



HAL
open science

”Buile Suibhne” or the sacralisation of tradition

Gilles Boucherit

► **To cite this version:**

Gilles Boucherit. ”Buile Suibhne” or the sacralisation of tradition. International Congress of Celtic studies XVII Utrecht, Utrecht University, Jul 2023, Utrecht, Netherlands. hal-04180747

HAL Id: hal-04180747

<https://univ-rennes2.hal.science/hal-04180747v1>

Submitted on 13 Aug 2023

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.

Copyright

Gilles Boucherit
Skol-Veur Roazhon 2
Rennes 2 University
Labourva / Research Center : CELTIC BLM
Klasker stag / Associated researcher

Buile Suibhne or the sacralization of tradition

The national and international context in which the romance takes place is first considered : western Europe is building itself anew while Ireland is being christianised. These events are best testified by Patrick's mission recorded in the *Senchus Mor* while in the company of the *Ui Néill*, Armagh is seeking a pole position for the island at the expense of Iona of Colum Cille in a Roman universe in reconstruction.

Suibhne the Irish king flying like a soul will disclose his lawful name to Mathair and predict his death. So archaic a form half human half animal for a female principle is only met with in Sibiria from where a likely trail is proposed to Ireland by archaeology.

Dying in the wake of Jezus and buried by Moling in a traditional tomb named « The Madman's Well » imply for a Holy Irish king the sacralization of tradition.

After two centuries of restless warfare, the Bretons masters and owners of the Island become subdued finally and a minority nation in spite of eager contests. A similar warfare is waged by the Bretons of Armorican Brittany against the Franks. The church does not remain passive at those fights. It makes a choice which reminds of Gaul after the invasions. It has found better to ally with the Franks hardly christianised with their barbarous manners but catholics, than with Visigoths and Burgundians early christianised but Arians. The situation is analogous in Great Britain, although the Celts are no heretics and the depth of their christianity is out of doubt. There as in Gaul, it is half pagan a nation which is given authority upon an already christian one. The Roman choice is not dictated only by the wish to rely upon a people whom catholic allegiance would be steady, but still by an overall political line roughed out since the invasions : alliance with the German countries. Converting the barbarians, then working out a new catholic faith which they would support, this is what pope Gregory the Great is aiming at, this is the big choice of the church at the time. Rome agrees to guarantee the political undertakings of the Anglo-Saxon and Franc monarchies. Although these are conquering undertakings they are still given a religious justification. The highest outcome of this policy will be the Holy Roman Empire, that is the reconstruction of Roman universality for the benefit of the See of Peter and the Carolingian dynasty¹. » This is the historical frame which the battle of Magh Rath will take place in.

1 LOYER Olivier, *Les chrétientés celtiques*, Rennes, 1993, p. 89-92 Étudier le destin des chrétientés celtiques sans aborder le problème politique est une gageure. Elles sont trop étroitement associées aux sociétés celtes pour ne pas subir le contrecoup de leurs défaites. [...] Cet aperçu, s'il montre bien comment, en l'espace de deux siècles, les Bretons, de maîtres et possesseurs de l'île, se voient réduits à n'être plus qu'une 89 nation minoritaire et soumise, ne donne pas l'idée de l'acharnement des combats. C'est une lutte semblable que doivent mener les Bretons de Bretagne armoricaine contre les Franks. 90 L'Église ne reste pas passive devant ces luttes. Elle fait un choix qui n'est pas sans rappeler celui qu'elle a fait en Gaule après les invasions. Elle a préféré l'alliance des Franks, à peine christianisés et de mœurs barbares, mais catholiques, à l'alliance des Wisigoths et des Burgondes, chrétiens de longue date, mais ariens. La situation est analogue en Grande-Bretagne, encore que les Celtes ne soient pas hérétiques et que la profondeur de leur christianisme ne fasse aucun doute. Là comme en Gaule, c'est une nation encore à moitié

