



WILD MAN / KING GOD

Gilles Boucherit

► To cite this version:

Gilles Boucherit. WILD MAN / KING GOD. The XVIth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Jul 2019, Bangor, United Kingdom. hal-02930545

HAL Id: hal-02930545

<https://univ-rennes2.hal.science/hal-02930545>

Submitted on 4 Sep 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

WILD MAN / KING GOD

Introduction

In his writing entitled « The Merlin legend and the Welsh tradition of prophecy » A.O.H. Jarman explains to us how « the legend of merlin, as found in early Welsh verse, embodied the primitive motif of the Wild Man of the Woods¹.» Even if this so called legend does not exist in Middle Welsh we can make by deduction a feasible reconstruction of its main outline and probable development out of a dozen poems combined with supplementary material from the Scottish and Irish versions of the tale. This means that the primitive motif occurs also in other Celtic countries as shown by Myrddin-Lailoken in Great Britain, Skol(v)an in Brittany and Suibne in Ireland so that each of them can be considered here as avatars of a single pattern. A pattern which Jarman writes appears somewhere else as soon as the « Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh and the Indian tale of Rishyasninga, which included legends of hairy anchorites or hermits leading solitary lives in the desert ». Wild men in Near and Mid-Orient originate probably from a hero of fertility, « conceived as a supernatural hairy creature, partly resembling a man, partly with characteristics of a beast, who lives a free life in a remote retreat with only animals as companions. So that finally « Both Babylonian and Indian sources contain legends of the beast-man².»

« The solitary beast-man of the ancient traditions had a tendency to coalesce with the holy man, the religious recluse. The beast-man was in popular belief not a creature inferior to man, but rather one with supernatural characteristics-ultimately a hero or a god of fertility and sometimes significantly brought into close relationship with a solar deity. The notion of such a god of fruitfulness may go back «to early pre-anthropomorphic days before man had cut the ties that bound him to other animals³.» » This last illuminating assumption⁴ is due to Miss Jane Harrison in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, and gives us a link with European folk traditions : “Thus the satyrs, Pan, Silenus (*/sai'li:nəs/*) , fauns, and the "wild men of the woods" of European folk-traditions" are in a class with Enkidu's original, if less directly so with that epic-hero himself⁵.” Jarman's last phrase of the paragraph mentioned reads like this : « There was, however, no direct link between the tales preserved in Celtic sources and those found in eastern or Asiatic countries ». It is these links however even if they are not direct that we are concerned with in this study.

1 In BROMWICH Rachel, *The Arthur of the Welsh*, Cardiff, 1991, p. 117

2 WILLIAMS Charles Allyn. *Oriental affinities of the legend of the hairy anchorite*. The University of Illinois, 1925, p. 13

3 Miss Jane HARRISSON, *Prolegomena tot the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 561 in WILLIAMS, 1925

4

5 WILLIAMS, 1925, p. 22

« The Sumerians /'su:mər/ were a non-Semitic, non-Indo-European people who probably entered Mesopotamia from the east prior to or during the fourth millennium B. C.⁶ ». The land at least between the Tigris and the Euphrates (/ju:'freti:z/) was inhabited by the Semites who were defeated. In the 4th millenium B.C. the Sumerian people would make headways undreamed of before on every range of activity, economical, social, political as well as spiritual : they developed religious concepts and also imagined a cuneiform system of writing. Their language had no relation with the semitic one.

« No doubt with the help of new invasion hordes from the Arabian peninsula, the Semites gradually regained some of their strength and became ever more aggressive. » So that « approximately in the middle of the third millennium arose the great Semitic conqueror, Sargon, the founder of the dynasty of Accad⁷. » In this sargonid period between 2400 and 2100 the Sumerians met with serious defeats at the hands of the Semites and the Guti. A brief renaissance of Sumerian power followed in the Neo-Sumerian period or third dynasty of Ur during the last century and a half of the third millennium B. C.

