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The Salvation of the Individual and the salvation of society in

Siaburchapat Con Culaind

Dying and coming back gives you considerable perspective.

From: Jenny Holzer, *Truisms 1977–79*

INTRODUCTION

Irish narrative literature is pre-eminently concerned with the conceptions, births, wooings, triumphs and deaths of individuals. The narratives portray these individuals as being bound into intersecting webs of social relations. As a result, their actions can take on a significance that is meaningful to the imagined society that was created by the Irish literate classes during the early medieval period. This paper will examine one tale from a genre that derives a great deal of its focus from this scheme—a scheme where the individual becomes a collective.

The tales of this genre describe the meeting of a pagan hero or otherworldly personage with a christian saint.¹ An early example is the meeting of Colum Cille and Mongán in the short narrative *Immacallam Choluim Chille 7 ind Óclaig*.² A much later instance is the long, polished and influential twelfth-century *Acallam na Senórach*.³ In these, and other narratives,⁴ saint and hero are shown to have an unrivalled potential to represent the interests of the ecclesiastical and secular communities that dominated Irish society. In a classic study, Peter Brown has shown how the Syrian holy man could become the metaphorical patron of a community and the focus of its identity.⁵ Similarly the Irish saint had the potential to represent ecclesiastical senses of

¹The fullest and most recent discussions are by J. F. Nagy and include: ‘Close encounters of the traditional kind in medieval Irish literature’, in *Celtic folklore and christianity: studies in honour of William W. Heist*, edited by P. Ford (Santa Barbara, 1983), pp. 129–49; idem, ‘Oral life and literary death in medieval Irish tradition’, Milman Parry Lecture on oral tradition for 1988, *Oral Tradition*, 3/3 (1988), pp. 368–80; idem, ‘Representations of oral tradition in medieval Irish literature’, *Language and communications*, volume 9, no. 2/3 (1989), pp. 143–58; idem, *Conversing with angels and ancients: literary myths of medieval Ireland* (Ithaca, New York, 1997).

² ‘The colloquy of Colum Cille and the youth at Carn Eolaig’, edited by K. Meyer, *ZCP*, 2 (1899), pp. 314–17; ‘S. Columbae Hiensis cum Mongano heroe colloquium’, edited by P. Grosjean, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 45 (1927), pp. 75–83.

³ The text has been edited by W. Stokes in ‘Agallamh na Senórach’, in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch*, 4, edited by W. Stokes, E. Windisch, (Leipzig, 1900); also ‘In Agallamh’, in *Silva Gadelica*, edited by S. H. O’Grady, 2 Volumes (London and Edinburgh, 1892), i, pp. 94–233 (text), ii, pp. 101–265 (translation).

⁴ For an idea of the range available see Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients*.

⁵P. Brown, ‘The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 86–90.

community, while the hero may be imagined as standing in for their secular counterparts, although the dynamic is neither so schematic nor so simple.

This meeting takes place in an almost sacred time whose indeterminacy allows it to provide a model for present behaviour. The ages of saint and hero were long gone for the writers of early medieval Ireland. An important study has suggested that their pasts functioned as a type of Old Testament in relationship to the New Testament present.⁶ Tales imagining those pasts could take on the force of Old Testament *exempla*. Through the medium of the saint and hero, distinct but related liminal figures, they allowed the writers and performers of Irish narrative to focus on issues that were crucial to the organisation of society and learning. The dramatisation of these issues takes place through the words and reported actions of individuals. This is related to the sophisticated interplay between imagined oral dialogue and writing within the same texts. I do not wish to specifically investigate the conceptualisations of oral and literary tradition in medieval Ireland through a use of these narratives. This has already been the subject of detailed analysis by Joseph Nagy.⁷ It should be noted, however, that the intersections between written and oral are related to the representation and, in a sense, the mediation of the seeming dichotomy of pagan and christian. Thus, there is an opposition, or potential opposition, between pagan/oral, christian/literate and hero/saint. However, these tales do not trade in certainties but take up a variety of positions. Indeed, uncertainties of meaning are associated with uncertainties of time and appearance in the narratives. Not all is as it is said, written or seen. Ultimately, the saint and hero speak through the tale directly to the audience or, if not, they allude disturbingly to an elitist knowledge. Sometimes, knowledge can be the possession of an individual or a group of individuals rather than of society.

It is illuminating to examine such inter-related issues through the lens of a single narrative, in this case *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* ‘The Phantom Chariot of Cú Chulainn’. The narrative is found in three manuscripts: *Lebor na hUidre*, Egerton 88 and BL, Additional Ms 33,993. The two latter represent a shorter and, at times, abbreviated recension of the tale.⁸ There are some differences between the two

⁶ This is the central thesis of K. McCone, *Pagan past and christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth, 1991).

⁷ Most recently, it has been one of the major themes in Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients*.

⁸RIA, *Lebor na hUidre*, pp 113^a1–115^b7; BL, Egerton 88, ff.14^v–15^r; BL, Additional MS 33,993, ff.2^v–3^v; edited in, ‘Wiaburcharpat Con Culaind inso–’, in! *Lebor(na hUifre: Book of the Dun*

recensions besides length. These constitute limited variations in content and, sometimes, in the ordering of material. There are no prolonged or significant divergences in vocabulary, as opposed to orthography. Most of my comments will be related to the earlier *Lebor na hUidre* recension, although I will also make use of the shorter recension to help illuminate particular points. Stylistically, its narrative style points towards, but does not quite attain, the extremely ornate prose that characterises compositions from the eleventh century and later.