[The Senchus Mor or Ancient laws of Ireland] exhibits the remarkable modification which the laws of Pagan origin underwent in the fifth century, on the conversion of the Irish to Christianity². It begins with a « pseudo historical prologue » which was written at the very end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century, that is after the battle of Magh Rath waged in 637. The fusion of native law with imported biblical concepts under clerical auspices is patronized from now on by the Pátraic of Legend whose status as propounded by Armagh³ had far outgrown that of the saint buried at Dun Lethglaisse⁴, knowing that historical evidence does not attest the existence of the see of Armagh earlier than 640⁵. [...] During the second half of the seventh century Armagh and the Uí Néill kings of Tara were engaged in a common propaganda campaign, based on historical fabrications, in an effort to sustain their respective claims of supremacy over the island⁶ » : Archiepiscopality for the church of Armagh, High-Kingship for the Uí Néill who chose not to back anymore Colum Cille their kin because the decline of Iona had already begun due mainly to its position in the Easter controversy⁷. » Tommene, abbot and bishop of Armagh was the first of the list in a letter from Pope John IV sent in 640 – to those Irish churches which continued to celebrate the Celtic Easter⁸ ».

In «the pseudo-historical prologue, « Dubthach moccu Lugair the poet » expounded to Patrick that there are many things covered in the law of nature which the law of the letter did not reach. What did not conflict with the word of God in the law of the letter and (=or) with the conscience of the faithful has been fastened in the canon of the judges by the Church (clerics) and the *filid*⁹. [...] [Heavenly] Inspiration had ruled the jurisprudence (*breithemnas*) of the men of Ireland and their poets. »

In the romance, Ronan is delineating a church on Suibne's king of the Dal nAraide estate, an area where Patrick may well have been at work¹⁰. Suibne's reaction is clearly over-enthusiastic. As a king he could have put a stop in due form to the cleric's actions. This strained relations mean that both sides knew too well what the conflict was all about. It is not what it appears to be in the historical history since Congal Claen joined with Domhnall Brecc because he'd been betrayed supposedly by the other Domhnall son of Aedh. It is probable that when Congal undertook at the instigation of king Domhnall to kill Suibhne Menn because he opposed him to the kingship of Tara, he got a promise of being made prince of all Ulster, a title which his ancestors had enjoyed for many centuries¹¹. » Although Congal Claen was made king of Ulster as promised he complained that he was « deprived of Cinel Conaill and Cinel Eoghain, and also of the nine cantreds of Oirghiall¹² ». Even if the tale rests on shaky foundations, there may be something in it¹³. Domhnall Aedh king of Tara at the time became the first High-King over all of the island after the battle of Magh Rath, a title

païenne qui se voit revêtir d'autorité sur une nation déjà chrétienne. Le choix de Rome n'est d'ailleurs pas dicté par le seul désir de s'appuyer sur un peuple dont la fidélité catholique lui soit assurée, mais encore par une ligne politique d'ensemble ébauchée dès les invasions : l'alliance avec les pays germaniques. La conversion des Barbares, puis 91 l'élaboration d'une catholicité nouvelle dont ils soient le soutien, tel est le but que se propose le pape Grégoire le Grand, tel est le grand choix de l'Église de ce temps. Rome accepte donc de cautionner les entreprises politiques des monarchies anglo-saxonne et franque. Entreprises de conquête, elles reçoivent néanmoins une justification religieuse. L'aboutissement suprême de cette politique sera le Saint-Empire romain germanique, c'est-à-dire la reconstitution de l'universalité romaine au profit du siège de Pierre et de la dynastie carolingienne.