« A successor to Sargon, Naram-Sin who ruled around 2200 met apparently with very strong opposition on the part of the Sumerian city states. « But whatever the extent of actual opposition, he certainly took [a] highly important step to legitimize his dominion and by so doing reformulated the notion and function of kingship⁸. » This process of legitimization is unambiguous since in some texts the king is called the « god of Akkad » : « The king had moved officially into a higher category of being – that of a deity – and declared himself the main channel of communication between the great gods of the country and his subjects, 'the black-headed people'⁹. » It is worth noting also that : « Akkad, a new city which, unlike Uruk or Eridu, could make no claims to be an ancient sacred site, became sacred because it was the seat of the divine king. The process of deification has close parallels to that of the Roman emperors and must be understood as a propagandistic attempt to justify far reaching administrative and economic reforms and changes in the political system¹⁰. » What appears blantly here is a break in tradition, a recurrent phenomenon throughout this study like in these two texts for instance: the first one being a Sumerian poem of the third millenium B.C. entitled « Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World¹¹ » and introduces Gilgamesh and Enkidu for the first time in the Sumerian period.

Inanna, queen of the heavens could not cut down her *Huluppu*-tree she had found fallen on the banks of the Euphrates and that she had planted in her garden. The people of Erech cut down Inanna's tree and presented Inanna with the pieces for her chair and couch. Out of her *Huluppu*-tree Inanna made a *pukku* (drum ?) and a *mikku* (drumstick ?) for Gilgamesh but they fell in the nether world through a hole in the ground. Enkidu heard his master weeping and offered him to go down to the nether world, but after going down Enkidu could not come back. Gilgamesh went to implore the great air-god Enlil who was at the head of the Sumerian gods in those days. Finally, Utu the sun-god opened a hole in the ground so that Enkidu could come back on earth. Master and servant embraced and Gilgamesh could question his servant about what he'd seen in the nether world.

The second text is the oldest version of the famous « Epic of Gilgamesh » which dates back to the Neo-Sumerian period that is around 2000 BC. Only two tablets have been recovered, so that the text is incomplete as we have it. The first tablet : « The hairy man Enkidu and the woman », may have contained the origin of Enkidu (may be created from clay ?) ; we do not know how the woman was sent to the beast-man, who was dwelling with his cattle in a remote place not far from the

6 KRAMER Samuel Noah. *Sumerian mythology*, Philadelphia, 1972, p. 6

7 *Ibid.*

8 LEICK Gwendolyn. *Mesopotamia : the invention of the city*, 2002, p. 100

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 30

mountains, and how she seduced and brought him in her city ruled by the great king Gish. In the second tablet : « After the seduction », Gilgamesh' divine mother Ninsun interprets the dreams of her son and explains to him that a man like him has been born in the field and reared [riə] by the cosmic mountain (heaven and earth united¹²), and will be affectionately associated with him. Then we read how Enkidu was seduced by a woman and stayed for a week with her who made him like a god and finally asked him why to stay with cattle ? And she accompanied him to Eanna, the new temple of Anu in Uruk (Erech) where he was welcomed by Gish the great king. Enkidu learnt to drink wine instead of sucking milk and became hilarious. Afterwards, he dressed like a man took his weapon and attacked the lions. « Thus Enkidu, who had been the guardians of wild animal-life, now became the protector of the tame¹³. » Now a voice (Gish' ?) says to the harlot to leave Enkidu, then follows a moralising speech on family life, work, laying up resources and to be loyal to his legitimate wife. He stalked downtown as if he were a leader, a rival to Gish. The two men struggle, Enkidu hold Gish down, then comfort his rival and they become companions.