Siaburcharpat Con Culaind can be plausibly dated, on grounds of language and style, to the late tenth century, or perhaps to the early eleventh century.⁹ This was a period which saw rapid social and political change in Ireland. On the political front the overkings consolidated their gains at the expense of lesser local kings and lords. This was a process which had its roots in the eighth century or earlier but by now had acquired an impressive momentum. At this stage, the high-kingship of Ireland was becoming a more meaningful reality. Kings such as Feidlimid mac Crimthainn († 847), Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid († 862) and Brian Bóroimhe († 1014) were dominant national figures.¹⁰ They were the patrons of lords and of learning. It is not surprising, therefore, that a great deal of the literary activity during this period was concerned with stressing the cultural unity of Ireland and the antiquity of the high-kingship.¹¹ These interests help shape the tale.

They coalesce around the central figures in the narrative. These are the saint Patrick, the hero Cú Chulainn and the Uí Néill king of Tara, Lóegaire. In addition, Patrick's companion saint Benén plays a seemingly minor but, in fact, important role

Cow, edited by R. I. Best, O. J. Bergin (Dublin, 1929), pp. 278–287; *Lebor na hUidre* also forms the basis of 'Keltische Beiträge I', edited by H. Zimmer, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 32 (1888), pp. 24–55; K. Meyer, 'Siaburcharpat Con Culaind', in *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, 3, edited by O. J. Bergin and others (Halle and Dublin, 1910), pp. 49–56, bases his edition on a transcription from BL, Egerton 88 collated with BL, Additional MS 33,993. There is an incomplete translation by O'Beirne Crowe in *The Cuchullin saga in Irish literature*, edited by E. Hull, Grimm Library, 8 (London, 1898), pp. 273–87, pp. 295–98; a more recent, but still incomplete, translation is offered by T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish tales* (New York, 1936), pp. 347–54. Further references to Bergin and Best's diplomatic transcription from *Lebor na hUidre* will be in the form *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, followed by the line numbers from their edition of *Lebor na hUidre*. References to Meyer's edition will take the form *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, followed by his pagination and lineation.

⁹ Discussed by R. Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1921), pp. 567–71; G. Murphy, *The Ossianic lore and romantic tales of medieval Ireland*, Irish life and culture, 11 (Dublin, 1955), p. 21, suggests an eleventh-century date.

¹⁰ For brief accounts of Feidlimid's, Máel Sechnaill's and Brian's careers: D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, Gill History of Ireland, 2 (Dublin, 1972), pp. 96–101, pp. 120–31; F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), pp. 211–29, pp. 262–67, pp. 266–68; B. Jaski, 'The Vikings and the kingship of Tara', *Peritia*, 9 (1995), pp. 315–19, discusses Máel Sechnaill.

¹¹ Discussed by D. Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland' in *Nationality and the pursuit of national independence*, edited by T. W. Moody (Belfast, 1978), pp. 1–35.

in the tale. The main action of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* takes place at Tara and the prose narrative details Patrick's attempts to convert a recalcitrant Lóegaire. The prose surrounds a long poem, recited by Cú Chulainn, that describes the hero's glorious, but ultimately transient, deeds. These are explicitly contrasted with the more lasting horrors of hell. The tale skilfully draws on a long literary tradition. Patrick, Cú Chulainn and Lóegaire were all extremely prominent literary figures. Patrick, after all, was regarded as the christianiser of Ireland; Cú Chulainn was celebrated as the island's greatest hero; Lóegaire was portrayed as a powerful exemplar of royal power as well as the half-hearted supporter of Patrick's mission. Moreover, Tara was the focus of much royal propaganda and was thought of as the capital of Ireland, even though it was not permanently inhabited in historical times.¹²

Within the frameworks provided by character, genre and plot, *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* asks many questions. One of the most important concerns the contrasts, meanings, and interactions of orality and literacy. The individual is vital in this exploration, vital because he represents more than himself. He is a representative of broad groupings within society. Such groupings are bound together by relationships of power and knowledge. In this tale the word in its spoken or written form may be a source of knowledge—of a knowledge that confers authority onto the speaker, the recipient, or both. The status, sometimes specifically the truth, of the spoken or written word becomes bound into these questions of power and access to knowledge. They in turn are vital components in the conceptualisation of a functioning society. The tale asks who should control access to knowledge in early Ireland. Indeed, *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* suggests a model for a textual community to answer this question. Brian Stock's explication of medieval textual communities is germane at this point. Stock has defined such a community as a group of people 'whose social activities are centred around texts, or more precisely, around a literate interpreter of them'.¹³ The interpreter of the text plays a vital role in defining the communal identity of the group. This also applies to broader groups within society. The Irish narrative functions on this broader level.

¹²The literary associations are legion. A recent discussion is E. Bhreathnach, 'Temoria: Caput Scotorum', *Ériu*, 47 (1996), pp. 67–88.

¹³B. Stock, *The implications of literacy: written language and models of interpretation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 6–9, and throughout.

AT THE SUGGESTION OF HOLY SPECTERS

Siaburcharpat Con Culaind represents its interests through the coming of the past into a present that is already in the distant past for the composer of the tale. Time is the dominating metaphor of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. It is a narrative concerned with the recreation of things past. The present of the tale is the legendary time inhabited by Lóegaire and Patrick. The past is the mythical time of Cú Chulainn and the Ulster heroes. Both these are implicitly juxtaposed with the present inhabited by the author/redactor/performer of the tale. The mythical past and the real present are further contrasted with the time-destroying moment where saint, hero and king meet in the tale. The saint's action suspends the ordinary sequence of time, and in the magical space of Tara the dead and living meet, a meeting that emphasises the saint's authority and access to divine knowledge. Tara, with its ritual and literary associations, is perfect for the *mis-en-scène*.