2 HANCOCK Neilson, *Ancient laws of Ireland = Senchus Mor*, Dublin, London, 1865, vol. 1, p. v

3 *Ibid.*, p. 36

4 *Ibid.*, p. 56

5 SHARPE Richard, *St Patrick and the see of Armagh*, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 4, Oxford, 1982, p. 36

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 PICARD, The purpose of Adomnan's *Vitae Columbae*, in *Peritia*, 1, 1982, p. 171

9 McLEOD Neil, The concept of law in Ancient Irish jurisprudence in *Irish Jurist*, 1982, 17, 2, p. 363, 364

10 SHARPE *op. cit.*, p. 55

11 O'DONOVAN John, The banquet of Dun na n-gedh and the battle of Magh Rath, 1995, p. 38

12 *Ibid.*, p. 36

13 MAC NIOCAILL, Gearóid. Ireland before the Vikings (in *The Gill history of Ireland*), Dublin, 1972, The Uí Néill 628-662, p. 95, 96

created for him by the lobby of Armagh.

The fundamental story of the romance is Suibne an Irish king becoming holy. It means that the pre-Christian royal functions in contact with the otherworld are being sacralized. Suibne's tomb is named : the Well of the Madman - *Tiubra na Gealta súd thall* – one of the ways leading to the Celtic other world. « Another druidic function which the Celtic saints inherited only too completely was that of malediction¹⁴” „. All the scheme of the Romance is held in these few verses : “

An clog sin roghonais notchurfi-si ar cráobhaibh gurbat aon re henaibh, an clog náomh re náornhaibh.	That bell which thou hast wounded will send thee among branches, so that thou shalt be one with the birds-- the bell of saints before saints ¹⁵ . »
---	---

Suibne is not cursed in Roman catholic Hell because of the psalmist he slew but is sent among branches one with the birds for the bell that the shaft of his spear sprang off up in the air. As a bird he is considered a saint before christianity and as a king dying a christian saint he will bring with him all the heritage of tradition in accordance with the agreement reached in the *Senchus Mor*.

It is true that “[...] the new creed inherited not merely the material but also a good deal of the spiritual properties of the old; and the saint was regarded as a superior kind of medicine man, with his bachall or pastoral staff and bell as the chief instruments of his art¹⁶”. “An idea common both to the ecclesiastical and secular literature is that souls and other spiritual beings appear in the form of birds¹⁷.” What makes Suibne fly as a bird soul is Ronan curse but its effects made out of pre-Christian properties will turn gradually into a traditional one with the first mention of feathers issued by Suibne's wife Eorann :

Robadh maith lem ar mbaeth aræn co ttigeadh clumh ar ar ttaobh, co sirfinn soirchi is doirchi let gach lá is gach énoidhche	I would fain that we were together, and that feathers might grow on our bodies ; in light and darkness I would wander with thee each day and night ¹⁸
--	---

In other words I wish we were souls... This will happen actually to Suibne a little later :

Fer[a]n eidhinn iomuallach an tan eirghius duinn, goirid bhim da ttarrachtain o rofas mo chluimh	When the proud turtle-dove rises for us, quickly do I overtake it since my feathers have grown ¹⁹ .
---	---

14 PLUMMER Carolus, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Oxoni, 1910, p. clxxiii

15 *Ibid.*, « That bell which thou hast wounded / will send thee among branches, / so that thou shalt be one with/ the birds/ the bell of saints before saints. » p. 13

16 *Ibid.*, p. clxxiv

17 *Ibid.*, p. 147

18 O'KEEFE J.G. *Buile Suibhne* (the frenzy of Suibhne) being the adventures of Suibhne Geilt a Middle Irish romance, London, 1913/1996, p. 49

19 *Ibid.*, p. 75

understanding thereby that the process is over. He is now a soul, he has dressed himself in his feather cloak or should I say *Tuigen* : « The cloak of the Irish poets and seers, largely composed of birds' feathers, recalls the costumes of the Siberian shamans, which are most commonly in the representation of some bird [...]»²⁰. » However it should be noted that « symbolism and mythologies of the « magical fly » go beyond chamanism strictly speaking and predate it²¹ . Therefore Suibne 's not a shaman and does not need to be one following Plummer : « Yet more curious are the cases in which the saint causes the souls of men to go forth from their bodies in sleep, and visit distant scenes. That the soul in sleep goes forth from the body is a very primitive belief; and hence comes the idea that it is dangerous to wake a sleeping man suddenly, not only lest the soul's travels and acquisition of knowledge should be interrupted, but also lest the absent soul should be unable to find its way back to the body. »