« [...] back of the episode of Enkidu and the woman lay the basic motif of Near and Mid tradition, once ritualistic [...] of the seduction of the mythical god or hero of fertility by a mortal woman containing the idea that upon their union would follow rain, or increase in vegetation, in flocks and herds-blessings for the whole people. The idea of the superhuman beast-man coming for the benefit of the people was kept in the epic, but now explained [...] as means of relief from an oppressive ruler. The new hero did not destroy the king, however, but became his worthy companion in exploits too difficult for even the latter to perform alone¹⁴. »

A third text, the popular poem « The curse of Agade¹⁵ » offers us a comprehensive way to interpret the two preceding ones :

« The goddess Inanna establishes her cult in Akkad. Her presence assures the well-being of the city. Enlil the god of Nippur was the leader of the Sumerian gods in the myths . He frowns at Inanna forcing her to withdraw from the city and abandon her sanctuary.

Naram sin¹⁶ falls into a seven years long depression after having seen in dreams that Akkad would no longer exist. Indeed, without Inanna's presence and the blessing of the other gods, the city is unviable. He decides to force Enlil to deliver a pronouncement to alter his divine will. He destroys Enlil's temple of Ekur. Enlil decides to wreak [ri:k] his vengeance through a barbarian invasion. He sends the Guti. The other gods in order to cool Enlil's angry heart curse Agade. The divine curse is fulfilled and the poem ends abruptly with, 'Akkad is destroyed- hail to Inanna.' »

It seems fairly obvious that the first text¹⁷ fits well in the atmosphere before the goddess is ousted in the Curse of Agade. The second text¹⁸ would rather fit the atmosphere before Akkad is cursed in the third text. which is the work of the third dynasty of Ur, the general idea being the careful path between reform and tradition, and that royal hubris ([/ˈhjuːbrɪs/](#)) like Naram sin who made himself « the god of Akkad » constitutes a threat, a critique of the excess of political power.

Concerning Akkad, we have seen that the process of deification of the king had close parallels to

12 KRAMER, p. 40

13 WILLIAMS, p. 15

14 WILLIAMS, p. 19

15 LEICK, 2002, « Akkad was known as the center of the most successful empire ever, which reached to the corners of the world. » , p. 85

16 LEICK, 2002, « Naram-Sin became the protagonist in quite a few literary compositions which originated in the Old Babylonian period [...]. » p. 100 [time from the end of Ur III to the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon (c. 2000-1600)

17 « Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World »

18 the oldest version of the Gilgamesh epic

that of the Roman emperors. Augustus, Julius Caesar's adoptive son asserted Caesar's divinity and proclaimed himself « the god Caesar's son ». Immediately after his victory over Sextus Pompey in 36, Augustus solemnly promised to raise a temple to Apollo on the Palatine¹⁹. Strangely enough the roman emperor Constantine the first, after his victory over Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian bridge in 312, ascribed it to the god he had chosen, and put himself under his protection: Apollo «[...] or the sun rather, [...] a god already popular among the previous emperors since Aurelian, and who had even been associated to Augustus²⁰». Only later on will he recognise it as the Christian god. Bishop Eusebius from Cordova who will be seen for the first time near to Constantine after the battle of the Milvian bridge belongs to those who have convinced him to see in the superior god he had worshipped and given him victory, the christian god.

But will the imperial authority be dangerously weakened by christianism and destroyed its religious foundation which was its ideological basis ? [...] Not at all :

« The religious character of the imperial power, a pagan notion by excellence, remained completely untouched. This is the first and one of the most striking contradictions of the Christian empire. [...]. Everything that is linked to the emperor, his person even his palace is still qualified by the term « sacred ». The roman emperor went on seeing his power like an image, down on earth, of the divine sovereignty. »

The court Theologians like Eusebius of Caesarea or Eusebius of Nicomedia would in their writings elaborate « a real political theology ». The emperor is entitled to give orders to the heads of churches as if he were a bishop from god's right. This point implies that the emperor « equal to the apostles » owns a kind of episcopal power over the whole of his empire. [...]. This means for the christian people « a true theological justification of imperial monarchy²¹ ».