The tale deals with a persistent theme in Irish narrative, the resuscitation of a dead hero from the past to validate accounts and interpretations of that past.¹⁴ This validation can only occur through the spoken authority of an individual witness. Only the individual can mediate the past into the present—something very different from the modern obsession with the recording mechanical eyes of cameras and camcorders. This obsession with the past as validatory tool is symptomatic of uncertainty rather than certainty, a sign of change rather than its lack. It can be compared to the harking back to a lost golden age of 'traditional' family values, often cited by conservatives, or to a liberal glorification of the 'radical' 1960s. The past functions, in these cases, as an artefact of the present. In this way *Siaburcharpat* resembles modern science-fiction stories of time-travel. Like these it offers an insight into reactions towards tradition and innovation. In medieval Ireland such a strategy reaffirmed continuity with the past by revealing a past that was remarkably similar to the imagined present, a tactic that is obviously suitable in overtly 'traditional' societies such as early medieval Ireland. The tale, however, betrays its contemporaneity with a late tenth-century/early eleventh-century present. Cú Chulainn fights great battles in Lochlainn, Viking lands that had already become assimilated to the otherworld, but which a pre-Christian Cú Chulainn

¹⁴Both McCone, *Pagan past*, and Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients*, have taken the relationship between the pagan past and the present of Christian Ireland as a major theme for examination.

could hardly be expected to know.¹⁵ The hero's narrative poem looks forward to the *laid* that characterises the *fiannaigecht* but which is an innovative departure from the norms of the Ulster cycle.¹⁶ Literary innovation is hidden by placing its forms in the mouth of a traditional character. More seriously, Lóegaire's refusal to convert to christianity unless Patrick brings back the dead hero underlines the importance of continuity with the past for the characters within *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* even if this continuity is a mirage.

The central thematic impulse of the text, if not the central metaphor, lies in the existence of oral and literary modes of communication in a society fractured by division among its elite members. These elite members are portrayed through the individual characters in the tale. Control and display of knowledge are paramount. Such control, the tale suggests, will save society much as the christian message saves Cú Chulainn and offers the potential of salvation to Lóegaire. A fractured society can be unified. This fracturing is most evident in the antipathy between Patrick and Lóegaire. Other important related issues, including the links and divisions between the recalcitrant pagan, the good pagan and the christian, are played out through the interaction of oral, written and aural. The ability to communicate truthfully, through time, is emphasised again and again in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. True spoken communication is tellingly opposed to the deceptive nature of the facade offered by sight. Words matter. Mastery of time facilitates the finding of divine truth. Servitude to time leads to an inability to see beyond the shallow truth of surfaces.

These metaphors and themes are carefully structured within the narrative. The tale makes subtle use of different genre models including the Old Testament.¹⁷ There are other prototypes. The power of saints to raise the dead, ultimately based on the example of Christ, is one of the principal influences on *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* and the tale shares close affinities with hagiographical models. The wonder-working ever-conquering all-knowing and proselytising Patrick of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* is typical of the saints in Irish hagiography, indeed of Patrick himself in the many Lives composed in his honour.¹⁸ Another specific influence, one originally suggested

¹⁵*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9359–360; for the most recent historical identification of Viking Lochlainn see D. Ó Corráin, 'The Vikings in Scotland and Ireland in the ninth century', *Peritia*, 12 (1998), pp. 296–339.

¹⁶Murphy, *Ossianic lore and romantic tales*, p. 21.

¹⁷McCone, *Pagan past*, p. 200.

¹⁸F. Ó Briain, 'Saga themes in Irish hagiography', in *Féilsgribhinn Torna*, edited by S. Pender (Cork, 1947), pp. 33–42; D. A. Binchy, 'St Patrick and his biographers: ancient and modern', *Studia*

by Robin Flower, may be the account of Gregory the Great's salvation of the pagan Roman emperor Trajan, which was first told in an early eighth-century Life of Gregory by an anonymous Whitby monk.¹⁹ This may not have been the actual progenitor of the genre, but it might well have influenced *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. The salvation of Trajan forms a neat comparison with that of Cú Chulainn, although in the earliest accounts the emperor neither speaks nor appears to Gregory.

There are other, more concrete, influences. For instance, there can be no doubt that the meeting of Patrick and Lóegaire ultimately takes its cue from the various confrontations of king and saint detailed by Tírechán and, especially, Muirchú in their compositions dating from the second half of the seventh century.²⁰ The other major direct influences on *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* are the sagas centring around the great heroes of the Ulaid and their contemporaries. Among these, a version of the tale of Cú Roí's death is an important source, particularly for the first part of Cú Chulainn's dramatic poem.²¹ Furthermore, the typical heroic deeds of Cú Chulainn form a large component of the tale. Intriguingly, these deeds are primarily presented through the medium of verse rather than through the more obvious choice of prose that might be expected. This and the juxtaposition of features associated with sagas and saints' Lives create a skilful and layered narrative.

This layered narrative represents the interests and fears of the elite members of Irish society. Broadly speaking this elite was composed of high-ranking aristocrats and churchmen. The two groups shared common interests as well as blood ties.²² On one level *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* endorses the community of the church, represented by Patrick and his companion saint Benén. It addresses the aristocracy through the figures of Lóegaire and Cú Chulainn. By implication the past is mimetic of contemporary Ireland. It is important to note, however, that the tale is not simple allegory. Neither Lóegaire nor Cú Chulainn are uncomplicated behavioural mirrors for,

Hibernica, 2 (1962), pp. 7–75; L. Bieler, 'Hagiography and romance in medieval Ireland', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 6 (1975), pp. 13–24.