Turning to archaeology : « [...] The lively animal art of the Pontic steppe Scythians of the Tagar culture [...] originates in the Bronze Age culture of the Altai-Sayan Mountains and is most likely to be a manifestation of a deeply rooted shamanistic belief system. A petroglyph, clearly of a shaman, has been found carved on a rock at Georgievskaya in a Tagar period context²², » *i.e.* from 10th century BC to 1st century AD²³ .

« Shamanism recapitulates the historical development of belief systems central to the life of the people considered [here the Kets and Evenks]. Enfolded within these shamanic traditions are the most archaic layers – layers which refer back to an animal mother, to the transformation of that originating totemic source into a form half-human and half-animal, to the degeneration of that totemic source into a cult object, and finally to the subordination of fundamental aspects of archaic beliefs to the shamanic cult, that is, to the shaman's power and functions ».

A doe animal mother can be found in Buile Suibhne at the stage into a form half-human and half-animal which by his *fearg* ignited by Ronan curse Suibne's royal soul in his feather cloak is able to meet with and say a prayer to :

<p><i>A mathair</i> na groidhi-si roliathadh do lenn, ní fhuil damh at dheagaidh-si <i>gan</i> dá fhichead benn.</p>	<p>O mother of this herd, thy coat has become grey, there is no stag after thee without two score antler-points.</p>
---	---

Since Fer Benn addresses an animal mother, one can assume that the Irish tradition we are dealing with reflects a clan situation which goes back to a period of the evolutionary process when matrilineality still prevailed, that is preferably before about the first half of the third millenium in the steppes and of the second millennium B.C.²⁴ in the Lake Baikal Bronze Age, that is later than the Afanasievo civilisation originating in the Repin culture of the

20 CHADWICK Nora, Poetry and prophecy, Cambridge, 1952, p. 58

21 ELIADE Mircea, Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase, Paris, 1974 (1968) : « On voit [à ces quelques exemples,] que le symbolisme et les mythologies du « vol magique » débordent le chamanisme *stricto sensu* et lui sont antérieurs », p. 374

22 CUNLIFFE Barry, The Scythians, nomad warriors of the steppe, Oxford, p. 92, 93

23 *Ibid.*, p. 88

24 OKLADNIKOV A.P., Yakutia before its incorporation into the Russian state, Ed. By Henry N. Michael, Montreal & London, 1970, p. 33, 34, 36, 138, 141, 150, 156, 164, 165.

Volga-Ural region “probably around 3.700-3.400 BCE²⁵” and established itself in “the western Altai Mountains²⁶”. “It flourished there until about 2.400 BCE, through the Yamnaya period in the Pontic-Caspian steppes²⁷” that is about the same time when patrilineality induced by horse herding appeared on the steppe.

It must be stressed that "connections with the Volga-Ural Repin-Yamnaya worlds were maintained by a continuing round of migrations moving in both directions, [...] ²⁸ in the Ural steppes, or after 3300 BCE, bringing many Yamnaya traits and practices to the Altai²⁹.” It is also clear that the Europoid migrants from Repin met with Mongoloid people of the forest belt and that the boundary between them was by no means permanent. For instance, "the neolithic population of the taiga west of Lake Baïkal, in particular, shows a Europoid admixture. In their turn, the Mongoloid elements penetrated into the steppe regions³⁰.” This chronology enables the mixed Europoid-Mongoloid population of the Afanasievo-Serovo cultural world to have taken part “[...] [to] the rapid diffusion of the early Yamnaya horizon across the Pontic-Caspian steppes³¹” and after a pause of only a century or two, about 3100-3000 BC [to a] large migration stream [which] flowed up the Danube valley and into the Carpathian basin during the Early Bronze Age³²”. « Yamnaya herders began to move through the steppes past Usatovo and into the lower Danube valley. The initial groups were followed by a regular stream of people that continued for perhaps three hundred years, between 3.100 and 2.800 BCE³³ ».