What happened was the integration in christianism of the political and patriotic Roman tradition²². As an emperor, Constantine will always keep his title Pontifex maximus²³. « A pontiff [...] was, in Roman antiquity, a member of the most illustrious of the colleges of priests of the Roman religion, the College of pontiffs. The term "pontiff" was later applied to any high or chief priest and, in Roman catholics ecclesiastical usage, to a bishop and more particularly to the Bishop of Rome, the Pope or "Roman Pontiff. » In the same time we can see Constantine taking a share in the affairs of the church after being asked to do so by the ecclesiastical authorities²⁴.

« Since the foundation of the Roman empire under Constantine the temporal and spiritual powers

19 GRIMAL Pierre. Le siècle d'Auguste, Presses universitaires de France, 1961, p. 16, 17, 36, 43

20 MARAVAL Pierre. Constantin le grand, Paris, p. 61

21 LEPELLEY, Claude. L'empire romain et le christianisme, Paris, 1969 p. 73

22 *Ibid.*, p. 73

23 *Ibid.*, p. 64-5

24 *Ibid.*

were intermingled, the emperor was the head of the church and in any civilisation hit by christianity the adoption of a christian government was unequivocal. This was not the case in Ireland²⁵. »

With the spread of the Tara dynasty of the Uí Néill [i: 'nɛ:] the traditional fifth of Ireland had been broken and they « drove the Ulaid from Emain Macha, leaving them around the end of the seventh century with but a pitifully shrunken kingdom in the area east of the river Bann, along the eastern seaboard, although they still retained their status of *cóiced* or fifth.

« The Uí Neill [i: 'nɛ:] were neither a tribe nor a group of tribes, but a dynasty. Their rise to power is related to the collapse of Roman Britain and marks an important step away from the tribal polity²⁶. » Needless to say, these revolutionary changes could find no basis in the traditional law; they resulted in an 'extra-legal' situation which is consistently ignored by the jurists^{27 28}. » And thus from the dawn of the historical period we are confronted with the collision between traditional law and political fact²⁹. Thus all the Uí Neill monarchies formed a kind of dynastic federation, at the apex of which stood the king of Tara³⁰. If « [this] king of Tara was normally the most powerful king in Ireland, [...] he was not the king of Ireland³¹: « This was [...] a fiction invented by the 'synthetic' historians, [...] which had neither a legal nor an historical basis³².

« Archaic Irish kingship was essentially tribal and originally also sacral. The king had few governmental or executive powers, but represented his people in war and in making treaties, and in pre-Christian times also in their relations with the Otherworld³³. [...] The symbolical mating of the new king with the local Earth-Goddess, or *ἱερός γάμος* was destined to bring fertility to man and beast in his reign³⁴. »

Comparative mythology suggests that the horse sacrifice derive from a Proto-Indo-European ritual [i.e. fifth to third millennia BC]³⁵. The Ashvamedha [from Sanskrit **ekwo-meydho* 'horse-drunk', attesting a ritual which included both a horse and drunkenness³⁶. Queen Medb for instance (meaning drunk) a historical figure, was a personification of the sovereignty of Ireland³⁷, a fact which explained the unusual number of her husbands. The horse goddess (Macha in Ireland and Rhiannon « the great queen » in Wales) was the embodiment of sovereignty³⁸. A reference which reminds us of those « early pre-anthropomorphic days before man had cut the ties that bound him to other animals³⁹. »

The most celebrated of these royal fertility rites is the so-called *Feis Temro* or (sleeping) Feast of

25 HOLSTEIN John. Les grands saints successeurs de saint Patrick en Irlande. Thèse, Rennes 2, 1990, p. 432

26 BYRNE Francis John. Irish kings and high kings, Dublin, 2001, p. 71

27 : « territory acquired by conquest [was] called 'sword-land' (*ferann claidib* /'klað'ivj/), a title never found in the laws, [...]