¹⁹R. Flower, *The Irish tradition* (Oxford, 1947), pp. 6–7; *The earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, edited by B. Colgrave (Lawrence, 1968), §29.

²⁰Muirchú, 'Vita S. Patricii', in *The Patrician texts from the Book of Armagh*, edited by L. Bieler, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*, 10 (Dublin, 1979), pp. 62–123: 1 §10, 1 §15–21; Tírechán, *Collectanea*, in *Patrician texts*, pp. 123–67: §12.

²¹P. Mac Cana, 'The influence of the Vikings on Celtic literature', in *The impact of the Scandinavian invasions on the Celtic-speaking peoples c. 800–1000 AD*, edited by B. Ó Cuiv, Proceedings of the [First] International Congress of Celtic Studies (Dublin, 1962), p. 81.

²²Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship', throughout; for the specific case of Dál Cais, idem, 'Dál Cais—church and dynasty', *Ériu*, 24 (1973), pp. 52–63.

and of, secular society. Most obviously Cú Chulainn is a pagan on the verge of christianisation. Less obviously, Lóegaire's conversion in the *Lebor na hUidre* version of the tale complicates the otherwise negative presentation of that king in that particular recension. The tale suggests models and implies problems through its major characters. However, *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* does not overtly spell out its moral or morals.

Instead, the narrative uses techniques such as verbal and structural repetition to carry its messages and uncertainties. An effective example is Lóegaire's doubtful remark to Cú Chulainn that his deeds are those of a warrior rather than a *cú* 'hound', and his associated wordplay on Cú Chulainn's name.²³ Here the medium of representation and the message coalesce perfectly. Similarly, the parallelism of Cú Chulainn's victorious journey to the land of *Scáth* 'Shadow' and his seemingly disastrous journey into hell, another shadowed land, is expressed structurally through the device of placing both accounts in contiguity.²⁴ The tale's prosimetrum format serves to highlight the loaded poetic import of Cú Chulainn's words. The change to poetry is a written and aural signal of considerable significance in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. It emphasises Cú Chulainn's importance and marks him as a figure out of time. He is the only character in the tale that speaks in verse. In some senses he speaks a different type of language. It is one that can be translated by the powerful saint, but not by the sinful king. Patrick's very presence helps translate the poetry of the hero into a prose that should be understandable to Lóegaire.

The overarching ideology of the text is that the existing socio-political elite is natural. The complex present is opposed by a past whose complexities can be untangled by a single individual, St Patrick. The implication is that this is a natural role for the Irish church in its dealings with both the past and the present. The saint simplifies the past for his audiences within and without the tale. In fact, the past is only approachable through the medium of the saint. *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* describes two meetings of a phantom Cú Chulainn with Lóegaire. During the first encounter the king is accompanied by Benén and during the second by Patrick. Lóegaire cannot even describe the first meeting and he remarks that this is *mani sénasu 7 mani chosecra mo gin* 'because you [Patrick] have not blessed and you have not consecrated my

²³*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9316, 9323–324, 9339.

²⁴*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9378–437, 9438–466.

mouth'.²⁵ This is surely based on biblical precedents. It is particularly reminiscent of the prophet Jeremiah's call. God touches Jeremiah's mouth so that he can become a vessel of divine revelation (Jr 1:9). The analogy points up the divinely inspired authority of Patrick. Lóegaire can only report his meeting with the dead hero through Patrick's intervention—through the saint's intercession with the past. It is his individual mediation that can bring salvation to the king and, by implication, to others. By analogy, the church as mediator of knowledge, and the main controller of the tools of literacy, offers order to Irish society.

Lóegaire's inability to speak of what he has seen is similar to Lancelot's failure in the quest for the Holy Grail in the thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal*.²⁶ Both Lancelot and Lóegaire are living in a sinful state. Significantly Patrick does not give the king a direct blessing. Instead, he blesses the air that carries Lóegaire's words from his mouth. Patrick's action is paralleled by Cú Chulainn's differing behaviour in his two meetings with the king. He does not speak in any significant way until the second meeting when Patrick is present and can give his implicit *imprimatur*. This is highly ironic as Lóegaire places great trust in the spoken transmission of narratives, in other words in an oral tradition. Yet, his sinfulness has blocked him from a controlling position in an oral dialogue. His mouth lacks the saint's blessing. In a sense, Lóegaire has lost contact with a primary means of communication.

In contradistinction to the sinful Lóegaire, Cú Chulainn's pagan heroism initially appears to be uncomplicated. Lóegaire, for one, places more credence in this past heroism than in the divine word offered by Patrick. This lack of complication is only apparent, and once again Patrick is the key figure. Initially, the first part of the long poem recited by Cú Chulainn, in response to Lóegaire's eager questioning, celebrates this heroism.²⁷ In a typical verse from the early part of the poem, the hero describes how:

*Ro brisius aurgala
for trinu na túath.
bá misi in caur claidebrúad
iar sligi na sluag.*²⁸

²⁵*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind I*, 9234–235.

²⁶The text is edited by A. Pauphilet in *Classiques Français du moyen âge* (1923, repr 1948); there is a translation of Pauphilet's text into English by P. M. Matarasso, *The quest of the Holy Grail*, Penguin Classics (London, 1969).

