesiastical learning also seems to bear their imprint. What we see in parts of these ninth- and tenth-century texts, then, is the response by different social classes to the prevailing apocalyptic anxieties that characterized society as a whole. Whilst the texts intended for an audience of churchmen draw richly on the apocrypha, their focus is cosmic. In contrast, the keen interest in secular society's collapse is alien to the *Saltair* and *In Tenga Bithnua*. The *Immacallam*, displaying a concern with both secular and religious lore characteristic of the learned poets, incorporates both perspectives.

It seems, therefore, that the overriding medieval Irish concept of celestial portents was an apocalyptic one, shaped by the eschatological expectations and fears which were high throughout the early Middle Ages. The sun darkening and the moon turning the colour of blood of Acts 2 are images that have recurred throughout this chapter, and which represent the essence of the medieval Irish understanding of heavenly *signa*, along with Christ's prophecies in Luke 21. (Ferchetne's prophecy of Antichrist ended on a cosmic note with the darkening of the sun and moon.) Above I briefly touched on Smyth's view that Irish cosmology in the seventh century was naively biblical, a view cogently contested by Ó Cróinín; however, in the matter of heavenly signs, her interpretation seems to have some weight, and not merely for the seventh century. Though we see development over the centuries, whereby Irish churchmen expanded these signs into complex sequences, we should not assume that the fashioning of learned literature was at any stage incompatible with heartfelt piety and a scriptural grounding. This eschatological, essentially religious manner of conceiving of celestial signs contrasts with the way in which similar phenomena, such as comets, were held to have worldly, political significance among learned members of the Frankish court. At the same time, it is clear that this 'symbolic orientation', to use McCarthy and Breen's phrase once again, was not confined to churchmen,

but was a concern of the lay professional *literati* as well. The *Immacallam* shows that apocalyptic lore was highly valued by the learned poets, and suggests that envisioning the collapse of the social and cultural orders particularly exercised their minds. Indeed, though Ferchetne is replaced by Néde, his prophecy of the 'last days' trumps his young rival, and ensures his respectful recognition by him.

Overall, the major change which we see over the centuries covered by this chapter is one of increasing literary sophistication in the handling of celestial signs. Further, the rise in the esteem in which the vernacular was held after the mid-eighth century enabled learned sequences of such signs to affect secular as well as religious literature, no doubt helped by the political uncertainties associated with the beginnings of Viking depredations. But the Ros Ela interpolation of the mid-eleventh century remains somewhat enigmatic. It suggests that one upshot of this shift was to enable a kind of allegory to be written, whereby apocalyptic material could be disguised and used by storytellers dealing with native figures, such as the Morrígan. Apocalyptic material could be projected backwards into the past, and used as a rich source of vivid, cosmic imagery for druidic magic, a line of argument which I take up further in the following chapter.