28 BINCHY, Daniel Anthony. *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*. Oxford, 1970, p. 36

29 *Ibid.*, p. 36

30 *Ibid.*, p. 37

31 *Ibid.*

32 BINCHY Daniel Anthony. *The fair of Tailtiu and the fair of Tara*, in p. Ériu, 18, 1958 p. 14

33 BYRNE Francis John. The rise of the Uí Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland, Dublin, 1969, p. 8

34 BINCHY, 1970, p. 11

35 MALLORY James Patrick, *In search of the Indo-Europeans*. London, 1989, p. 151.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 136

37 MAC CANA Proinsias. Aspects of the theme of king and goddess in Irish literature, in *Études celtiques*, 1955, VII, 1, p. 76

38 Gricourt Daniel, Hollard Dominique. Lugus et le cheval. In: *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, vol. 28, n°2, 2002. pp. 121-166

39 The reference in Williams study is : Miss Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 561 (of Pan)

Tara'. It was reputedly last celebrated by Diarmait mac Cerbaill in the middle of the sixth century⁴⁰, who [was] at once the last of the pagan kings of Tara and the first of the Christian high kings. Adomnan [...] calls him *totius Scotiae regnatorem a deo ordinatum*; Adomnan was obviously concerned, not merely to establish high claims for his Uí Néill relatives, but also to propagate the idea of a specifically Christian high-kingship . [...]. But the legend of the cursing of Tara reflects an historical fact : ecclesiastical disapproval of the pagan aspects of kingship⁴¹.

« No doubt in the prehistoric period, when Tara was still overshadowed by Emain, the inauguration feast of the king of the Ulaid (Uladh), [...] was regarded as the most prominent event of its kind⁴². » The myth of the sacred or quasi-divine king is as firmly embedded in old Celtic tradition as in the Eastern world. The connection between the Proto-Indo-European speakers and Mesopotamia could have happened as early as the time of the civilisation of Maikop between 3700-3200 BC. These dates show [...] that Maikop was contemporary with the first cities of Middle and Late Uruk-period Mesopotamia⁴³ [...]. » Anyway, it is obvious that this pagan fertility rite, with a quasi-divine king at its centre, could not survive the christianization of the Tara dynasty. Indeed I suggest that the annalistic records of its celebration may be used to trace the progress of the new faith among the rulers of the Ui Neill⁴⁴ » Daniel Binchy writes.

We have seen with the process of deification of the divine king of Akkad that « the divine emperor in Rome, has been borrowed from the East ; his is not a continuation of the sanctity with which the primitive Roman *rex* was invested⁴⁵ », in accordance with Indo-European tradition. « [...] Julius Caesar was the first historical Roman to be officially deified⁴⁶.

During the christian empire appeared the phenomenon of human wilderness known as “the wild man of the woods” in the Celtic countries. Adomnan describes Irish kingship as christian and submitted to God. His model would be a christian kingship held by the Uí Néill and counseled by the successors of Columba their parents and allied. Irish kingship in Adomnan's *Vita Columbae* is national and christian⁴⁷. « The predestined king must be ordained by god⁴⁸. » Diarmait mac Cerbaill description as king of Ireland ordained by god's will, reflects Adomnan's will to read the past in these terms⁴⁹. This helps to explain the almost unique title of *rex Hiberniae* which was accorded to Domnall mac Aedo by the *Annals of Ulster* in 642, for he was the one who defeated the combined forces of Ulster and the Scottish Dal Riata under Congal Caech at the battle of Mag Roth in 637⁵⁰. By this victory was undone the work of three generations of Corcu Réti (or Dal Riata) kings and Ionan abbots in Argyll and Ireland, thereby ensuring the permanent supremacy of the Uí Neill⁵¹. During this battle Suibne the sacred *rí benn* meaning king of peaks (or horns)⁵² in the « Críth Gablach », will turn not drunk but