²⁷*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind I*, 9341–437.

²⁸*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind I*, 9349–352.

[I won contests,
Against champions of the peoples.
I was the red-sworded warrior,
After the cutting down of hosts.]

But this glory and Cú Chulainn's exploits in the mythical land of Scáth are transitory. It is nothing when compared to the reality of hell, a reality that is graphically described by the hero:

*An ro chesusa d'inned a Loegairi
for muir 7 tír.
ba ansa damsa óen adaig
la demon co n-ír.*²⁹

[One night with an angry demon was more difficult for me O Lóegaire, than the trouble that I have suffered on land and sea.]

The poem is basically a diptych, the first part celebrating the past, the second part showing the limitations of paganism as personified in the suffering of the once great Ulster heroes. This holds true for the two recensions of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. Despite their ultimate common source, there is a difference in tone and content between the *Lebor na hUidre* version of the poem and that found in the other two manuscripts. The difference in tone is a product of the difference in content. The three texts largely agree, although there is some variation in the ordering of the verses, up to and including Cú Chulainn's evocation of the damnation of the Ulster heroes and his following tribute to Patrick's power.³⁰ At this point *Lebor na hUidre* diverges significantly. Where Egerton 88 and BL, Additional contain five more stanzas, *Lebor na hUidre* has fourteen.³¹ These are in the interpolating hand of H who was working before the middle of the twelfth century,³² and it is possible that they represent an

²⁹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9439–442.

³⁰*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9480; *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.8.

³¹There are differences between three of these five verses and their equivalents in *Lebor na hUidre*. The verse beginning 'Cusin fotugath' in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.13, parallels the verse beginning 'Cusin étuch cosinn arm' in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9512, and is missing a word. The stanza 'Is cian mar o roscarusa' in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.15, mirrors the verse beginning 'Is cian scarsu fri eochu' in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9500, despite divergences in expression. The final stanza in both recensions carries the same sense but is better integrated with the rest of the poem in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I.

³²The date of the H interpolator has generated considerable debate. Ó Concheanainn has argued that H is in the hand of Máel Muire and, thus, can be dated to the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth. T. Ó Concheanainn, 'The reviser of Leabhar na hUidhre', *Éigse*, 15 (1974), pp. 277–88; more recently, idem, 'Textual and historical associations of Leabhar na hUidhre', *Éigse*, 29 (1996), pp. 65–120; D. N. Dumville, 'Scéla láí brátha and the collation of Leabhar na hUidhre', *Éigse*, 16 (1975), pp. 24–8, follows Ó Concheanainn's date; H. P. A. Oskamp, 'Mael Muire: compiler or

expansion of a previously shorter poem and that they may come from another version of the tale to which H had access. In general, H seems to have copied from existing texts rather than composing individually.³³ However, these verses are well integrated with the poem, which ends with a *dúnad* unlike the shorter poem in the other recension.³⁴ In fact this better integration suggests that the shorter poem represents an abbreviation of an ultimately longer counterpart rather than the other way around. Moreover, the extra stanzas in the *Lebor na hUidre* recension provide a better balance with the first part of the poem and drive home the christian message inherent in Cú Chulainn's recitation, serving both to overtly glorify Patrick and to endow an already evangelical poem with extra evangelical enthusiasm.

Despite this, the five verses of the shorter recension powerfully connect belief and reality and contrast them with the deceit of appearance, tying in with previous stanzas.³⁵ They should, perhaps, be considered in their own right. Lóegaire does not believe in Patrick, *cení creiti-si do Patraic*,³⁶ but he believes in the Ulster heroes and their deeds. Unfortunately, appearance distorts. Cú Chulainn's account of his heroics and his suffering is immediately followed by the revelation that his appearance is a deception. The hero's warlike gear, his chariot and his horses are all phantom, created by Patrick for Lóegaire's benefit. The verbs *creitid* 'believes', *cruthaigid* 'shapes' and *ad-cí* 'sees' are evoked within a few lines of each other.³⁷ The acts of believing, shaping and seeing are inextricably confused. The central verb here is *cruthaigid*. Its basic meaning is shapes or forms. It calls forth a whole range of related words. Patrick has shaped, *rocruthustar*, the phantom chariot and its accoutrements. His power as a saint comes through God, who is sometimes known as the *Cruthaigtheóir* 'Creator'. It also reminds the reader/hearer of the common noun *cruth* 'shape, appearance, form'. The *cruth* that Lóegaire has seen beguiles him, for he refuses to believe in the true

reviser', *Éigse*, 16 (1976), pp. 177–82, argues that H was working in the twelfth century, and sometime before 1130; G. Mac Eoin, 'The interpolator H in *Lebor na hUidre*', in *Ulidia: proceedings of the first international conference on the Ulster cycle of tales*, edited by J. P. Mallory, G. Stockman (Belfast, 1994), pp. 39–46, argues that H flourished in the second half of the twelfth century.

³³Mac Eoin, 'Interpolator H', p. 40.

³⁴The technical term *dúnad* is used to describe the practice whereby a poem begins and ends with the same word.

³⁵*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.10–16.

³⁶*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.7. It is after this stanza that the two recensions diverge significantly.

³⁷*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.6 [*creiti-si...no cretfet*], 56.11 [*atcí-siu*], 56.12 [*rocruthustar*].

shaper, *Cruthaigtheóir*, and his representative Patrick. The contrast between appearance and reality is particularly intense and well worked out in these verses.