In Bohemia Moravia in the 3rd millenium BC groups of people with Corded Ceramic, the continuation of some people of the steppes, will move from the Middle Danube to the British Islands and Northern Italy to the Iberian peninsula, with characteristic form of the Beaker package hunting set : « the bow and arrow, knife, and beaker³⁴ ». One of the symbolic values of the beaker could be used for a libation before marrying, *banais rigi* in Ireland where the king must have a drink from his wife before sleeping together³⁵, or on a Scythian drinking horn (rhyton), the seated goddess, holding a beaker, [...] approached by a suitor mounted on his horse, [...] may represent the union of the goddess and a hero warrior³⁶.

Bell Beaker sites [...] around Budapest, west of the Yamnaya settlement region, [...] dated about 2800-2600 BCE [...] could have been a bridge between Yamnaya on their east and Austria/Southern Germany to their west, through which Yamnaya dialects spread from Hungary into Austria and Bavaria, where they later developed into Proto-Celtic³⁷. In the middle of the second millenium BC north of the Alps appears the Únětice culture³⁸, followed by the Late Bronze Age Urnfield culture of Central Europe³⁹ and the Hallstatt culture in Western and Central Europe from the 12th to 8th centuries

25 ANTHONY, D. The horse, the wheel, and language. Princeton, 2007, p. 309.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 308

27 *Ibid.*, p. 309

28 *Ibid.*, p. 308

29 *Ibid.*, p. 311

30 LEVIN, M.G. and POTAPOV, L.P. The peoples of Siberia. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 99.

31 ANTHONY, *op. cit.*, p. 305

32 *Ibid.*

33 ANTHONY David, 305-306, 351, 353

34 FITZPATRICK A.P., The arrival of the Bell Beaker set in Britain and Ireland, in John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe ed. *Celtic from the West 2*, Oxford and Havertown, 2017, p. 43

35 HILY Gaël, *L'autre monde celte ou la source de vie*, Bruxelles, 2003, p. 54

36 CUNLIFFE Barry, *The Scythians : nomad warriors of the steppe*, Oxford, 2019

37 ANTHONY David, *The horse, the wheel, and language*. Princeton, 2007, p. 367

38 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Únětice_culture

39 <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=urnfield+culture>

BC and in Early Iron Age Europe from the 8th to 6th centuries⁴⁰. At that time will appear the so-called *Cernunnos* in the Val Camonica (Naquane, in Capo di Ponte).

In Ireland, « From about 2400 cal BC, Bell Beaker pottery was used at Ross Island's work camp, where copper was produced [...]»⁴¹. On the other hand « The Cruithin or Priteni are the earliest inhabitants of these islands to whom a name can be assigned⁴².»

The «Milesian» legendary invasion tells how the leader of the Goidelic invaders of the Eastern Midlands, found the Cruithnig or Dal nAraidi dominant (*i.e.* in the northern half of Ireland). [...] Conn fought many battles against the Dal nAraidi (whence his epithet *Cetchathach*), and so did his son Art and his grandson Cormac⁴³» and great grand son Niall Noígiallach.

On the mythological context of 'the taming of the wild' cluster of stories in the early Irish sources we have a dispute originating between the Tuatha De Danann, the former inhabitants and masters of Ireland, and the newly arrived settlers, the Sons of Mil, over the division of the cattle or the deer. «The myth of the first hunt drew a sharp distinction between the settled society and the wild one [...]. The importance of ploughing as a marker distinguishing a settled society from an unsettled community is upheld by the legend of the foundation of Rome, when [...] Romulus marked its sacred boundary with a plough drawn by a white bull and a white cow⁴⁴.» Could this be a way to explain the meaning of these lines ?