40 BYRNE, 1969, p. 17

41 *Ibid.*, p. 18

42 *Ibid.*, p. 135

43 ANTHONY, *Op. Cit.*, p. 290

44 BINCHY, 1958, p. 136

45 BINCHY D.A. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship, 1970, « That the rex was sacred is clear from the researches of Dumezil and other scholars, and in particular from the survival under the republic of a special official called the *rex sacrorum* to discharge the religious functions of the former king. » p. 9

46 After the death of Caesar, Octavian, as the adoptive son of Caesar, assumed the title of *Divi Filius* (son of a god): Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus, was he called when he died.

47 STALMANS Nathalie. Saints d'Irlande, Rennes, 2003, p. 134

48 *Ibid.*, p. 156

49 *Ibid.*

50 FRASER, James E. From Caledonia to Pictland Scotland to 795. Fraser gives the date 639 p. 164

51 BYRNE, 1969, p. 17

52 BYRNE, 1973, 2001, p. 42

mad. His name *Fer benn* (i.e. man of the peaks) is « dligtheachán⁵³ » meaning *lawful*. But the whole story is that Suibne will die in a state of grace thanks to the *céli dé* Moling. *Céli* means client : « The kings were in effect in the position of *celi* or clients to their overlord⁵⁴, » explains Byrne. Moling therefore was in the position of a client to god not submitted to it as in Adomnan's description of kingship, and this is probably a clue to the romance. A romance which sounds very much like the testament of Iona.

At the end of this study⁵⁵ we have discovered two situations separated by time and by space, when and where on earth appeared human wilderness : one at Sumer ([/ˈsuːmər/](#)) in the second millenium before our era and the other in Britain and Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries. Both situations reveal a break in traditional sovereignty. The traditional reference to a sacred or supernatural motherhood is replaced by a reference to a divinised male human. In both situations a double break is evidenced, involving military force and a religious shift from goddess to king-god. In both situations also, one old element disappears, motherhood, and one new element appears, writing. Obviously wether we consider the Sargonid Naram Sin or Caesar, the sacred part of traditional sovereignty owed to mother earth symbolised by a goddess is placed on male shoulders whose only reference and justification is made to force. If we acknowledge the fact that « the one who writes masters history » then we understand why human wilderness appears in literate societies since they are fostering schools to teach the people.

Human disqualification results from the process of divinising a king. We've seen in Sumer that friendship between two people, Gilgamesh and Enkidu is replaced after the Akkadian period by challenge between the same two people. In Britain and Ireland on top of social disqualification coupled with defeat at war concerning Myrddin and Suibne, madness replaces drunkenness traditionally associated with the ritual of sacred sovereignty. The use of the word « dligtheach » « law, custom » qualifying Suibne's name *Fer Benn*, imply the idea that tradition is pregnant with the origin of law. In this respect it is possible to argue that human divine sovereignty is not lawful by itself, or else that it has to be endorsed by something which does not refer to life but to force.

In the Celtic countries the two conflicting parties oppose christian people. One is Roman, the *Romani*, the other is Celtic, the *Hiberni* in Ireland, personified respectively in Buile Suibhne by Ronan and Moling the *Céli Dé*. The main opposition between these two parties rely on the fact that one uses subordination while the other uses clientship concerning the relation to Christ, King of the stars, King of heaven. Subordination is a concept supposing force, while the Celtic notion of clientship implies personal relationship.

But I would even go farther and suggest that Buile Suibhne be understood as the testament of Iona consisting in tradition personified by the wild man dying in a state of grace as if transmitting to us with his death-swoon and loud-sigh the Celtic church in heritage.

Diolch in vawr

53 O'KEEFFE J.G., *Buile Suibhne*, London, 1913/1996, p. 80-81

54 BYRNE, 2001, p. 43

55 Leaving aside the Wild Indian