The *Lebor na hUidre* recension carries the same contrastive weight, but it particularly emphasises the idea of *creitem* ‘belief’. The resulting stress falls as much on *creitid* and its derivatives as on the semantic range surrounding *cruthaigid*. Within the nine verses unique to the *Lebor na hUidre* text, the verb occurs four times.³⁸ If the stanzas it shares with the other recensions are included,³⁹ this figure rises to eight. The importance of belief is augmented by the much longer address that Cú Chulainn makes directly and urgently to Lóegaire in *Lebor na hUidre*. This speech accounts for the extra stanzas. Cú Chulainn places Patrick’s power in the foreground. Two stanzas are devoted to a description of Patrick’s abilities to strike down and to resurrect. In the second of the two verses Cú Chulainn avers:

*Dosraithbeoigfed aitherruch
robad mór in band
co mbetis i mbithbethaid
ar bélaib na cland.*⁴⁰

[He (Patrick) could resurrect them again, however great the deed, so that they were in the living world in front of the kindreds.]

This signals the limitations of Cú Chulainn’s deeds. In a key statement, a little earlier in the poem, the hero points out that he is talking to Lóegaire to gain Patrick’s good will and a ticket to heaven—*conad damsa a búaid*⁴¹ ‘so that his victory is mine’. The possibility of victory is only opened by the saint’s ability to transcend time and manipulate appearances. The tale suggests that the martial glory of a Cú Chulainn is best perfected through the guidance of the ecclesiastical elite. Once again, Patrick is both an individual of great power as well as the representative of a major grouping in Irish society.

Patrick’s guidance is ensured by the pagan hero’s lack of authority. The concept of authority is of outstanding significance in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. The manipulation of time is used as a metaphor for authority in the tale. Cú Chulainn has been summoned both from the dead and from the distant past by Patrick in reply to

³⁸*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9482 [*creitfes*], 9486 [*creitted*], 9494 [*creitfes*], 9526 [*crete*].

³⁹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9474 [*chreitfes*], 9476 [*ceni creitindso*], [*na creitfet*], 9534 [*chretmecho*]; *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* II, 56.6 [*creitfes*], 56.7 [*ceni creiti-si*], 56.6 [*nocreitfet*], 56.18 [*creitmecha*].

⁴⁰*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9520–523.

Lóegaire's challenge, and the successful summoning underlines the saint's authority. Two concerns, time and communication, are emphasised right at the outset of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*.

*Asbert Loegaire fri Patraic noco chréiubsa duitsiu nách do Dia no co ro dusce Coin Culaind damsa fó miadamla feib adfiadar i scélaib conid n-acur 7 conid n-arladur ar mo bélaib sund is iar sain no crétiubsa duitsiu.*⁴² [Lóegaire said to Patrick that 'I will not believe in you or in God until you resurrect Cú Chulainn in his glory as it is recounted in the stories, so that I may see and talk to him here before me, and after that I will believe in you'.]

This passage is reminiscent of the apostle Thomas's statement that he will not believe in the resurrection until he sees Christ in the flesh (Jn 20:24–9). The king's doubt and his wish to physically see the hero can be compared to the behaviour of 'doubting' Thomas. But, unlike Thomas, Lóegaire shows no signs of repentance. The apostle wishes to see the resurrected body of someone that he knows, while the king wants to see a character long dead who is only remembered through stories. For Lóegaire the importance of the *scéla*, the stories, is clear. His impression of Cú Chulainn, unlike Thomas's of Christ, is based on stories rather than first-hand experience.

These are the *scéla* which were regarded as central to the training of the Irish *fili* 'poet'.⁴³ The *fili* was not only a poet, but also a genealogist and composer/reciter of narrative tales. Often, but by no means always, the *fili* had strong connections with the church.⁴⁴ Cú Chulainn, as composer and performer of the poem, is analogous to a *fili* in this tale. Moreover, the contents of his poem point towards the *scéla*. So does the rest of the narrative. Traditional *scéla* are subtly invoked throughout *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. The two major descriptions of Cú Chulainn play upon the common 'watchman' device in the Ulster Cycle tales.⁴⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams has pointed out that the watchman device sometimes had a riddling aspect and that this could lead to

⁴¹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9471.

⁴²*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9221–228.

⁴³ A basic source for the *filid* is the law tract *Uraicecht na Riar: the poetic grades in early Irish law*, edited by L. Breatnach (Dublin, 1987); see especially the glosses to §2, which state that the *fili* must know 350 compositions, consisting of 250 *primscéla* 'primary tales' combined with 100 *foscéla* 'minor tales'.

⁴⁴The link with the church is stressed in D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, A. Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', *Peritia*, 3 (1984) pp.382–438; see also Breatnach, *Uraicecht na Riar*, pp. 79–100, esp. pp. 98–100.

⁴⁵The examples are numerous, but a particularly good one is *Fled Bricrend: the feast of Bricriu*, edited by G. Henderson, Irish Texts Society, 2 (London, 1899), §§49–51.

an erroneous description.⁴⁶ Cú Chulainn's appearance is certainly a riddle to Lóegaire. The king enacts the watchman role for Patrick and Benén, with the twist that Patrick already knows the reality of Cú Chulainn's condition, while Lóegaire, entrapped in the world of the senses, only sees a veneer. The king is a poor watchman. Moreover, the details of Cú Chulainn's appearance find close analogues in the extant sagas.⁴⁷ They physically mirror the verbal descriptions of the *scéla* that Lóegaire craves.