<p>Cidh iomdha dom dhamraidh-si as gach glinn i nglenn, ní minic lámh oiremhan ag <i>dúnadh</i> a mbenn.</p>	<p>Though many are my stags from glen to glen, not often is a ploughman's hand closing round their horns. (?)</p>
--	---

Then Suibne gives his legal name «Fer Benn» to Mathair, the first nickname in a long list of the Dagda. « [...] In *Cath Maige Tuired*, the Fomoiri, force [the Dagda] to drink an enormous quantity of porridge that has been poured into a hole in the ground⁴⁵. As for Suibne : «[the woman] used to thrust her heel up to her ankle in the cowdung nearest her and leave the full of it of new milk there for Suibhne⁴⁶.»

«Some say that it is the point of a deer's horn the herd had placed under him in the spot where he used to take his drink out of the cowdung, that he fell on it and so met his death». This is an obvious mention of the wild deer the animal of the mother animal which used to be offered and sacrificed symbolically. That the deer was both and simultaneously a hunted and a sacred animal offered as a sacrifice and offered libations to⁴⁷ was true already at the Hittite period, a situation which is not that much different from Jesus's actually : « Thereafter, Suibhne rose out of his swoon and Moling taking him by the hand the two proceeded to the door of the church. When Suibhne placed his shoulders against the door-post he breathed a loud sigh and his spirit fled to Heaven, and he was buried honourably by Moling⁴⁸. »

40 <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=hallstatt+civilisation>

41 KOCH John. T. , CUNLIFFE Barry, *Celtic from the West 2*, Oxford and Havertown, 2017, p. 133

42 O'RAHILLY Thomas F., *Early Irish history and mythology*, Dublin, 1999, p. 342

43 *Ibid.*, p. 349

44 FOMIN Maxim, Hunting the deer in Celtic and Indo-European mythological contexts, in *Celtic Myth in the 21st Century: The Gods and their Stories in a Global Perspective* / Emily Lyle, University of Wales, 2018, p. 74-76

45 KOCH John T., *Celtic culture*, Santa Barbara, 2006, 2, p. 554

46 O'KEEFFE J.G. *Buile Suibhne*, London, 1913/1996, p. 75

47 CREPON, P. Le thème du cerf dans l'iconographie anatolienne des origines à l'époque Hittite, in *BCILL*, 21: *Hethitica*, IV. Louvain-La-Neuve: Peeters, 2002, p. 148

48 O'KEEFFE., *op. cit.*, p. 158-159

As a conclusion, the romance « Buile Suibhne » which is the first and last expression of Iona's christianism looks very much as if it were the *familia* of Colum Cille's testament in a national context of internal strife for supremacy over the island, and international, Armagh and the Ui Néill playing the game of the church of Rome, striving on its side in a wider context to recover its lost imperial grandeur. As a king Suibne embodies the roots of tradition in touch with the other world in a newly christianised Ireland where druids have let their place to saints, seers and poets. By the strength of Ronan's curse Suibne is on his way to sanctity. His shape shifting into a soul bird is a way to link the present with the eternal world of origins. The grey aspect of Mathair is a figuration of Mother-Earth or Primeval Being declining Sovereignty. Suibne *alias* Fer Benn *alias* Dagda *i.e.* the Male Principle, succeeding in reaching the Female Principle means that the world gets a new shape, life is alive again⁴⁹ because a new hierogamy is on its way in another era. Suibhne can predict his death at Tech Moling, where after having his Way of the Cross, traditionally, from a point, the king, the Holy madman, will die a 'saint'.

49 HILY, *op. cit.*, p. 50