Yet, the king is an inadequate student of the *scéla*. He is in an analogous position to that occupied by the audience of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. He has a part to play, but it must take place within the confinements of a proper christian society. The audience is guided through the tale by their community of christian belief with Patrick, Cú Chulainn and the teller of the tale. This is the guidance that Lóegaire rejects. It is typical of the king's blindness that he is unaware that Cú Chulainn's first appearance signals that the hero has come from hell. This is an ironic reflection on Lóegaire's wish to see Cú Chulainn *fó miadamla* 'in all his glory', the glory that was celebrated in the *scéla*. The king is disturbed by a supernatural wind, the physical marker of Cú Chulainn's hellish origin. Even the sinister fog that falls on the king, and the gigantic clods of earth thrown up by Cú Chulainn's horses must be explained to Lóegaire by Patrick's companion Benén.⁴⁸ Lóegaire apprehends appearance but is closed to the truth and as a result is shorn of authority.

The king's inability to recognise the truth has important consequences that are worked out in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. The tale plays on the idea of *siabair* 'phantom' and the wordplay reflects Lóegaire's confusion. Cú Chulainn drives a *siaburcharpat* 'phantom chariot', which is, nevertheless, deceptively realistic. Although Cú Chulainn, himself, and his experiences are real, the hero has to persuade Lóegaire that he is not a *siabrae* 'phantom'.⁴⁹ Nagy has perceptively pointed out that *siabair* also evokes the verb *siabraid* 'distorts, transforms'.⁵⁰ Cú Chulainn is traditionally associated with heroic distortion. He is also, through his acceptance of christianity, enabled to transform himself from a denizen of hell into a soul worthy of

⁴⁶P. Sims-Williams, 'Riddling treatment of the "watchman device" in *Branwen and Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', *Studia Celtica*, 12/13 (1977/78), pp. 83–117.

⁴⁷Compare especially the description of Cú Chulainn and his fellow heroes in Henderson, *Fled Bricrend*, §45, §47, §§49–51; compare also the descriptive passages throughout *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, edited by E. Knott, *Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series*, 8 (Dublin, 1975).

⁴⁸*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9243–244, 9245–246, 9249–250.

⁴⁹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9302 *ar is ní siabrae rodátanic is Cú Chulaind mac Sóaltae*; 9315–316 *Ar ní siabrai dotánic acht Cu Chulaind mac Soalta*; 9538 *ar ní siabrae dotánic is Cu Chulaind mac Soaltai*: 'for it is not a demon that has come to you: it is Cú Chulainn son of Soalta'.

heaven. Like the resurrected Christ he is not a *siabair* but is *siabartha* ‘transformed’. Lóegaire, in contrast, is not heroic enough to become distorted or wise enough to undergo transformation. His lack of wisdom is pointed up by his suspicions concerning Cú Chulainn’s identity, even though the hero is a reincarnation from the tales. Yet, these tales, as Cú Chulainn’s own narrative shows, are phantom when compared to the truths of heaven and hell. Stubbornly, Lóegaire refuses to believe that the saint has called back the hero until Cú Chulainn has identified himself through a recitation of his deeds.

This recitation is mimetic of the oral performance of a *fili*. Indeed, there is a marked use of connectives in the tale as well as free use of repetition. The latter is one of the most important structuring principles of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. The tale is like a Chinese box, hiding performances within a performance. Furthermore, Cú Chulainn’s poetic recitation parallels the recitation of the *fili* surrounded by his patrons and public. The tale presents us with a model for the transmission of knowledge within aristocratic society through a tableau of individuals. Suitably, *Siaburcharpat* flanks its performer with a king and a saint. Cú Chulainn expresses the truth through the practice of *filidecht*. For him, *filidecht* provides the structure of salvation, a structure validated by Patrick. Salvation is found in the form of true knowledge which is properly guided. It is implied, if never openly stated, that the literate Patrick and the oral go-exist in the same way. In fact, it is the literate Patrick who perfects the pagan virtues of Cú Chulainn. There is the hint, although it is never spelt out, that the *céla* demanded by the king. Cú Chulainn’s performance of his *scéls* (go beyond a mere, and typical, recitation of heroic deeds. During the climax of his poem he does not glorify yet another martial exploit. Instead he describes how all of the Ulster heroes, with the exception of their king Conchobor, are *i pein iffirind* ‘in the torments of hell’.⁵¹ Conchobor, Cú Chulainn explains, has won heaven because of his championship of Christ.⁵² This is a reference to the story narrated in the early eighth-century *Aided Chonchobuir*,⁵³ and is a good example of how the author of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* is indebted to, but does not unimaginatively imitate, earlier sources. The reference to Conchobor has another

⁵⁰Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients*, p. 264.

⁵¹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9459–466.

⁵²*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9463–466.

function as well. The figure of the past Ulster king, and his reward in heaven is implicitly distinguished from Lóegaire's earthly power but lack of moral worth. This is emphasised by Cú Chulainn's warning to the king, a warning that he gives twice, towards the beginning and at the end of his recitation:

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*Creit do Dia 7 do náem Patraic a Loegairi ná tuadaig tond talman torut.*⁵⁴
[‘Believe in God and Saint Patrick, O Lóegaire, lest the surface of the earth come over you’.]

If Lóegaire persists in his state of unbelief there will be no journey for him *hi tírib na mbeó*⁵⁵ ‘in the countries of the living’. He will fall into the slumberous mass of earth, dying to God rather than to the world. Only the *Lebor na hUidre* recension presents Lóegaire as converting to christianity, adding a complication to the generally negative portrayal of the king.⁵⁶ This conversion is consonant with the picture of Lóegaire

⁵³There are several versions of this tale. See *The death-tales of the Ulster heroes*, edited by K. Meyer (Dublin, 1906) pp. 4–21; J. Corthals, ‘The reitoric in *Aided Chonchobuir*’, *Ériu*, 40 (1989) pp. 41–59, has dated a core text to the early eighth century.

⁵¹*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9459–466.

⁵²*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9463–466.

⁵³There are several versions of this tale. See *The death-tales of the Ulster heroes*, edited by K. Meyer (Dublin, 1906) pp. 4–21; J. Corthals, ‘The reitoric in *Aided Chonchobuir*’, *Ériu*, 40 (1989) pp. 41–59, has dated a core text to the early eighth century.

⁵⁴*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9301–302, and *Creit do Dia 7 do nóem Patraic a Loegairi arna tudaich tond talman torut*, 9536–537.

⁵⁵*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9300.

⁵⁶*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9540, laconically remarks: *Ro chreti trá Loegaire do Patraic iarom* ‘Then Lóegaire believed in Patrick’.

developed by Muirchú and is based on it.⁵⁷ Crucially, for an aristocratic audience, Lóegaire's negative presentation had become ubiquitous, in spite of the tradition that the king had eventually converted. At the same time, it was important to have a royal hero-figure that would appeal to this audience and represent their interests. Once again, a single person is needed to stand in for many. Conchobor fills this role.

There is another dimension to the representation of oral dialogue in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*. When Cú Chulainn recites his heroic deeds, his 'oral' and 'pagan' narrative is sanctioned by Patrick. It is not so much knowledge but the mediation and interpretation of knowledge that is claimed by the clerical elite. In the case of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* it must be mediated through a saint from a dead hero to a living king. The central role of the cleric is encapsulated in Cú Chulainn's repeated urgent statement to Lóegaire: *creit do Dia 7 do náem Patraic*⁵⁸ 'believe in God and St. Patrick'. Such contact with past figures, a contact made possible through christianity, is present in the accounts of the finding of the epic *Táin*.⁵⁹ In these accounts, and in *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind*, there is a coherent mediation between the written and oral. The christianity of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* transforms the oral narrative through the medium of a saint. Patrick derives at least some of his authority from his ability to physically invoke the past. Implicitly, the resulting narrative is true. It has been pointed out by Nagy that the sacerdotal figure of the saint can communicate and clarify the past and in this clarified form it is made available to the Irish.⁶⁰ Cú Chulainn as hero and *fili* operates in the christian world and with its approval.

A telling and, perhaps, unintended irony of this text is that Lóegaire will only be convinced of christianity by the spoken word of a dead hero, by a 'warbling Teller', rather than through the written authoritative word of holy scripture. Yet, the narrative passes on this conviction in a written form. It is arguable that Benén, who has a bit-part towards the beginning of the narrative, is in fact intended to represent the scribe of the dialogue.⁶¹ This dialogue validates the aristocratic milieu of *Siaburcharpat Con*

⁵⁷Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, I §10, I §15–21. It is possible that the king's remark at I §21, *Melius est credere me quam mori*, 'It is better for me to believe than to die', influenced the *Lebor na hUidre* recension. Cú Chulainn's remark that the earth will come over Lóegaire is implicitly a threat of death. Of course, Tírechán does not show the king converting and, hence, the variation goes back to the seventh century.

⁵⁸*Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* I, 9301, 9314–315, 9536.

⁵⁹J. Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 166–79, has a useful summary and discussion of these accounts; McCone, *Pagan past*, pp. 201–02.

⁶⁰Nagy, 'Representations of oral tradition', pp. 152–53.

⁶¹Nagy, 'Representations in oral traditions', p. 152, remarks that although there is no reference to the writing down of Cú Chulainn's narration 'this is precisely what the existence of the text implies'.

Culaind by accessing systems of past knowledge, ultimately made available to the elite through the figure of a saint. This is an almost perfect model for an elitist textual community.

CONCLUSION

Siaburcharpat Con Culaind is a complex tale that can be read on several levels. I have focused on two major issues: the representation of Irish elite groups through the medium of individuals and the mediation of knowledge within society. Both problems are tied in with the ideological self-identification of elites, whether secular or clerical. Significantly, though, it is the saint who draws the boundary in this tale. His miraculous power is capable of momentarily hiding the discontinuities which threaten the narrative, those between oral and written, event and representation, knowledge and power. The community of *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* subsumes the divisions between pagan and christian into the overarching span of Patrick's divine access to knowledge. Furthermore, the tale skilfully evokes and utilises the vernacular world, represented by Cú Chulainn, to formulate its message and create its community. Irish, rather than the more elitist Latin, is the chosen medium of expression. After all, an aristocratic audience would contain only a minority literate or conversant in Latin.

This aristocratic audience is implicit throughout the tale and is one of the reasons that the practice of *fili*, churchman and churchman-*fili* form one its self-conscious centres. These figures have the ability to transmit narrative and knowledge to an audience. Yet, this narrative is not primarily about politics, or even entertainment. It embodies the complexities of writing, and the relationship of writing to speaking. These in turn are the defining factors in the control and transmission of knowledge, a control and transmission vital to all social communities. *Siaburcharpat Con Culaind* visualises these difficult issues through the interplay of individuals. The tale of Patrick, Lóegaire and Cú Chulainn is on one level the story of three individuals. On a deeper level their meeting draws a blueprint for Irish elite communities and suggests that their organisation, hence salvation, should lie in the hands of Patrick's ecclesiastical heirs.